Lost People Do Matter to God

(Beggars & Bread Series)

Luke 15:1-7
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If you had milk that was pasteurized this morning—or if you have had surgery lately and the surgeon washed his or her hands and used clean instruments—then you owe a debt of gratitude to a man born in France in 1822 named Pasteur, Louis Pasteur.

Among other things, Louis Pasteur figured out that infectious diseases are caused by germs. He also figured out that weak forms of bacteria, if properly introduced into the body, could protect, immunize, the body against stronger, harmful bacteria.

One of his great projects was to find a vaccine for rabies. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he had it figured out when a nine-year-old boy, Joseph Meister, was bitten by a rabid dog. The little boy’s mom begged Pasteur to try the vaccine on her son. Pasteur did…and the boy recovered.

Pasteur went on to do lots of important things, but when it came time for him to prepare for his death, he made a request for his tombstone. He could have ordered lots of impressive things for his epitaph, but he requested three words: “Joseph Meister lived.”

When his story was nearing its conclusion, it was the memory that he was responsible for the life of Joseph Meister he wanted as a legacy.

When your story is told, what will be your legacy? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be able to say you were responsible for someone living, really living, forever?

Is there someone like that for you? Is there someone who will live forever because of your investment in them? If I were to draw random names from a hat—names of those in attendance today—and I were to draw your name and ask you to tell us the name of someone who will live forever because you took the time and energy to have a spiritual conversation with him or her, would you have a name? Wouldn’t you like to?

What a great and eternal difference we could make in someone’s life!

Today we begin a new series, “Beggars and Bread.” For four weeks we are going to talk about our opportunity to have spiritual conversations with people who are far from God.

For the three weeks following today we will talk about “hows”—how to initiate and have spiritual conversations. But before we talk about how we’re going to have spiritual conversations we’re going to have to talk about why we would even talk about having them and, in fact, if we’re going to have them.
As we get started, let’s remember the nature of this venture, this calling, to have spiritual conversations. Having spiritual conversations does not mean you and I are so wonderful and have all the answers and we are going to lower ourselves to the levels of others so they can be wonderful and thoroughly together like we are.

I’m talking about beggars helping other beggars find bread.

D. T. Niles, a great Sri Lankan Christian theologian, wrote, “Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” You see, helping to have spiritual conversations with people is not the work of perfect people who have conquered all their troubles. It is the work of people who found help, helping others find help.

And when we decide to help someone with what we’ve learned, we’re simply beggars sharing with other beggars where we found bread. It’s important that we take that attitude. A good spiritual conversation begins with sincere humility and gratitude for God’s grace. We can’t do this with a condescending, patronizing, holier-than-thou attitude. It’s just one beggar who has found bread saying, “Hey, friend, I found bread and I can tell you where to find it, too.”

Now, let’s talk about the phrase, “Lost people matter to God.” And let’s break it down…

1. Lost people are lost.

What does it mean to be “lost”?

Well, it could be an intellectual lostness—a search for truth without having found it—wandering around in the world of spiritual ideas without knowing what’s what.

It could be a moral lostness—trying to make decisions about right and wrong without a moral compass or objective standards.

To be “lost” could mean feeling adrift and off course. A lack of purpose. An unmet desire to find meaning and direction.

To be “lost” could mean addictions and lifestyles that are out of control.

To be “lost” could mean having wandered away from the Christian family—drifted away from church.

To be “lost” could mean one is completely separated from God, never having been counted as one of the “flock.” Never having really been, to quote Jesus, “born anew.”

Lost people need the Lord for abundant life. Jesus said, “I have come that people might have life, and have it more abundantly.” Jesus came to bring to us abundant life—life overflowing, life with all we need and more. While there certainly are lots of happy people who are not yet followers of Jesus, and while there are lots of Christians who are as sour as vinegar, I believe there is a depth and richness to life that is impossible without being connected to Jesus.

But the issue runs deeper than “the good life.” Ephesians 2 contains a sobering phrase. In Ephesians 2 God inspired Paul to write to his readers about the time when they were “separate from Christ.” “You were,” he wrote, “without hope and without God in the world.”

Now that is sobering. “Without hope and without God in the world.” Lost people are “without hope and without God in the world.”
According to the Center for Disease Control, in the hour that we spend together today 282 people will die in the United States. And each one of them will awaken in a world beyond this one. I believe that. I believe there is an eternal world either with God or without Him. The Bible calls that world with Him “Heaven,” and without Him, “Hell.”

Now, you will not hear me saying how many are “lost” and how many are “found.” But this I believe: In the hour what we spend together this morning a bunch of folks will awaken in a place forever separated from God, the source of all that is good.

And some of them will die never having had a follower of Jesus have a spiritual conversation with them. Good, Christian people were either embarrassed, or busy, or scared, or unprepared, or calloused, or they didn’t believe people really need the Lord…or something…and so people from sea to shining sea will die while we’re together and step into forever without hope and without God.

Lost people are lost.

2. Lost people matter to God.

Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost!

That’s one of the most powerful phrases in the whole of the Bible. Jesus couldn’t have been more clear. When self-righteous religious snobs criticized him for having a meal in the house of Zaccheus, a “sinner,” Jesus said, “The Son of Man (his favorite title for himself) came to seek and to save the lost.”

The phrase, “Lost people matter to God,” is traced back to Pastor Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church just outside Chicago. That church took the phrase seriously and became a new model, in many ways, for churches across the country.

And it’s true. Nothing is more clear in the pages of scripture than lost people matter to God. It is particularly poignant in the story of the lost sheep.

We city slickers don’t know much about sheep, but we can get the picture. The shepherd—he who knows his sheep like a mother knows her children—counts them. And he counts them again…because it seems one is missing. He panics. That little sheep with that funny ear and walks with an ever so slight limp…is out there somewhere. Defenseless. Directionless. Lost.

So the shepherd traipses off into the woods looking for the sheep that’s missing. Even if the other sheep bleat about it. Even if someone says, “Cut your losses; it’s a bad business decision to leave ninety-nine and look for one,” he heads out intentionally, lovingly, looking for that one.

God is like that. Intentionally, lovingly, looking for lost sheep.

Lost people matter to God! Consider the incredible lengths that God has been willing to go to in order to reach people, communicate with people, show love to people and ultimately to redeem people.

If lost people really are lost, and if they truly matter to God, then it seems very natural that we would have spiritual conversations with people.
Again, we’re going to talk about how to do that over the next few weeks. But let’s be clear…

**This begins with prayer.**

Would you pray for 2 or 3 people in particular this month? Would you pray that God will give you the opportunity, within this month, for a spiritual conversation with two or three people?

I did. And God has given me two opportunities I didn’t even anticipate.

I’m inviting you right now to ask God to give you two or three people with whom you can have a natural, non-threatening, spiritual conversation. Would you begin right now to pray for those wonderful opportunities in the next four weeks?

Remember the image with which I began? I want us to be clear on this. It’s the title of this series. We are simply beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.

Here’s another way of looking at it…

A few months ago I was in the men’s room of the Dallas airport. I approached the sink and noticed a man standing there facing a sink and doing nothing.

He was standing there. Just standing there. As I walked up I noticed he looked in my direction. Then I realized why he was just standing there. This was one of those sinks whose faucets have no hot and cold handles. One of those newfangled faucets under which you simply place your hands and water magically comes forth.

I didn’t have to think about it. I’d seen those faucets before. I placed my hands under the faucet and, voila, I had water.

And I noticed that the man’s gaze immediately left me and went to the faucet in front of him. He followed my cue, reached his hands under the faucet and, voila! Water!

Let’s be clear here. I wasn’t smarter than that guy. Unless I’m wrong, he was a farmer. He was dressed like a farmer. Not one of those mega-farmers who uses big machinery and advanced technology to mass harvest crops. I’m talking about the kind of guy who works hard to coax enough out of God’s green earth to support his family. Those guys are smart. I’ve never felt more uneducated than on a farm. That farmer standing in front of that faucet probably could re-build a tractor engine, deliver a breech calf, plumb an irrigation system and do countless other things I cannot do.

The difference between us was experience, not intelligence. The only thing I had on him was that I’d had an experience, and I knew how to get the water. At some point in the past that I don’t remember, I walked up to faucets that didn’t have a hot and cold handle, felt stupid, and probably finally saw someone else stick his hands under the faucet.

The guy next to me that day just needed someone to show him how to get to the water.

Which reminds me…

Jesus was walking with his friends through Samaria, north of Jerusalem, when they happened up on a well. It was the community well, called “Jacob’s well.” Jesus was tired, and decided to chill out at the well while his friends went into town for some supplies.
About noon, a woman came up to draw water from the well. Jesus asked her for a drink. (Which I find really interesting, by the way. He who walked on water and turned water into wine asked a mere mortal for a drink. Thus began a spiritual conversation.)

She answered, “You are a Jew (she could tell by looking at him) and I am a Samaritan, and a woman on top of that. You know it would be a cultural faux pas for me to give you water.”

Jesus answered, “You know, I could give you living water.”

“Living water. Really?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Jesus. “I’m not talking about this water. Everybody who drinks this water is satisfied for a while but gets thirsty again. I’m talking about water that satisfies you forever. I’m talking about establishing a well inside you that will produce eternal life.”

“You’ve got my attention,” she said.

And then, after they had a brief exchange over the fact that she’d had a string of bad relationships, and about what real worship looks like, the woman said, “I’ve heard that when the Messiah comes, he will explain everything to us.”

“I am the Messiah,” Jesus told her.

The woman left her water bucket at the well, went back into town, and said to everybody she could find, “Come, see a man…”

And they did. And many believed. Because a woman told them where they, too, could find what she’d found.

Was that woman somehow smarter or more deserving, more pure or more wonderful than the others? Or did she just happen to be the first one around there to find out how to get the water? I think we’d all agree on the latter.

We’re not smarter or more deserving, not more pure or more wonderful than those who don’t yet follow Jesus. We’re just folks whom someone showed where living water comes from showing other folks where the living water comes from.

So let’s help people find the bread we have found…the water we have found. Because lost people are lost…and really do matter to God.