

# INNKEEPERS

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The Bible says, “Seek and you will find.” Matthew 7:7 (NIV) It’s a fascinating thought. It doesn’t say “*seek and maybe you’ll find*” or “*seek and hopefully you find*”—no, it has no contingencies, except of one thing. And that one thing is this: The Scriptures also inform us that you must ***seek with all your heart.***<sup>1</sup> Seek who? Seek God. And as we continue on in this Advent Season, we need to be reminded that there was a lot of seeking going on around Bethlehem during that first Christmas. Some of that seeking was good, some of it was not good at all, but down right evil. So for our purposes this morning, let’s begin to take a look at some of the main characters in the Christmas story and consider exactly what it was that they were seeking. We’ll start with the Bethlehem innkeeper and his treatment of Mary and Joseph—what kind of “*seeking*” was going on with respect to them him?

Well, the bottom line is this: The innkeeper could not be bothered to seek a place in his inn to accommodate the dire needs of a very pregnant young woman by the name of Mary and her espoused husband, Joseph. We find this out in Luke’s Gospel which tells us: <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. <sup>7</sup> And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:4-7 (NKJV)

It has become popular among some New Testament scholars to interpret these verses in such a manner that either absolves the innkeeper of any culpability, or removes him altogether from his part in the Nativity Story. And while I respect some of these scholars, I am not convinced of their conclusions. When reading the phrase “***no room for them in the inn,***” these scholars focus upon the Greek word for “***inn***”—which is κατάλυμα(kat-al'-oo-mah)—and point out that it can have a variety of different meanings it relates to places of lodging. They lean toward understanding that the “***inn***” Mary and Joseph were turned away from was not an inn at all. Rather, they contend that it was merely some general place of public accommodations in the Town of Bethlehem that travelers would just go into and throw down their mats and cover up with a blanket and go to sleep. Or, some even suggest that Joseph and Mary had headed to Bethlehem in the hopes of staying with some of their relatives who happened to reside there—and that this destination is what the reference to an “***inn***” was all about.

Furthermore, and these scholars generally conclude that the story isn't trying to build up any drama here. In other words, they contend that Mary and Joseph were never stressed out by the fact that they couldn't find a place to stay.<sup>2</sup> Now, all that is very interesting—but how do we assess these conclusions? Quite frankly, I find their conclusions to be—in a word—*silly*. They miss the entire point that is being communicated to us by the phrase that states: ***“there was no room for them in the inn.”*** How could anyone conclude that a young woman on the verge of delivering her first child in a strange city, who (with the exception of Joseph) was away from her closest family members (some whom were likely midwives), while traveling on a cold night (yes, the December nights in Bethlehem do get cold, even with occasional snow<sup>3</sup>)—how would Mary not have been alarmed by the fact that no one would give them shelter in anything other than a stable filled with animals and their accompanying manure? What is being communicated here in this part of the Christmas story is not some calm ***“oh-I-guess-this-will-have-to-do”*** attitude on Mary and Joseph's part when they head to the stable. On the contrary, what the narrator is trying to tell us is that this young couple was in an extremely desperate situation and nobody seemed to care—whether that someone was an apathetic innkeeper, or (worse yet) a collective group of people (who may have been kinfolk) that were so uncaring—they couldn't be bothered to give up their space in the inn to help Mary and Joseph out in their hour of great need. Those who had already occupied that place of shelter (whatever you conceive the ***“inn”*** to be) couldn't have cared less. That is the point that is being made here—because in general, when it comes to accommodating Christ, the world couldn't care less.

This first shunning of Mary and Joseph was just a precursor of what the world's attitude would be to Mary's soon-to-be-delivered child—the Baby Jesus. And so, the innkeeper offered no room in his inn. His paying patrons were warm and cozy in their beds and he wasn't about to ask one of them to give up their spots for some poor carpenter who traveled down from Nazareth, of all places, with his overly pregnant wife. After all, giving birth to a child in his inn would be a messy ordeal and crying babies were bad for business. The innkeeper had his self-interests at stake here, and make no doubt about it, his self-interests as far as he was concerned was in seeking one thing—his own personal profits. That was his bottom line—he was concerned only about personal gain to the exclusion of anyone else's needs. You see, he had yet to hear something that this baby would one day declare during His manhood: <sup>36</sup> **“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> For what can a man give in return for his soul?”** Mark 8:36-37 (ESV) Yes, turning Christ away and seeking the things of the world, only to lose your soul to Satan in Hell is a poor exchange indeed. And those lying in their warm beds who overheard Mary and Joseph's plea to the innkeeper, but failed to offer their own

places there in the inn were just as guilty as the innkeeper. Now they may have thought that they could fake it and pretend that they were asleep and couldn't hear or see what was going on—but God knows what was in their hearts, for as His Word tells us: “The LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek Him, He will be found by you, but if you forsake Him, He will cast you off forever.” 1 Chronicles 28:9 (ESV) Failing to seek Jesus is a terrible thing. And forsaking Christ by not offering Him a place to reside in your heart has seriously adverse consequences in the eternal sense.

But, this man wasn't the only innkeeper in the land of Judea. There were thousands upon thousands of them. While their true occupations may have been doctors, lawyers, farmers, peasants, princes and kings, yet they were all *“innkeepers”* just the same. In fact, in America today, we live in a nation filled with *“innkeepers,”* just like the one who turned Christ away a little over 2,000 years ago.

Timothy Schmalz is a Christian sculptor and he made a life-sized bronze sculpture of a homeless man sleeping on a park bench. And he took this sculpture across the country and set it up in public places where people could plainly see it. Now the thing about this sculpture is that the homeless man's face, hands and most of his body are concealed from view by a blanket that was part of the sculpture. And if you just glanced at it, you would have assumed that it was just another nameless, homeless person. But upon closer viewing, something might catch your eye as you would look at this man's feet and would see what appear to be large puncture wounds, as though something fairly large and pointed had been driven through his feet. And if this was not enough to reveal this homeless man's identity, then perhaps the title on the plaque would provide an enlightening clue—because that plaque simply reads: **“Matthew 25.”** **“Matthew 25”** is a reference to the Gospel of Matthew which says: “I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.” Matthew 25:45 (NLT2)

You see, the man under the blanket in the sculpture is Jesus. I wonder how many people view that sculpture and understand its true meaning. I wonder how many then go home, look in the mirror and see the *“innkeeper”* that tends to reside in all of us until we let the Holy Spirit start to transform our lives. You know what's really funny? When the statue was placed in front of a Church located in an affluent neighborhood in Davidson, North Carolina, do you know how these well-to-do people reacted? One woman called the police and demanded that the perpetrator be arrested and the sculpture be dumped in a landfill. Another took the time to write a long letter of complaint to the local newspaper asking, **“How dare anyone place something like that in their beautiful, exclusive surroundings.”** Some religious leaders even insisted that it was an insult to the Son of God.<sup>4</sup> Yes, there are a lot of *“innkeepers”* in Davidson, North Carolina, and I suspect in Charlottesville, Gordonsville, Orange and

Richmond—and all places in between. But I wonder if any of them recall that, when Jesus stepped out of His heavenly glory and into the darkness of a Virgin’s womb, He soon found that there was no room in the inn. And that later in adulthood, He’d have no place to lay his head.<sup>5</sup> And that throughout His earthly ministry a world full of “*innkeepers*” would despise and reject Him,<sup>6</sup> until finally they’d one day nail Him to a cross with no other possessions than the clothing that He wore.<sup>7</sup> You see, Jesus doesn’t want us to be “*innkeepers*.” In fact, He doesn’t want us to be “*keepers*” at all. Rather, Jesus calls His followers to be “*out-givers*” and not “*innkeepers*.” Why?—because Jesus tells us that it is more blessed to give than to receive.<sup>8</sup> And when you give even to the least of those around you—when you care for them and show compassion to them—it’s like you are doing it for the Jesus who was homeless here on earth, but will one day return in all of His glory to gather His people to come into the most amazing Kingdom of all—the Heavenly Kingdom of God: “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’” Matthew 25:40 (NLT2)

So my recommendation is this. If you read any bible commentaries or footnotes in some study bible suggesting that the innkeeper in the Nativity story never existed, don’t buy into any such notion. The innkeeper was very real back then and they continue to populate a sizable portion of this earth today. Now here is the importance of all of this: What if ***you*** happen to be an “*innkeeper*”?—one who doesn’t act all that differently from the one who turned Mary and Joseph away from that Bethlehem Hilton. ***Is there any hope for you?*** Or, if not you, what if someone you know is such an “*innkeeper*”—maybe a loved one, friend or neighbor: ***Is there any hope for them?***—someone so self-centered and lacking compassion for his or her fellow human beings that he or she could have just as easily rebuffed Mary and Joseph on the cold winter’s night? The answer is a resounding: ***YES, there is hope!*** How do I know that?—because that is exactly what the Bible teaches. The people who lived in the Greco-Roman City of Ephesus were well known for being “*innkeepers*” because many of them were uncaring, selfish, unethical and immoral.<sup>9</sup> They were pretty hardcore along those lines. And yet, when Jesus came into the hearts of those who accepted him as Lord and Savior, they shed their “*innkeeper*” status and followed the most precious homeless man who ever lived—Jesus Christ. In fact, the Apostle Paul turned to those in the City of Ephesus who had been washed in the blood and declared: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” Ephesians 2:13 (NIV) But is that kind of transformation still possible in the dog-eat-dog world in which we live today? Well yes, it is.

Let me tell you about an “*innkeeper*” that I read about earlier this week from an article that appeared in the Boston Globe. This man was not only an “*innkeeper*” but he happened to be an

outfielder for the Boston Red Sox when they won their first World Series back in 2004. His name is Manny Ramirez. When he played for the Red Sox, he was one of their biggest stars ever. But, he was plagued with that “*innkeeper*” attitude—he was selfish, arrogant, rude to fans, and certainly not a team player. Once back in a 2008, he even pushed a 64-year-old man to the ground over an argument about getting tickets for his friends to attend one of the games. His teammates tried to cover for him by saying, “*Oh well—that’s just Manny being Manny.*” But in reality, that was just Manny being an “*innkeeper.*” Finally, toward the end of his career, the Red Sox traded him to the Dodgers and the fans in Boston couldn’t have been happier. I guess that I would have to say that Manny Ramirez was about as incorrigible as anyone I could think of.

And yet, he was not so hopeless (no one is) that the blood of Jesus Christ could not change him. So when I read this recent news article, I was shocked to learn what Manny had been up to lately. No, it wasn’t some selfish and immature acts that showed no respect for others. On the contrary, he had been engaged in some very selfless and compassionate acts in serving others. In fact, what he’d been doing was preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ in hospitals all around Miami where he now resides. This radical change in his demeanor and his actions came about, he said, when he “***found God.***” Manny explained: “***What I’m doing now, I preach. That’s what I do. Go into hospitals just to preach and teach the people the Bible.***” He also recently enrolled in seminary because, as he put it: “***I just wanted to learn [about Jesus]. I’ve been doing that for five years now. It hasn’t been easy. [But,] it’s [been] something great. I’m growing [in my faith]. It takes time. It’s like playing baseball. If you want to be the best, you got to hit it every day. If you want to get to know God, you have to have a relationship with him [every day].***”<sup>10</sup>

Wow!—that’s not the talk of an “*innkeeper*”—that’s both the talk and the walk of a believer with mercy, empathy and compassion for his fellow man. And when I thought about it, I realized that it wasn’t so much that Manny had “***found God***” as it was that ***God had found Manny.*** In fact, God had ***drawn*** Manny to Him. For as Jesus said: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” John 6:44 (NASB) And when even the hardest of “*innkeepers*” give a response to God’s pull, then some amazing things will start to happen. First, the Holy Spirit opens your eyes so that, when you look in the mirror, you begin to see that “*innkeeper*” reflection that you never noticed before. And when you finally see that, you come to realize your own sinful condition and your need for a Savior.<sup>11</sup> And then, the Holy Spirit helps you to yearn for the things of God—in a way that was never possible in the past.<sup>12</sup> You may even cry out like David did when he shouted: “O God, you are my God, and I long for you. My whole being desires you; like a dry, worn-out, and waterless land, my soul is thirsty for you.” Psalm 63:1

(TEV) And finally, instead of being an “*innkeeper*” who turns needy people away with an attitude of indifference, you’ll develop a new attitude that will be the product of a ***new heart*** and a whole ***new way of thinking***.<sup>13</sup>

Like I said at the beginning, the Bible says, “Seek and you will find.” Matthew 7:7 (NIV) Who knows, you might even find that homeless guy lying there on a park bench with a blanket spread over Him—and if you do, ***be sure to take a close look at His feet.***

Let us pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 29:13 (ESV) You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

<sup>2</sup> NET Bible, First ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 2".

<sup>3</sup> John A Beck, *Baker Book of Bible Charts, Maps, and Time Lines, The*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Kaushik, “The Homeless Jesus Sculpture,” *Amazing Planet* (11-15-18), offered by David Finch, Oakland, Oregon, PreachingToday.com.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 8:20 (NLT2) But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.”

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 53:3 (NLT2) He was despised and rejected— a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 27:35 (NLT2) After they had nailed him to the cross, the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 20:35 (ESV) In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

<sup>9</sup> John O. Reid, “Bible verses about Ephesus,” *Forerunner Commentary*, [www.bibletools.org](http://www.bibletools.org).

<sup>10</sup> Caleb Parke, “Manny Ramirez ‘found God,’ takes a swing at seminary: ‘You got to hit it every day,’” [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com) (December 4, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> John 16:8-9 (NIV) [Jesus said:] “When He [the Holy Spirit] comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup> in regard to sin, because men do not believe in Me.”

<sup>12</sup> “What does it mean that God draws us to salvation?” [www.gotquestions.org](http://www.gotquestions.org).

<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel 11:19 (TEV) “I will give them a new heart and a new mind. I will take away their stubborn heart of stone and will give them an obedient heart.”