

**Date:** May 13-14, 2023

**Title:** *Asking for a Friend*

**Scripture:** Matthew 15:1-20

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So today is Mother's Day. And when you heard the text read just a few moments ago, I would guess that at least some of you thought that doesn't sound like it has much to do with Mother's Day. And in a way, it doesn't. It's not a direct text, but in a way, I think you'll see that some connections are substantial when we really take a moment and look at this.

Here's why I say this. If you had a mom, which you did, your mom had an agenda for you. You may not have realized there was much of an agenda. As a mom, you may have tried to live without a big agenda, but the truth is, as a mom, you have an agenda.

As a dad, you have an agenda. You want your child to grow up and embrace some of the things that you value and cherish. So, for example, when you have little kids, your first agenda is to keep them alive. And then if they get just a little older, you start to want to shape their character in some way.

Usually, it starts with really simple things. The other kids aren't as nice as we'd like you to be. So, in our family, we treat each other with kindness. We're kind. We're those kinds of people. Not like those people who aren't as kind as we are. You've heard this kind of thing. You've employed it. If you're a mom or a dad you've probably had this done to you on some level.

Then as you get a little older, there are other parts of the agenda. We want our kids to be successful, musical, or spiritual, or we want them to be the kind of people who..., and we bring these different agendas to the table because we're trying to form our kids. And a lot of times the way that it's framed is the way that we do it is better than the way that those people do it. We're the good people and those aren't the kinds of people we are.

Now, I say that because that's natural in parenting, and in some ways, it's good, even in parenting to do that. In fact, I don't know how you go about parenting without saying this is what we value. Those people don't value. You don't necessarily have to say they're bad, but this is what we value, why we value it, and why this is important. Do it this way. But yet there is a challenge with that. And we'll come to that in just a moment.

I remember when my kids were really little. We had some friends. And often when you have young kids, your best friends become other people who have kids of similar ages. And we had some friends who had four kids as we did, and two of their boys were lined up perfectly with our boys and age, and they had the complete opposite parenting philosophy to us, and everything that didn't matter.

And what I mean by that is we believed in things like bedtime, like putting your kids to bed at a certain time. They were, hey, there's no bedtime. You just live, whenever. We actually had our kids sleep in their own bedrooms and in their own beds. They had constant sleepovers, and they had no restrictions around eating. We were you eat when the food is provided, and you eat was provided. They were you eat whatever you want, whenever you want.

My kids loved going to their house, and they were good friends for a number of years. They moved way out west. It was really fun. A couple of years ago we had a chance to see them and some of their kids, and it was fun to see that their kids and our kids, that there wasn't a ton of difference from those kinds of choices that we made.

But my point again is there's an agenda. Here's how one author wrote about this as a poem just parenting in general. "If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn. If children live with hostility, they learn to fight. If children live with fear, they learn apprehension. If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves. If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy. If children live with jealousy, they learn to live with envy. If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty. If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient. If children live with encouragement, they learn to be confident. If children live with praise, they learn to be appreciative. If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves. If children live with acceptance, they learn to find love in this world. If children live with recognition, they learn to have a goal. If they live with sharing, they learn to be generous. If children live with honesty and fairness, they learn what truth and justice is. If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in others. And if children live with friendliness, they learn that the world is safe. And if they live with serenity, they learn to find peace of mind."

Now, I read that simply because my guess is in that you find some things that you say, either I had that, or I didn't have it. I would like to give that to my children. So, what does that have to do with Matthew 15? We started a series a couple of weeks ago that we called *Asking for a Friend*, and the idea is that there are seven passages in the book of Matthew where Peter comes and he has an interaction with Jesus. He says something or has an interaction that perhaps if you or I were in that situation, we might want to ask but might be afraid to for social reasons.

And this is one of those situations. Here's what happens. It says that the Pharisees and the religious leaders or the teachers of the law came from Jerusalem to talk to Jesus. Now, we're a little conditioned. When we hear Pharisees today in the Bible, if you've been around church, to do a little bit of a Pharisee "boo" as soon as you hear it.

But the Pharisees were the really good people of that day. These were the people who went to the synagogue or, in our words, to church. They volunteered. They showed up at work. These were the people you wanted to have around you. These were not the "boo" people. These were the people that everyone looked at and said, these people have it together.

And the ones who came from Jerusalem, the reason that that little phrase is included is that it means that these were the people who were closest to the center of the religious center of everything. They come to Jesus, and they basically said why don't your disciples wash their hands before they eat? This was a custom that was built on some Old Testament law, and Jesus' disciples didn't feel that they had to ceremonially wash their hands before they eat.

And so, Jesus hears this question, and he turns around to the Pharisees, these religious leaders, and he says, why do you break the commands of God for the sake of your tradition? And then he challenges them and says, you've heard it said honor your father and mother, but you set aside this law and you say that this stuff basically is something that you don't have to take seriously if you've devoted something to God.

There was a way of thinking that said that to honor your parents meant that you had to provide for them. And what people were doing is they were setting aside some of their resources and saying this is devoted to God. The translation of that in some versions is what was called corban and it was a way of saying, I don't have to use this for my parents. And Jesus says you're setting aside tradition for this.

In *The Message*, which is a paraphrase of the New Testament, says it this way. It says, "Why do you use your rules to play fast and loose with God's commands?" And then Jesus quotes Isaiah 29 and he says these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain, and their teachings are merely human rules. So, Jesus calls the crowd to him. He says, listen and understand, what goes into someone's mouth doesn't defile him but what comes out of their mouth defiles him.

The disciples came to him and said, don't you know the Pharisees are offended by what you said? And so, Jesus doubles down, and now He takes, and he tells them this little story. And he says every plant that my Heavenly Father has planted will be pulled up by its roots. Leave them. They're blind guides, and if blind lead the blind, they'll fall into the pit. Jesus says these plants don't actually have roots. They're blind guides. Just get away from it.

And so, here's Peter now, this is the moment he says, can you explain that to us? I love how the text reads this. It says, are you still so dull? Again, *The Message* puts it this way. It says, are you being willfully stupid? That's Jesus to Peter at this moment. And then he says again, it's not what goes into your mouth, but what comes out of your mouth. He gives this list, and this is the interaction.

So, what does this have to do with Mother's Day and where we're at as a culture? I said this earlier, but mothers by nature, fathers by nature, want to influence their kids. And in order to do it, they say, here's what good people do, the way that we live, and the way that we go about things.

And there are other people that aren't like us and who don't live like us. And that's how you build conformity. And in a family, I think that probably makes sense in order to say we hold up kindness, you have to say kindness matters. To say we're the kind of family that shows up for each other, you have to hold up some other things along the way.

But here's what happens as a culture. We do this. You don't have to be a church person to understand this. Look at any current news story and what you see is there's a group of people who take a side. Then there's a group of people who take another side and say we're not like that side. Then there's another group that will come along and say oh, but now we're taking this side because they took this side, and there's constant virtue signaling, and it happens in spiritual lives as well.

And here's what I really want you to hear, and that is what might make sense as a mom and as a dad can be spiritually detrimental if you're constantly saying there are good people and there are bad people, and here is how I define myself. I think this is the point Jesus was making about the Pharisees. And so today I'd like to just show you two different ways of approaching spiritual life, two contrasting approaches to spiritual life.

The first deals with our source of authority, and the second is our operating system. So, here's the first, and this is our source. Here, Jesus points out that one way of approaching spiritual life is to build your authority over time. It's the traditions, it's the rules of people that he talks about. And the other is on the timeless word of God.

And so, the question in many ways is what do you build your sense of authority and trust on? Jesus calls the Pharisees, the religious people, hypocrites because he says, you're close to me with your lips, you proclaim something, but the truth is, your heart is far from me because basically, you're basing everything on your traditions, and not on what the text actually says.

The way that this plays itself out in our day and our age is that what happens is you get in some kind of a group, and you say, I care about the group identity more than I care about what the Bible actually says. So, what you'll do is you'll add to, and you'll get these traditions that you'll say, this is what makes sense and good people believe or live this way. And it will be about the group identity rather than about what the scriptures actually teach.

I heard about a woman who was teaching her daughter how to make ham, and as she was getting ready to put ham in the oven. She cut one side and then the other side of the ham, and she placed it in the oven. Her daughter said, why do you do that? She said it's how I learned to do it, how my mom taught me. And so, the next time she was with her mom, she said, Mom, why did you teach me to cut the ham off on each side? And she said, well you know when your dad and I were first married, we had a really small pan. And so, in order for

the ham to fit, I had to cut the ham off on either side and I just kept doing it. Then I taught you, and now you're teaching your daughter.

Well, what we do spiritually when we count on tradition or group identity is we find little things that we say, well, maybe the Bible seems to teach this, but it can't really mean that, or I don't like that it means it. And so, we come up with an alternate interpretation until we get the outcome we want. And what we're really doing is we're saying, I'm being driven by a group identity.

In academic circles, one of the ways this is talked about is something called trajectory. And what trajectory is, is it's where you say, well, the Bible may have said this, here's the bounds of the Bible, but the trajectory of the argument takes us over here. And because I know what the trajectory means, I don't have to stop it, what the Bible says, but I go to the trajectory of the argument, and so, this is what the Bible actually means. And there are whole disciplines that will talk about this and talk about what it means. And usually what happens with that is all of the current accommodations or conclusions of trajectory are exactly what our culture says.

And so, what people do is they'll say, well, the Bible may have said this, but it actually agrees with our culture because the trajectory was going here. And the problem with it is, I think Jesus would say, you can call yourself religious or not religious, but if you're constantly setting aside what the Bible actually says in order to have a different conclusion, then that is not actually taking the Word of God to heart.

By the way, in the Bible, both at the end and at the beginning, one of the problems with handling Scripture is adding to and subtracting. In the Book of Revelation, we're told not to add to or take away from the prophecy. In the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis three, when the serpent came to Eve in the garden, the serpent added to and subtracted from the Word of God.

In adding to, it was the moment when the command had been don't eat from the fruit in the middle of the garden and the serpent said, weren't you commanded not to eat from or touch the fruit? So, you added to the Word of God. Then subtracting, by simply saying you won't die if you eat it, surely, you're not going to die. That's crazy talk.

And so, the strategy always for devaluing what scripture says is to add to or subtract, to make it tradition, to make it a group identity, so that we start to say, I'm good because of my group identity, because of how I interpret things rather than what the text actually says. And so that's the first contrasting approach.

Here's the second. And I'm just going to say this is having an outside-in versus an inside-out mentality. And this is Jesus again, as he talks to these people, he says, it's not what you put into your mouth, but it's what comes out of your mouth. You see, religion for many people is

all about keeping a moral code. And whether or not you're religious in a formal sense of being part of a church, part of a religious group, or you're irreligious, you have a moral code that your group identifies with. What can happen then is you start to get rules, and when you have your rules, your rules start to become what defines your group and it becomes an outside-in kind of spirituality.

Now, certainly, rules can be helpful. Rules can be helpful for a season. They help us learn to navigate something in our life for a while, like saying, I'm going to do this every day at this time or I'm not going to do this, but in time, rules that are made to be absolutes can get us away from what's actually good for us.

Let me give you an example from dieting. So, do any of you know anybody who's gone on a keto diet, ketogenic diet, you know what I'm talking about. This is where you don't eat anything except meat, protein, cheese, and maybe a few vegetables once every month kind of a thing. And so, what happened a few years ago when this became a really popular thing is everybody who was on it said, hey, if you want to lose weight, you just need to eat this way and you'll lose all kinds of weight. And it worked for a lot of people. And what happened is some people would use it well, they would get on it for a little while, and then they would cycle off and say, in order to be healthy, I can't just eat meat, I have to eat some vegetables, fruit, and some other things in my diet.

And so there were some people who did this well, but there was always that person, that keto guy, who you know what I'm talking about, is the person who's kind of girth challenged and they eat nothing but bacon for like six months. And they start lecturing somebody else about how if they would just eat bacon and ham and hard salami exclusively and stay away from bananas and grapes, that all of a sudden, their life would be better. Now there's a rule, right? The rule is don't eat bananas and grapes because they're full of sugar, which, you know, eating bacon instead of bananas should tell you something.

But what happens is they lose sight of what does health look like? Because there's a rule and they say, I follow the rule because I want the result. Now, I don't need an email. If you're a keto devotee, I realize it can work for some of us for some seasons. But what I'm saying is when somebody becomes obsessed with rules, they lose sight of the objective.

And what happens spiritually when you live outside-in is you start to say, this is all about the rules and the rules are what matter. And you understand this intuitively in other areas of your life. If you think about Mother's Day, if you have a mom and you think, well, Hallmark created a day, and I don't really want to give a Mother's Day gift, but I guess I should give a Mother's Day gift because it's Mother's Day.

So, you give a gift, and you give it to your mom with that attitude, she's not going to go, wow, thank you. She's going to say, you check the box. It was a rule. You did what you needed to

do. You did the bare minimum. Do you know what a mom wants more than an obligatory gift? She wants a little bit of heartfelt appreciation, whether it's Mother's Day or any day. And that is something that can't be manufactured by rules, by saying, I got you a Mother's Day gift, what more could you possibly want? I mean, you hear it right?

And yet, spiritually, what we tend to do is think, well, if I follow these rules, give me rules, then I will be okay. And what Jesus is after is heart transformation, a change from the inside-out where the rules aren't what drive us, where we don't have to have rules, but what we have instead is a heart that's aligned with what God has for us. And that's real spiritual transformation and brings spiritual life and joy in a way that nothing else can.

And you know this as a parent, if you're a parent, I said earlier that your job when they're young is to keep them alive. And then as they get a little older, you try to do behavior control. And so, what you do is when your child's hitting a certain age, you say, well, we want to be nice to the neighbor kid who isn't nice to you, so be nice. Well, I don't want to be nice. Well, okay, you need to be nice. Well, if you're nice, you can play with whatever you can, you know, do whatever. And so, you negotiate, barter, or do something to get your child to behave in the way you want them to. But what happens is if you don't transition from behavior control to influencing thinking, then you realize that at some point if the heart hasn't changed, you can give all the behavioral incentives you want, but it doesn't matter.

And yet, when it comes to spiritual life, what a lot of us want to do is we want to have our own source of authority and say, I ignore what is actually biblical and we want to control our lives from the outside-in rather than the inside-out because it's easier. Tell me the rules. Tell me what I have to do. Then I don't have to figure out what transformation looks like.

You see, religion again is about keeping a moral code. But what Christianity is ultimately about is it's about grace and forgiveness for those of us who can't keep the moral code. And here's why I say the way that we often parent if we transfer it to spiritual life, can be detrimental because if we spiritually try to say there's a good group and there's a bad group, there are people who get it and people who don't. Now, I'm not suggesting again that there's never a time for discernment, but if that's how you do it, what will necessarily happen is you will become one of the Pharisees. You will become an outside-in lover of spiritual things, and you will become somebody who says, I am deciding ultimately what has the authority.

And the reason you do that is because in order to keep all of the rules, you need to change the traditions so that you can keep them. But what Christianity actually is, is it's saying the rules or the standards are so high, nobody keeps them. I'm not in the good group. I'm in the group that shares in goodness because of what Jesus Christ has done. My goodness is credited to me because of Jesus, not because of what I've done. And it changes everything spiritually. But as long as we take kind of our parenting approach into our spiritual life, what

we'll do is will say, well, there's the good group of which I'm a part, and then there are groups out there that aren't so good, and we will make rules in order to keep ourselves in the traditions in order to keep ourselves in the good side of the ledger, rather than being able to freely admit that we need what Jesus Christ has offered.

And one of the great ironies in the church or in Christianity is that the very thing that Jesus came to free us from, we often glom onto because it somehow makes us feel like we earn something or deserve something. But the reality in Scripture and the reason Jesus had some of His harshest words for the Pharisees, the really good people, wasn't because He just wanted to shoot at good people, but it was because he wanted them to understand that their very goodness could keep them from seeing their need of Jesus and celebrating and savoring what God does for us through Jesus.

You see if you and I are able to live in the place where we say I'm not good no matter what I've done or not done, but Jesus is good and makes me acceptable and clean, then I live differently, and the internal transformation starts. You see, in many ways, Peter's question was what makes somebody clean, unclean then if the Pharisees aren't clean, if they're not worthy, then what makes somebody worthy?

The question that moms use when raising kids, that dads use when raising kids, is what makes you worthy? What makes you a good part of our family, a good part of a citizen in our world? And Jesus, I think here is answering Peter's question by saying you're not going to be clean other than when you're transformed by the work of Jesus Christ.

One of the great moments, maybe you had this with a parent, maybe you didn't, is when a parent sees you at your worst and loves you unconditionally. And if you had one of those moments in your life, maybe several of those moments, that's a blessed thing. Maybe it didn't happen in your home, but it happened later with a friend or maybe a partner, a spouse. But what happens when you're loved by somebody in spite of your unworthiness is you cannot help but want to please that person.

And when Jesus is seen as the one who loves you, regardless of whether or not you keep all the standards, you won't be able to help but want to please him. And that will bring about internal transformation. What we need, is we need Jesus to be what we celebrate rather than our goodness and our group identity.

Let's pray. God, I asked today that you would help each one of us to see the reality of the futility of trying to make ourselves the good ones. But instead, we would find freedom and joy in understanding that Jesus alone can make us good in coming to Him, coming to savor what Jesus has done, brings about real spiritual transformation. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.