



HG247: BLESS
Eat (Experience Life) Together

Matthew 9:9-13

Home Group Study Notes

23 October 2022 - Rachel Orford



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

It's your fantasy dinner party. What's on the menu and who's on the guest list?



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



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Eat (Experience Life) Together

Matthew 9:9-13

Home Group Sermon

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Introduction

You can imagine my excitement at finding out I had got to talk about eating. It is absolutely one of my favourite things to do and certainly the best thing I can think of doing with other people. But saying this out loud did make me feel a bit guilty because it doesn't feel that spiritual! After all if you were to list the ways in which Jesus blessed people you would probably come up with things like healing, teaching, praying and of course his ultimate sacrifice on the cross which assured our salvation. The chances are you wouldn't include eating with other people on the list would you? But actually a great deal of Jesus' ministry was centred around meals. There are in fact 30 instances related in the gospels of Jesus eating with other people - one of which is today's passage from Matthew which will we look at in a moment. And those are just the times we know about - there surely must have been many more.

Eating together is often used in the Old Testament as a way of expressing what God's kingdom would be like. For example in Isaiah 25 we read that on his mountain "... the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines." And Jesus would have been rooted in the Jewish tradition of festivals and shared food with all kinds of people as a sign of the inclusivity of God's kingdom. But somewhere in between then and now this tradition of enjoying and sharing food as part of our spirituality seems to have got a bit lost.

The author Michele Guinness was born into a Jewish family but embraced Christianity in her teens. She reflects she felt the loss of this rich cycle of Jewish celebration which her new belief system did not share. She tries to rectify this in her book "The Heavenly Party" by showing how these old ways of celebrating can be adapted for a Christian context. After all, she says God, our Father, is a people-loving creator who presumably wanted us to have fun. As if proof were needed, he created us with over ten thousand taste buds. He didn't have to do this. He could have just made us creatures for whom food was just fuel. But Jesus himself says in John 10 that "I came that they [his followers] may have life, and have it abundantly." But Michele claims that a newcomer or curious explorer of the Christian faith could be forgiven thinking otherwise because most images and paintings of Jesus as an adult are either of him at his crucifixion or at other events looking sombre or sorrowful. There are none of him having fun or laughing and very few of him eating. Two that most people would recognise are the, perhaps understandably, sombre fresco of the Last Supper by Da Vinci and the well known painting of the Wedding at Cana by Veronese which records Jesus' first miracle! He has just turned water into wine. Who wouldn't be celebrating that? What a witness to God's generosity! But to be honest Jesus and Mary both look like they can't wait to leave.

But we know this couldn't be true. In Luke 7 Jesus says to the Pharisees "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard....'" The pharisees have accused him of overindulging! Although nowhere do we read about this actually happening, Jesus clearly was known to enjoy eating and drinking with others - often.

And reading between the lines of the gospels it is clear that during meals Jesus engaged with all kinds of people, furthering his kingdom, fostering true community, demonstrating reconciliation and building genuine fellowship.

Eating together is important and Jesus himself truly blessed people on these occasions. How can we do the same? What other people could we be eating with and sharing or expressing our faith with?

Friends and neighbours

Perhaps most obvious are our friends and neighbours - people who live nearby or who we know and get along with. Some may have some kind of faith and others not. But the point is we wouldn't find it hard to find opportunities to eat together with these people and some we do anyway. But could we do it differently?

In scripture, one of the most well known examples of Jesus eating with his friends is found in Luke chapter 10 when he visits the home of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. Some of you may know that this is one of my least favourite passages of scripture. I have always struggled with it and been firmly on the side of Martha who in my opinion got lumbered with all the hard work while Mary lounged around listening to Jesus' teaching. We read that "[Martha] had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said." But actually it doesn't tell us what he was saying. We don't know if he was sharing any great words of wisdom. It just says that Mary was listening to him. She was attending to her guest, making him feel valued and welcome whilst Martha was clattering pots around in the kitchen and grumbling.

How often has this happened in our home? My husband is usually the one who is chatting to our guests, finding out things we have in common with them, what's going on in their lives, introducing them to each other, whilst I am in the kitchen resentfully loading stuff into the dishwasher and burning things in the oven! Many times have I said good-bye to our guests and heard them say "I'm really sorry we didn't get time to catch up". Jesus himself said to Martha "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better....." She chose fellowship with her guests. This is what outwardly evidences the true spiritual gift of hospitality. I have a feeling that often I have not blessed anyone who came to our house to eat with us no matter how nice the food was. Amazing things happened at meals when Jesus was there and we need to create a space where amazing things can happen when we eat with others too. We need to make time to enjoy the people we are sharing with, to participate in the laughs and meaningful moments as small talk about the weather turns to deeper topics (which may or may not include questions about our faith) when relationships are strengthened and new ones formed. There is nothing wrong with taking care of the needs of our guests but these are times to foster true fellowship rather than impress people with your culinary skills (if you have any). In fact if this is something that causes you stress - fellowship is equally effective over a takeaway!

Strangers

Of course we are not just being called to bless people that we know. What about strangers? Most of us would probably feel a bit unsafe inviting complete strangers to eat with us in our homes. But of course eating with other people doesn't have to happen at home. In their book BLESS, Dave and Jon Ferguson relate the story of two people who made their separate ways to their local McDonald's to eat breakfast - one was a young Afro-American man with dreadlocks and baggy jeans and the other was a little old white haired grandma. When the old lady saw the young man on his own, she approached him and asked if they could share breakfast together. He was a bit startled but pulled out a chair for her and they spent nearly an hour just eating and talking about a whole load of different things - from their families, to art and even church. They shared bits of wisdom with each other and then exchanged phone numbers before he walked her to her car. When this story was shared on social media it apparently went viral, probably because incidents like this are so rare and people were caught up by the fact that from one snatched meal together these two people had truly blessed each other. It also suggests that people would like it to happen more often!

But it took a bit of courage on the old lady's part didn't it? The introverts amongst us are probably cringing. And this is where our church family as a community comes in. If we can work together it feels much less threatening doesn't it?

The most well known account of strangers eating together in scripture is found in Matthew chapter 14 where Jesus feeds 5,000 people with a meal somehow made from just five loaves of bread and a couple of fish. In fact it was more than 5,000 because as we read this did not include the women and children. He didn't have to do this. He hadn't invited them to come. They had just followed him when he had gone off for some time alone. There were villages nearby for them to go for food. But by doing this for complete strangers, Jesus invites us to share what we have too. Obviously this was a miracle and we would expect to have to go to Sainsbury's, but providing food 'just because we can' is a wonderful witness to God's generosity and welcomes everyone to his metaphorical table.

A whole host of events could give us collective opportunities to share in this way. What about the enormously successful Christmas lunches which churches in Billericay have hosted for people who would otherwise have been on their own on this day? Another example happens on each Alpha course. This is admittedly a more outwardly evangelical event, but each meeting begins with a shared meal. Guests are often surprised to be greeted with such a spread but it is a fantastic opportunity for wide ranging conversation - often about how lovely the food is. As well as breaking down barriers it somehow makes the later transition to talking about our faith much more organic. The priest and spiritual thinker Henri Nouwen described this kind of hospitality as "...the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy."

Enemies

And what about our enemies? What about people who would not normally make it onto our invitation list? People that are the subject of today's reading. Whilst at Matthew's house, Jesus and his disciples were found to be eating with "many tax collectors and sinners." Tax collectors could easily be identified as the enemy; after all they were collaborators with the Romans, betrayers of the nation and enemies of God. Sinners more than likely referred to a catch-all category of people which included anyone who was not religious or who led an illicit kind of lifestyle. For us, this might not just be people we don't particularly like, but people we would naturally avoid or people who society often leaves out - ex-offenders, addicts, homeless people and people who are just maybe a bit different from us - people of other faiths or who have no faith at all and treat us with suspicion.

I think it challenges us to find opportunities to eat together with these people for several reasons. We probably have few natural relationships with them; we don't move in the same circles and wouldn't necessarily meet them. We may feel anxious about spending time with people who have different lifestyles and values. We may even feel distaste. We may also be worried about what other people might think. Jesus knew that others would judge him when he ate with Matthew and his friends; that they might think that if he ate with sinners he must be one too. But look at his reply when he is challenged about this by the Pharisees "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.....I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." He was acknowledging that the spiritual needs of sinners were greater than the needs of the so called righteous and he made a choice based on that priority.

It wasn't the first time that Jesus had pulled the Pharisees up about their choice of dining companies either. In Luke 14 we find him telling his host "When you give a dinner or a banquet do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed." So how about that? By blessing others we be blessed in turn.

But invitations can be tricky and not always well received. Notice in today's passage that Jesus specifically went to find Matthew. Matthew wasn't looking for him; he hadn't joined the crowds to listen to him. He was working at his tax collectors office when Jesus showed up. We can't necessarily expect people to come to us either. In all likelihood the people we are talking about wouldn't even consider coming to an Alpha course or even a jacket potato lunch in the church hall. The chances are that if we want to bless them we will have to step out of our comfort zones and meet them where they are. And this is the challenge which we need to be creative about, to pray about - asking to be shown the right opportunities.

Sharing food has the advantage that it is a great leveller. When we talk about 'sinners' we need to remember that this includes us too (something that the Pharisees in our passage needed to learn), and when we sit and eat with one another we can be witnesses to God's grace as fellow sinners along with everyone else. Jesus shared a table with those who were far from God and we need to find ways of connecting with this important part of his ministry. After all as God's people we are called to represent him.

We are meant to eat together

Whether it is with friends and neighbours, complete strangers or even people we would not usually have anything to do with, the advantages of eating together is that it doesn't take time out of our busy schedules - we have to do it anyway. Assuming that we eat 3 meals a day, that is 21 opportunities every week to share something of ourselves with others.

Jesus used mealtimes to do some of his most important ministry. He has some of his most intimate and consequential conversation when dining with others. Surely we are meant to eat together. To eat with people is to accept them, maybe forgive them and to welcome them into fellowship with you. In a world where we are growing more divided and isolated from each other surely one of our most tangible, compelling and distinctive qualities as church members should be our authentic fellowship. Christians are people who share with each other and talk to one another face to face. Eating and sharing together with other people invites them to come into the light of this fellowship with us and hopefully in due course with God, because it can be a tremendous witness to the reality of his kingdom.

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Emmanuel Church Text for 2022

*“But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
the purposes of His heart through all generations.”*

Psalm 33:11



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1: Do you agree that the sharing of food as part of our spirituality has got a bit lost? In what ways could we embrace it more? How could we include others?

2: How much do you have the impression of Jesus as someone who liked to have fun? Does it change the way you feel about him? How might it change your own behaviour?

3: Do you think you have the spiritual gift of hospitality? Read Luke 10: 38-42. Do you identify more with Martha or Mary?

4: Have you ever been a stranger on the receiving end of generous hospitality? How did this make you feel?

5: What barriers can you identify that might deter us from sharing meals with people who are different from us? How can Jesus' example help us to break these barriers down?

6: What real-life opportunities could we create for eating and drinking together with people who we might normally avoid?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) Caring For Each Other

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) Concern For Others

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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