

Small Group & Personal Bible Study by Pastor Dennis Hadley
Intensify Hunger

Pastor of Desperation by Pastor Mark Labberton of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, California.

A man once appeared at my office door asking for some bullet points on Christianity to help make sense of the dinner conversations he was having with his wife, a recent convert. He made it clear he was very busy, very successful, and didn't really have time to study her beliefs, just bullet points, now, please. It would have been easy to hand him a book or pamphlet. That can be good. But instead, I said, "I can see you are a very busy, successful person, so I don't think this is a good idea." "Why?" he asked, frustrated. "Because," I said, "if I were to give you the bullet points, and you were to really understand them, they have a way of working into a person's life so significantly that your life could really get messed up. You would have to rethink the meaning of success, of time, of family, of everything, really. I don't think you want to do that, do you?" **It was an effort to raise his thirst, not to give him answers. In his case, it worked.**

The pervasive models of ministry in North America are those whose popularity comes in part from their extraordinary ability to meet needs. Remarkable programs service every nuance of middle class American life. From megachurches to country parishes, as needs present themselves, the church seeks to provide answers.

It's true, of course, that at a profound level, God meets our needs: for redemption and re-creation. We are called to an *incarnational* ministry that literally embodies the love of God. We worship a God who came among us as one who serves and who calls us to imitate him. What, then, could be more obvious than that churches do everything in their power to meet needs?

It might be this straightforward, except for one notable thing: Jesus did not seem especially or consistently inclined to meet people's needs. At least not the way they expected. Yes, he met needs. It's just that meeting needs was not what Jesus was primarily about. Nor was that what he wanted people to be drawn to. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you" is Jesus' approach.

Jesus' ministry draws the desperate, not the satisfied. And once drawn, Jesus does not necessarily give them what they think they need. "My son, your sins are forgiven" was not what the paralytic had in mind as his pallet was being lowered. When Jesus said to the woman at the well, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband," he was not satisfying her in the least. When Jesus waited two days beyond the news of Lazarus's severe illness before going to Bethany, arriving after Lazarus had been in the tomb four days, Martha made it clear that he had not met their needs: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Our Lord says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God," while the church busily attends to "all these things."

In a consumer-culture like ours, the church easily gets lost in its pre-occupation with things, which it then calls evidence of the Kingdom. But Jesus says the Kingdom is for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Finding God with desperate people is an entirely different experience than among the satisfied.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus speaks of the blessedness of the poor and the meek who know the grace of desperation. One of the greatest dangers of our need-satisfying ministries is that we mute the desperation that is the very pretext for the water of life. What's more, the irony that shows up throughout the Bible is that when needs are met and the people are satisfied, they forget God. The Lord's daily provision of manna kept Israel dependent. It's not what the people said they needed. Even the addition of quail didn't stop their grouching. God wasn't trying to meet their needs. He was making them his people. That called for a different diet and an alternative strategy.

Which are we trying to do? Satisfy people's needs or intensify their hunger?

Memory Verse: Isaiah 55:8

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

1. Our memory verse this week describes how God doesn't think or act in the ways that we do. How might that change your view of things that happen in your life or the lives of those around you?

This verse always reminds me that what matters most to God is not always what matters most to us. As Galley would say, "God uses extreme measures to deal with extreme circumstances." So when troubles and challenges come my way or to those around me I should know that God is at work and He has a plan and I should watch and expect to discover what He has in mind.

Read the following stories of Jesus and his ministry and then ponder the questions below.

- Luke 5:17-26 (Focus teachings Luke 5:20, 5:23)
- John 4:1-26 (Focus teachings John 4:10, 4:13-14)
- John 11:1-44 (Focus teachings John 11:25, 11:40)

2. As you read these three stories how did Jesus response to people differ from what they may have been expected?

Luke 5:17-26, the men the brought the paraplegic to Jesus wanted to see him healed so he could walk. But Jesus forgave his sins. He wanted them to think about the question, "which is easier to do, heal or forgive sins?" It also raises the question, which is needed more, forgiveness of sins or healing?" If sickness leads me or someone to repentance and to find Jesus as Savior then even if the sickness leads to death, it is still to the glory of God.

John 4:1-26, the woman expected Jesus to avoid and ignore her, not ask her for water. Knowing the life she had been living and that she was a Samaritan, for Jesus to offer living water seemed confusing and yet intriguing.

John 11:1-44, Mary and Martha expected Jesus to heal Lazarus. But instead he waits and he tells them he has a resurrected life to offer. He wants to know if they believe. Them knowing Him as the resurrection and the life is much more important than him healing or even raising Lazarus to mortal life.

3. What was the result from the way Jesus intensified the hunger of the people?

He gave them what they didn't ask for but they were in every situation, more important than what was asked for and in every situation they were out of reach of the people on their own.

People seek most what is now and present while Jesus is concerned most about what is eternal and best. Jesus knows that it is only when we are desperate and in need that we truly seek Him.

4. Which do you find yourself and our church trying to do most, satisfy needs or intensify hunger?

I by nature try to please people and give them what they want. It is difficult to ignore the most basic need requests of someone in order to lead them to something more important and more eternal.

I need to understand that "no one comes to me (Jesus) unless the Father who sent me (Jesus) draws him." John 6:44. If God is putting a hunger in the heart of someone then I should feed it but feeding a hunger is not always giving the quick answer that is wanted but rather giving more than what the person is looking for. If God starts a fire I need to throw really dry wood on it, not help put out the fire.

5. Why do you think we are so quick to give people the answer they are looking for rather than giving them something to think about as Jesus did?

We are a society of instant gratification. If I don't give you what you want you will go away. But Jesus was an amazing teacher and he gave only what was best and what would drive a hunger for more.

6. Think of someone you have been trying to reach for some time. How might you intensify hunger for knowing Jesus with that person?

Share, pray, and commit.