

Title: Great Expectations
Text: Luke 11:1-8
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Date: 28 July, 2013

It's also been wonderful while I've been away to journey with many of you through our SOAP bible reading plan. This year we are reading through the Old Testament. Right now we are just finishing the book of 1 Samuel – the story of King Saul and King David and Jonathon. It's one epic story after another. Gosh, God has been speaking to me, as I know he has too many of you. The simple fact is that when we open the bible we encounter God. The bible is not for our information, but our transformation. One pastor put it this way:

Scripture is not an encyclopedia of religious information about God, but a wrestling mat for an encounter with God.
(Jonathan Martin)

That's what we do every Sunday morning; we wrestle with the truth of God and allow it to teach and transform us from the inside out. As we do that this morning, let's pray:

Dear Lord, Today help me to preach the Savior big, Satan small, sin defeated and the sinner loved.
(Judah Smith)

Earlier this year Sue and I had the privilege of travelling to Cambodia. I booked all the flights and accommodation through the internet. I found this amazing hotel with a bargain price in Siem Reap. I was four stars, something like \$60 a night – breakfast included. Sensational. We arrived at the hotel and quickly discovered a gap between our expectations and experience; the photos we had seen on the internet didn't match the experience we had on the ground. The hotel was full – a good sign – except for the fact that our room was right at the back, and the only way into it was to literally climb a ladder. Not the romantic hideaway I had in mind - we hadn't paid to stay in a tree house.

An expectation gap is the gap between our expectation and our experience.

You got to a movie that everyone is raving about – and you enter the cinema full of expectations – only to be disappointed.

You order your favorite dish at your favorite café – expectations are high – only to discover that standards have slipped and the meal is nothing like what you hoped for.

You come to the wedding with expectations of 'happily ever after', only to discover 'disappointed forever more'. You might be sitting next to your 'expectation gap' right now – don't look!

The difference between our expectations and our experience is the expectation gap. And this gap is often marked by disappointment, anger and frustration.

Let me you in on a secret; it's possible to experience an expectation gap as a Christian. In fact, from time to time, it's likely. It is not always going to be onward and upward. The graph tracking our faith won't always be up and to the right.

A preacher's 5 year-old daughter noticed that her father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon.

One day, she asked him why.

'Well, darling,' he began, proud that his daughter was so observant of his messages. 'I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon.'

'Well, how come He doesn't answer it?' she asked.

One of the most common expectation gaps for Christians is in prayer. We start praying full of faith and with high expectations, believing with all our heart God will hear and respond to our requests. But then our prayers seemingly go unanswered, our line to heaven seems to be broken and God silent to our pleas. And so we become disappointed, frustrated or angry.

And this how we often deal with it, as we will with most expectation gaps – we lower our expectations.

One person said the key to being happy as a parent of teenagers is to lower your expectations. Likewise, some of us have fallen for the trap of believing that the key to being a happy Christian is to lower our expectations of God to a more sensible level.

When we lower our expectations about prayer, our prayer life will lack faith, focus and fire.

With lowered expectations, we pray with anemic faith, wondering whether God will answer, rather than believing he will.

With lowered expectations, we pray with little focus, instead of asking specifically - praying generally – with ifs, buts, maybes, apologies and get out clauses for God.

With lowered expectations, we pray with little fire – with little passion, doubting whether prayer really makes a difference after all.

Tragically, because of the frustration, disappointment and anger caused by the expectation gap between their expectations and experiences of prayer, some – many – Christians give up praying all together. Some of us here this morning have stopped praying. One writer put it this way:

The greatest tragedy in life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.
(F.B. Meyer)

There is another way; we don't have to lower our expectations around prayer. Instead, we can have Jesus teach us how to pray, in the process recalibrating our distorted expectations and dramatically impacting our experience.

Let's turn to Luke, chapter 11:

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."
(Luke 11:1)

When you read the four accounts of Jesus' life – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – you will quickly notice that Jesus was always praying. His life was marked by intense bursts of ministry separated by long periods of prayer. Jesus earthly ministry began with 40 days of prayer and fasting in the wilderness, and ended with an agonizing prayer in a garden and a surrendering prayer on a cross. As Jesus breathed, so he prayed.

And so it was one day, after seeing Jesus pray for the umpteenth time, and in a way different to their own experience – the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. There are two words – one phrase - in this one verse that are critical for anyone who would follow after Jesus:

'Teach us.'

Jesus was a Rabbi; a Jewish interpreter and teacher of the Torah – the law of God. Every Jewish Rabbi of Jesus' day had disciples; an inner circle of followers who committed their lives to following the teaching of their Rabbi and implementing it to every part of their life. Disciples would mimic every aspect of their Rabbi's life; how he walked, spoke, dressed himself – even how he chewed his food. The ultimate goal of a disciple was to for all intents and purpose, to become their Rabbi. A second century saying of the Jewish Mishnah was:

May you be covered in the dust of your Rabbi's feet.
(Jewish Mishnah)

The idea was that a disciple would walk so closely to their Rabbi, they would be covered in – even choking on, his dust. To be a disciple of Jesus is to commit to a lifelong journey to become like him.

Last year we undertook the Reveal survey across Newlife, a tool used by thousands of churches around the world. Many of you went online and answered a stack of questions about your experience and engagement in faith. Reveal recognizes that Christian faith is a journey of four stages.

The first stage is **Exploring Christ**. People at this stage would say something like this, ‘I believe in God, but I am not sure about Christ. My faith is not a significant part of my life.’ If you are at this stage, you are still working out whether Christianity makes sense; whether it’s true and relevant. The survey revealed that around 9% of us at Newlife are in this category, which is awesome. Newlife will always be a safe place to explore and ask questions.

The next stage in the discipleship journey is **Growing in Christ**. People at this stage would say something like this, ‘I believe in Jesus and am working on what it means to get to know him.’ At this stage you have crossed the line of faith and trusted God with your life and have started to align your priorities with God’s priorities. Around 38% of us at Newlife are in this category – the biggest group.

The third stage is **Close to Christ**. People at this stage say something like, ‘I feel really close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance.’ At this stage you are becoming a mature Christian. Around 21% of us are in this category.

The fourth stage in the discipleship journey is **Christ Centred**. People at this stage say something like, ‘My relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. It guides everything I do.’ Christian faith is central to your existence. This is the second largest group at Newlife with around 32% of us.

Where we are on the discipleship journey does not depend on how old we are, how long we have been in church, how smart we are or how gifted we are. There are 18 years old young adults at 12two who are Christ centred and 70 year olds here this morning who are just starting to explore. Where we are on the journey depends simply on how closely our life is aligned to Jesus – our Rabbi. Here’s my question – where do you think you are on that continuum?

Are you an explorer, or in the early stages of growing in Christ, mature in Christ or Christ centred?

And here is my follow up question; what does Jesus need to teach you to move further in the journey? Where are you confused or stuck?

How would you finish this sentence:

Jesus, teach me...

Is it to love my enemies? Or to read my bible and enjoy it? To be less anxious? What my gifts are and where I can use them?

If we want to move along the discipleship pathway, if we really want to grow, we will always be asking Jesus, our Rabbi, ‘Teach me...’ We will seek to cover ourselves in the dust of our Rabbi’s feet. Our commitment here at Newlife – that of the Elders and Ministry team – is that if you are serious about moving along this pathway, we are serious about doing all we can to help you.

One last thing before we move on; I would add a fifth stage to this pathway – ‘Christ Conformed’. You see, God’s goal for us is not just that our life would not just be centred on Christ, but that we would be like Christ – conformed into his image. And the bible promises that one day – when we see him face to face, and through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit – we will be. Hallelujah!

Let’s move on:

(Jesus) said to them, “When you pray, say:

“Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.”
(Luke 11:2-4)

Most of you are familiar with these words. It's a shorter version of the so-called 'Lord's Prayer' found in longer form in Matthew's gospel. I just want to make two quick observations before we move on the last section of this passage.

First, notice that there is no 'I' or 'me' or 'my' in the Lord's Prayer; it is a prayer to be prayed in community. This is so important. Jesus did not teach one disciple, but a community of disciples who together failed and succeeded and learned in the adventure of following Jesus. Here is what I would say:

Christian faith is always personal, but never private.

Jesus invites us to personally make the decision to cross the line of faith; from Exploring Christ to begin the journey of growing in Christ. We cross that line when we personally decide to confess with our lips Christ as Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead. That's what we mean when we say Jesus is our personal Lord and Savior.

But this personal faith is always lived out communally. Faith starts with 'I and me' and moves quickly to 'we and us'. The disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Teach **us** how to pray.'

Sometimes I hear people say that they don't need to be involved in church to be a Christian. There is a technical term for that sort of thinking; Rubbish! It's like this; if you remove one glowing ember from a fire pit full of glowing embers, it will soon lose its heat. To retain our heat we must remain close to the source of the fire and close to each other. If you want to move further along the discipleship pathway, commit to come to church every week, not just when it's convenient. Do all you can to get into a small group and develop relationships of intimacy and trust. Christian faith is always personal, but never private.

The Lord's Prayer reminds us also that we do not address our prayers to a distant and indifferent God, but to a close and intimate Father. Eugene Peterson says that prayer is answering speech; that is God our loving Father addresses us first, and through prayer, we respond. Prayer is always child-like, but never childish. Prayer is the most intimate act we can engage in, as it is through prayer we engage with the One who loves us fully and completely. David Platt says this:

The purpose of prayer is not to give information to God, but to experience intimacy with God.
(David Platt)

Let's bring it home with this spectacular parable of Jesus:

Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your boldness he will surely get up and give you as much as you need."
(Luke 11:5-8)

Jesus loved to tell stories – he was a consummate story teller. His stories – which we call parables – took wove the stuff of everyday life into a narrative that drove home what was often an unexpected – even scandalous, truth. This short story is a classic example.

First the expected; in the story man on a journey arrives on a friend's door step, looking for hospitality. Hospitality was central to Palestinian life in Jesus' day, as it is today. If a friend, or even a stranger, sought hospitality – food to eat and a place to sleep – culture and time honored tradition compelled you to provide it.

And it wasn't just the host's responsibility; it was the responsibility of the whole village. Food would be gathered from every household. Most homes were one simple room in which there was a small attic type structure where food was stored. And so the host would go from household to household, telling the story of an unexpected guest and seeking food – olives, and cheese and

grape molasses and so on. And of course, bread, which we will get to in a moment. The host would gather the best tray, pitcher, goblets and cloth the village has to offer. This is a community occasion and holy obligation. Kenneth Bailey puts it this way:

The issue is not food as such, but rather food adequate for the occasion. He has the responsibility of the magnanimous host to prepare to offer the guest that which is beyond his ability to provide.

(Kenneth Bailey)

I have had the privilege of travelling to the Solomon Islands a couple of times where our brothers and sisters, people like Caleb and Tanya, always overwhelm us with hospitality. We feast from the time we arrive to the time we leave. The time I visited, the last night we were there, Caleb and his family provided the meal for us and other guests. It was his extended family's gift to us. There was reef fish and chicken and sweet potato and rice and tuna - more than enough for all of us. Many people had been preparing that food all day for us, which we the honoured guests ate first as watchful women waved flies away from every dish. My friend, Bruce Mullan, leaned across to me as we ate, and I will never forget what he said. 'This cost a packet'. 'What do you mean?', I asked. 'This rice, tuna - the chicken - all up there is a month's wages here. People only eat this stuff when there are special guests. They can't afford it any other time.' Through his community, Caleb offered us beyond his ability to provide, as does the host in Jesus' story.

But as often there is, there is a sting in the tail of Jesus' story. First, the guest arrives at midnight. This does not negate the need to provide food and shelter; far from it. But as the man moves from one house to another, he comes to one in particular where he seeks bread. Bread was the most important part of the meal. In some ways, if there was no bread, there was no meal. Bread was the knife, fork and spoon with which the rest of the meal was eaten. I love Indian Food. I love Naan Bread. What is the best way to eat Naan Bread? Dipping it into the curries and shoving that gooey blob into your mouth. Yum!

In Jesus' day, bread was baked by each household usually around once a week and was meant to last for seven days. Because villages were small and life lived communally, people would know which households had bread and which didn't.

One man and his family have more than enough bread it seems and so the man goes to ask for it. But there's a problem. It seems the man with the bread and the man who is the host are estranged in some way. How do we know this? Again, in the village culture of Jesus' day, you never knocked on the door of a friend - you would call out his name. But the host seeking bread knocks and the man with the bread wakes up and answers with his excuses - 'its midnight, the door is locked, the kids are asleep - and I don't like you.' But despite all his excuses, and because of the host's boldness, the man still gets up, gets the bread, and probably still annoyed - gives it to the host. The man does not give the bread because he likes the host, but despite the fact he does not like him. He gives because he is asked and because in that culture, it is expected.

What's going on here?

Jesus seems to be saying this - if a man who does not like you is prepared to give you bread when you ask, how much more will your heavenly father who knows you and loves you give you your daily bread when you ask him for it in prayer?

There's more to this

There is a Greek word in this text that appears only here in the whole of the Bible. Translators have had a hard time adequately communicating it to us in English. How we translate it matters. The whole point of the story depends on it. The word is:

Anaideai

The NIV 1984 translation which we most often use here at Newlife translates it as boldness. This suggests that because the man pounded on the man's door he got the bread. Now we need to be bold in prayer, but that is not the point here.

The Amplified translation offers us 'shameless persistence and insistence'. He knocked and knocked and wore the man down. Now persistence in prayer is important, but that is not the point here.

The CEB translation offers 'brashness'.

Here's the one I like. Here's the one that I believe fits the context of the story best. The most recent version of the NIV puts it this way:

I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your **shameless audacity** he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

(Luke 11:8)

God is not some grumpy old man who we have to convince through prayer to give us our daily bread. God is a loving Father who loves lavish good gifts on his children. He loves nothing more than to see his children approach him with shameless audacity, confident that their Father will hear and will respond, because to do anything less would be inconsistent with his nature.

Centuries ago, the great reformer, Martin Luther, said this:

Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of His willingness.

(Martin Luther)

Some of us have been rendered mute by the 'ifs, buts and maybes' that distort our view of prayer.

What if I ask God to heal me, and he doesn't?

But I asked and asked and asked again and God never came through?

Maybe this is all a cruel joke - a divine conspiracy to frustrate me into thinking God cares?

We could spend the next week qualifying and addressing the deep and profound questions surrounding prayer. But this morning what I think God wants us to do is let the text do the talking – or more particularly, let the Rabbi whose words are the text, teach us. And this is what I believe Jesus is saying – the point of his parable:

Come to your Father in prayer with shameless audacity, confident that he loves to lavish his children with good gifts. Don't censor your prayers – ask, seek and knock – call out to God in faith. Whatever you do, don't lower your expectations. Believe that God will always, always, always answer.

Celebrate with joy every answer to prayer of 'yes'.

Learn to trust your Father through every answer of 'no'.

Learn and grow through every response from God of 'wait.'

Instead of lowering your expectations, through continual prayer, allow your expectations to be aligned with your Father's will. When this happens, your experience and expectation will be in perfect harmony.

Do you remember when you learned to swim? At some point you had the confidence to move away from the shallow end of the pool to where the deeper water was. Do you remember the terror of your feet not finding the reassurance of the bottom – of knowing you could not stand and breathe? I remember it well – I remember splashing my way back to the shallows, where the bottom was safely within my reach. I did this again and again until I had the confidence to stay in the deeper water.

Some of us have experimented in the deep water of faith where we have prayed bold prayers, the answers to which only God could deliver. We have prayed those prayers, and for a host of reasons, some of us have been left feeling either disappointed, frustrated, angry – or all three. And so we have moved back to the shallow end where there is less excitement, but more certainty. If that's you this morning, this is what I believe God is saying to you through this text:

Instead of splashing in the shallows of the possible, through shameless and audacious prayer, dive (back) into the deep water of the impossible.