**How to BLESS Your Neighbor - Week 4 - Eat**

**Message Big Idea:** In order to BLESS our neighbor, Jesus invites us to share meals together.

**Scripture:** Matthew 9:9-13, John 7:34-35, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

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Need “BLESS” language more (replace “restore” with “bless”)

**Introduction:**

Ok, quick show of hands: how many of you like food? That looks about right. Now, how many of you *love* food? That’s what I thought! We are a culture that is serious about our food. In fact, we’re so serious that we even have competitions centered around eating food! And we don’t simply have casual competitions either. There are actual “professional” eating leagues as well.

Now, I imagine plenty of you have seen competitive hotdog eating before, but did you know there are actually lots of different foods that these leagues competitively eat. Here are just to name a few: Pictures?

* Crawfish
* Onions
* Fruitcake (hard pass)
* Beef Tongue (no thank you)
* And maybe the nastiest thing I’ve ever seen…mayonnaise. Did you know that the world record for most mayonnaise consumed in a single sitting is *four* 32-ounce bowls eaten in 8-minutes. Anyone interested in signing up for that?

Improved Idea: Giant mayo container (but it is filled with Oreos)

In light of all this talk about food, I thought it would be fun to have an eating competition this morning…right here… not with mayo, but with… oh, I don’t know…how about Oreo Cookies? How many want to sign up for that? That’s what I thought! Ok, I am looking for three friends to come and help me out this morning. And we are going to have a good old-fashioned cookie-eating contest.

*(TP: Ask 2-3 volunteers ahead of time, if possible to join you for this competition on stage. Little set up is needed. Have them eat 3-5 cookies.)*

Ok, for this competition, all you have to do is be the first person to finish five Oreos. That's it! And you will be crowned the first ever Community Labor Day Cookie-Eating Champion of the world! That’s a prestigious title if I’ve ever seen one.

Ok, Ready? Let’s go!

*(Play some good cookie eating music in background)*

That was exciting! Can we give our contestants a hand? As Americans, we love just about everything that has to do with food. But here’s where we’re headed this morning: we believe that eating is *actually* one of the best ways to carry out the Jesus mission!

**Series Recap**

We are in the middle of a series we’ve entitled “How to BLESS Your Neighbor” which is all about our mission: **Helping people find their way back to God.** Now, this isn’t just a mission statement to know or memorize. It’s not just the mission statement of our church. It’s your mission. It’s my mission. But far too often, though, we are people that “hope” people find their way back to God instead of being people who “help” people find their way back to God. So during this series we’re equipping and challenging one another to be people who “help.”

So, how do we carry this mission out? Through the years we’ve discovered the best way to live out that mission is to be a BLESSing. Each week of this series we’re encouraging everyone to identify the people and places God has placed us in the midst of in order to be a BLESSing.

*(All five practices)* Now, BLESS is actually an acronym that stands for 5 different missional practices. So far in this series we’ve talked about the first two practices: *(highlight)* **Begin with Prayer** and **Listening**. Today we’re going to talk about the third, and maybe my favorite practice: **Eating**.

As far as eating goes, many of us are eating on-the-go, in our cars, alone. Am I the only one? For a lot of us, the “dinner is served” sounds of our childhood like dinner bells or dad’s epic whistle are merely a memory from the past. But eating ~~and doing~~ with people is actually really important. More important than most of us realize.

In fact, the Health Board of Canada recently shared a list of benefits of children and young adults eating with their parents regularly at designated meal times. Here are a few that stood out to me:

* Healthier eating into adulthood
* Lower risk of disordered eating
* Less use of cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol
* Fewer behavior problems.
* Better self-esteem and less depression
* Better grades and higher scores on achievement tests at school

So apparently eating with people ~~and doing it with purpose~~ has enormous benefits. And not only with our nuclear family, either.

**Word: Jesus and Missional Eating**

Trim this – especially the significance of eating in the ancient world (repeated too much). But have you ever heard a *message* on eating? Think about it: If I asked you to think about the things Jesus did during His time on earth, what would come to mind? I’m guessing most of us would think of things like teaching, healing, doing miracles, praying, walking on water, dying on a cross, right? But did you ever think that part of how Jesus saved the world was by… eating?

In fact, a lot of Jesus’ ministry was centered around meals.

* He performed his first miracle at a wedding feast.
* He fed 5000 people on a hill in the countryside.
* The night before his crucifixion, he ate a meal with his closest friends.
* After his resurrection, he shared breakfast on the beach with his disciples.

Now, it’s important to note that eating was a big deal in Jesus’ culture. To eat with someone was a statement that you considered the person worthwhile. It was an endorsement of that person as someone you prized and respected. That’s why it was so outrageous to the religious establishment that Jesus was always eating with the lowest and most marginalized of his day. Respectable rabbis don’t eat with the people who aren’t part of the “good people” group.

Here’s one of my favorite stories of Jesus eating with people. It comes from the Gospel of Matthew, and it’s actually *about* Matthew the tax collector himself:

“As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” He told him, and Matthew got up and followed Him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” -Matthew 9:9-13

So, this is the scene: Jesus is walking along and He sees a tax collector named Matthew at his tax collector’s booth, which was kind of like his office. And Jesus walks up to Matthew and says those two life-changing words: “Follow Me.”

And in Jesus’ day, tax collectors were considered the scum of the earth. You know the jokes people tell about lawyers? Well, tax collectors were the butt of those kind of jokes in Jesus’ day. Tax collectors were like local lackies for the Roman Empire, so right out of the gate they’re considered traitors. Plus, in order to get their salary, they had to gouge people for as much money as they could through whatever means they could, so everyone knew they were corrupt as well. So, for Jesus to call one of the most despised, looked down upon people to be one of his disciples would have been an enormous shock. Scandalous, even.

And notice the first thing Jesus did after Matthew said “yes” to his invitation “follow Me”. He didn’t have him take a class on how to be a disciple. He didn’t get Matthew started studying the bible and memorizing Scripture. Those things are all important, but look what he does first… He went to Matthews house to *eat*.

And who else does Jesus eat with? Even more tax collectors, along with a whole group of people specifically referred to as “sinners”. Now, it’s worth noting that the term “sinner” in Jesus’ day was a catch-all derogatory term for anybody who wasn’t religious, or who was involved in an illicit lifestyle, like prostitution. So here’s Jesus, the esteemed rabbi, eating with the most despised and looked-down-on people of the day, a veritable who’s who of the socially unacceptable. And to the leaders of the religious establishment, this was absolutely disgraceful.

For the Pharisees the first priority was obedience to regulations, but for Jesus it was a mission to people. Jesus knew and knows that a healer sometimes has to get his hands dirty

And eating in an ancient culture was central to life. I’m not sure as people who scarf down fast food while driving with our knees down the road are capable of really grasping how central eating was to life back then. Eating with someone was a statement that you wanted to be associated with them. Eating with someone was an affirmation of that person’s value, dignity, and worth. Who you ate with was a statement of who you loved and cared about and considered part of your social class. So Jesus communicated a lot by the seemingly mundane act of eating at Matthew’s house with him and his socially outcast friends.

So of course the Pharisees, the religious elite, are super offended by Jesus eating at Matthew’s house, so they, trying to undermine Jesus behind his back, ask His disciples *(highlight)* **“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”** But Jesus overhears them, and I don’t know if this is the case but I picture him with a mouth full of food responding with: *(highlight)* **“It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”**

Just focus this section on the Pharisees (not saying the tax collectors aren’t sick.) Now Jesus was *not* saying the Pharisees were healthy, good people who didn’t need a doctor and the people He’s eating were messed-up. Jesus was saying that He was on a mission with his life, and the Pharisees just didn’t get it. When He says “Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”, He was quoting the Old Testament, which the Pharisees were famous for knowing forwards and backwards. So Jesus is saying, “You know God says ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’, but you don’t *really* know what it *means*, and if you do, you aren’t living it out.” These were words God had spoken to His people who’d become meticulous about performing religious rituals while at the same time neglecting the poor and the vulnerable and the marginalized. So Jesus *isn’t* saying the Pharisees are “the righteous” who don’t need a doctor. He’s saying “You guys need to live out all that stuff that you’re so well-known for having memorized.”

And this tension between Jesus and the Pharisees over who Jesus ate with is not an isolated incident. Here’s another thing Jesus said to His critics among the religious establishment from another place in the Bible. *Put on screen* “The Son of Man (that’s Jesus’ favorite way of referring to Himself) came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.” But wisdom is shown to be right by the lives of those who follow it’(Luke 7:34-35) Jesus wasn’t a drunk, He wasn’t a glutton, but He was so frequently eating with people who were that He got accused of it. A lot.

What we have to see in Jesus’ life is that eating was not just something he did because people have to eat. Eating was integral to His mission of reaching and restoring the world. Jesus was a missional eater. Eating together was a big deal in Jesus’ culture, and it is still a big deal in our culture today. Many friendships are formed around the table.

In this passage, Jesus models what it looks like to see past the externals and invite those on the “outside” to a seat at the table. His love for the misfits wins out over the need to hold the standard of external religious allegiance time and time again. I think Henri Nouwen captures this idea brilliantly:

**“When we invite friends for a meal, we do much more than offer them food for their bodies. We offer friendship, fellowship, good conversation, intimacy, and closeness. When we say, 'Help yourself… take some more… don’t be shy… have another glass…' we offer our guests not only our food and drink but also ourselves. A spiritual bond grows, and we become food and drink for one another.” -Henri J.M. Nouwen**

When we eat together, we’re doing way more than simply sharing a meal – we’re living on mission.

**Challenge: BLESS by Eating**

So here is what I love most about all of this talk about eating and blessing those around us. We already have eating locked into our calendars every single day. With so much uncertainty in our days and weeks, we can always count on eating! In fact, we all usually eat three times a day, twenty one times a week. That’s already built into our weekly rhythm. ~~But~~ So before you start feeling like I’m asking you to just add one more thing to our schedule I want you think again about the faces or the places that you feel God is calling you to B.L.E.S.S. and remember that our mission is

**“Helping people find their way back to God”** not

**“Hoping people find their way back to God.”**

That mission requires that we move, that we take a step. In order to help, we need to actually do something.

All throughout this series we have been putting *(picture of card)* a card in your hand where we’ve been asking you to write down a name of a *person* in your life or a *place* where you sense God may be calling you to go to and begin to B.L.E.S.S. If you haven’t used this card yet, I want to ask you to take it out and begin to pray about who to go to or where God wants you to go. Even take this moment now to write down some names or places that you feel called to.

Maybe the person that God is calling you to B.L.E.S.S. is a:

* Neighbor or Family member
* Co-worker
* The person holding the sign asking for help at your intersection

Or maybe you feel that God is calling you to B.L.E.S.S. a specific place. It could be:

* A nursing home or assisted living housing, or an apartment complex
* An organization that focuses on the hungry, marginalized or hurting
* Or maybe it’s a local school

What are some ways that we can begin to practice missional eating in those places or with those people?

What would it look like if each of us set aside 1-2 meals *every single week* for missional eating? Picture with me for a moment a world where people are sitting, talking, listening and connecting to one another. It’s not a bad picture, is it? I think it’s a picture God loves!

Should these excuses come earlier? The 21 days thing could be part of excuse #1.

However, let me to be perfectly honest for a moment. Planning to B.L.E.S.S. others and actually executing the plan can be two very different things. For me, I know that I begin to make excuses as to why I *can’t* or I *shouldn't* B.L.E.S.S. those around me. Maybe your excuses sound similar to mine or maybe they don’t, but we all have excuses we make.

Here is excuse #1.

**Make this Excuse #3 Excuse #1: “I just don't have time.” Make the 21 meals thing part of the solution of this excuse.**

Many of us, myself included, can barely find time to eat meals with our *own* families, let alone with other people, right? I get it—finding time to eat with people can seem impossible. But what if maybe, just maybe, this call of Jesus to missional eating is the thing that finally gets us to a tipping point where we realize that we have to start managing our time differently, because we can’t B.L.E.S.S. the world around us like God wants us to if we don’t stop. Missional eating doesn’t have to be just one more thing to cram into our already over-committed schedules—it can actually become a part of the regular healthy rhythms of our lives.

Instead of the excuse, let’s choose to slow down and make time for the people that matter to God.

Here’s another excuse I often feel creeping into my head and heart:

**Excuse #2: “I wouldn't know what to say.”**

Does this contradict the BLESS practice “Story”? Instead of saying you don’t have to talk… say this is a great time to practice “Listen.” Or maybe another way to put this is, “I just don't want to make someone else uncomfortable with what I am saying.” I understand this one too. But once I discovered that Jesus isn’t necessarily asking me to talk *about* him, he’s just asking me to *act like* him, it really changed the game for me. It took the pressure off of always having to know the right thing to say or have the perfect theological statement ready to go at a moments notice. It became more about loving the people that Jesus would love, listening the people who need to vent or talk, being supporting or encouraging or a crying shoulder when someone needs it.

Instead of the excuse, let’s choose to not worry about the perfect thing to say and focus more on just being present and to listen to the people that God has put in our lives.

Here’s a third excuse I tend to hear a lot:

**#1 Excuse #3: “I don't like to have people in my home” or “I just don't know how to cook.”**

So let me respond quickly: if you don't like to have people in your home, that ok, then eat out.

*“But I can’t cook?”* That’s ok. Then carry in. Listen, it doesn't have to be an eight-course meal. It can be peanut-butter/jelly and some Doritos if you really want. Remember, it’s not about *what* we’re having, it’s about *with whom* we are having it with.

In their book, Right Here, Right Now, Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford write:

**“Sharing meals together on a regular basis is one of the most sacred practices we can engage in as believers. Missional hospitality is a tremendous opportunity to extend the kingdom of God. We can literally eat our way into the kingdom of God! If every Christian household regularly invited a stranger or a poor person into their home for a meal once a week, we would literally change the world by eating!”**

Instead of the excuse, let’s choose to find a way to connect with other people around a table. Any table, it doesn't matter.

**Conclusion:**

I recently heard about a story that went viral a few Thanksgivings ago. It was about a young man, Eric and elderly woman, Jan both alone at breakfast time, sharing an unplanned meal. It was a Thursday morning, and Eric headed to his local McDonald’s to eat breakfast by himself. And a 70-year-old woman, Jan, had the same idea. As they were eating alone, Jan saw Eric sitting by himself. She approached him and asked if they could enjoy their breakfasts together. *(Image)*



He quickly said yes, and Jan grabbed her food and he pulled up a chair for her to sit in. The two of them sat together for over 45 minutes talking about church, art and Eric’s young son. Eric said that Jan even shared some amazing life wisdom with him, *“She mentioned many times about how we all should love one another, and how we should never judge anyone because you never know how their day is going and what they’ve been through.”* Then after they finished they exchanged phone numbers and Eric walked Jan to her car.

Don’t you love that story? In some ways, these two couldn't be much more different, but I think that they discovered that you can learn a lot about someone when you share a meal together. And this story spread rapidly around social media as you could imagine. And if stories like this spread so easily on social media, what does it say about how we value eating together and also how we find stories like this rare?

But what if these stories weren’t rare? What if we made these stories common in our community? What do you think our towns would look like if Portillo’s, Pot Belly’s, or even our homes became hubs for missional eaters? For people connecting, listening and caring? I believe that we could start being a part of the solution for a better world. A world that God would smile at. We would, by eating, begin restoring God’s dream for the world.

**Communion Idea**

The author N.T. Wright put it this way,

**“When Jesus himself wanted to explain to his disciples what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a meal.”**

As Jesus approached his final days, he had some really important messages to share with his disciples and he choose to eat with them in order to communicate those messages.

And it was at those meals that he talked about:

The Bread. This was a representation of Jesus’ body that was to be beaten, stabbed, bruised and hung on a tree.

The Cup. This was a representation of Jesus’ blood that was to pour out of him as he made his way to his crucifixion and as he hung on that tree.

And Jesus invites us all to this table. Let’s go to this table now.