

Contagious Relationships!

“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.”

A recent poll by the Conference Board, an organization of 2,000 non-profit corporations around the world, announced that only 47.5% of US employees are happy with their jobs. This is down from a 1987 high of 61.1%. More people are trudging to work having a bad day before they even punch in. They have a term for this: job misery. Job misery spills over into other areas of life like health problems, addictions and broken relationships.

We are not told in our text whether Matthew was happy with his job or not, but it is quite clear when Jesus offered him another job—that of a disciple and future pastor and missionary—he was more than happy to leave the tax collection business, his last paycheck, everything to follow Jesus. Now if you have to leave your job to follow Jesus, go ahead. God’s blessings to you. But for most of you, Jesus does not make you quit your jobs. He does not ask you to quit your marriages, family, or friends. In fact, you can follow Jesus at work, at the gym, in the classroom, wherever you live and go and hang out.

This is exactly what the Lord wants. Today we continue our “Contagious Christianity” series and we see Christianity being contagious in our relationships with others. But first, it starts with our relationship with our Savior.

I. Our contagious relationship with Jesus.

I got my taxes done this week. Sure, they are complicated; there are endless forms (my taxes took up 13 pages). I can’t complain, not when I read up on how the Romans collected taxes in Jesus’ day.

The Roman government did not have a branch to collect the taxes like our IRS. No, they auctioned off the various territories in their empire to the highest bidder. Companies run by very rich people with hundreds and thousands of shareholders would bid on these territories. They would pay the tax in full to the Government, and then go out and collect the money for themselves. Because they are in it for a profit, they charged more. It would not be surprising if you actually paid twice or three times as much in taxes so everyone in this company got a good profit.

Matthew was one of those workers in a company like this. He manned a tollbooth. He collected taxes on the number of axles on your wagon, the number of slaves you had, all goods you had, personal or for sale; there was a tax for everything. And you had to pass through several of these tollbooths. It would be like driving through Illinois and at each tollbooth, you would have to stop, unload everything from your car including the spare tire, and you would be taxed, even 15% on that Snickers bar you bought. Matthew did that to every boat, wagon, traveler and caravan that came along. No wonder the people despised tax collectors. In fact, they were put out or excommunicated from the synagogues.

Matthew could have changed all that. He could have quit that job and worked at the grocery market, got reinstated by the synagogue, got his friends back and stopped being an embarrassment to his family. But even if he did, he would still be an outcast, outside the kingdom of God.

Somehow before this, he met and heard Jesus. When the church leaders and his friends shunned him, Jesus didn’t. One part of his message sounded familiar, how a guy like Matthew was a sinner and not worthy of God. But Jesus attached another message to that, one of forgiveness. The self-righteous Pharisees said forgiveness was impossible for him, but Matthew found mercy in Jesus.

We understand that from our text. ***“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.”***

The Pharisees had a warped sense of repentance. If you were a sinner, there was no forgiveness. You had to improve your life before you can be taken back by God. As one Rabbi put it, if you were reading one chapter of the Bible a day, you need to read two before God took you back. Sacrifice. Do more. Be more. Shape up.

Jesus showed them the flaw of their thinking. First, the Pharisees should be happy Jesus was hanging with sinners. What good is a hospital if it doesn’t admit sick people? These sinners needed spiritual help. But then Jesus exposed them. ***“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’*** The Pharisees looked for sacrifice. Read more of the Bible, give more to the church, do more. But God doesn’t want sacrifice, mainly because no sacrifice we can make will ever make things right between us and God. Never. He wants mercy. God is looking for the sick, sinners just like Matthew and his friends, everyone on earth, because we can’t help ourselves. Jesus wanted the Pharisees, too, but they pushed him away because they thought their sacrifices, not God’s mercy, made things right between them and God.

I remember the days when my kids ate in a high chair. Where do you think was the cleanest place in our house? On the floor under that high chair. That seems strange. You have seen kids and how they spill milk, throw food and tip their dishes over onto the floor. Messy. But that is why it was the cleanest spot in the house because we washed it at least three times a day. The rest of the floor was dirty, too, but we didn't notice it. It didn't have milk and pureed peas on it. But we saw the dirt under the high chair and cleaned it often.

Our lives are dirty. Every day we mess up that floor, so to speak. You have spilled sin on it, hurled insults and unloving words on it, and you have spit up pride upon it. It is a mess. But watch Jesus wipe it up and make it clean. Watch this Savior go all the way to hell and the cross in order wash away our sins. And he wants you because you are a sinner. This is the relationship you have with Jesus, that of a sick patient with his doctor, or a sinner with his Savior. This is why Matthew followed Jesus. That is why we follow him.

II. Contagious in our relationships.

But you don't have to leave your job to follow Jesus. In fact, God wants you to stay in your job, to keep all your relationships because he wants you to be contagious to anyone you know. We are not sure why Matthew had this party in his house. Was it to celebrate his new job as a disciple? Was it Jesus' idea? What mattered was Matthew invited Jesus to meet his friends who were sinners, too.

I am guessing, but we have around 80 to a 100 volunteers here at church, whether ushers, altar guild, choir, Sunday School teachers and so on. Wouldn't it be nice if we had 300? But I am proud you are involved outside of church, too. We have members who volunteer at the food shelf, who coach a city soccer team or who do hospice care. Be careful lest we become one with the world again. But he also wants us to have relationships with anybody and everybody, and you have more relationships with people than I will ever do. You work with more people, you live next door to them. I get nervous when our sons and daughters go off to college. They are faced with tremendous pressure and temptation to forget God and become like the world. But we need God-fearing Christians sitting in the college classroom or living in the dorm or teaching. We need God-fearing children of God in government or science or in the office or on the playground.

Remember how Jesus calls us the salt and the light of the world. The world is a better place because of the presence of thankful Christians who follow their Lord. And we need these relationships. I remember a few years ago on one of our many trips to the Mayo clinic in Rochester, we stood in line at Caribou coffee between doctor appointments. Because of blood work and fasting, my wife got a cup of coffee and said, "This is heaven." I have to paraphrase, but the cashier said we will all be in heaven some day. That meant more than anything that any doctor could say to us that day.

Your fellow believers need to hear you say that. Remind them Jesus came, died, rose again, and is coming back for them. They know it, but we all need to hear it again. And there are other Christians besides those who sit next to you in church. You work or go to school with many of them. They need to hear you tell them that God desires mercy, not sacrifice, and they have a physician for their souls.

But other sinners need to know us, too. Maybe they belonged to a church at one time, but not now. Maybe (and this is becoming more common) they haven't heard of Jesus or the Bible at all. They need to know you, work with you, trust you, feel comfortable with you. You do it because it is Christ's love in us. Be their friend, a good Samaritan even to strangers. But you also are looking for that chance to introduce them to their Savior. It may take years, many years. It may be as simple as introducing them first to the pastor. Maybe few will listen, but who knows? We need each other out there.

Here is another stat. One survey says that 7 of the top 10 most gratifying jobs out there include professions like pastor, firefighter, various kinds of teachers and therapists. The common theme is these jobs involve caring for other people. If that is the case, then Jesus loved his job, so much so he died to save us sinners. And now he calls us to serve him by befriending others. The next time someone asks you what you do, don't say I am an accountant or teacher, tell them, "I follow Jesus Christ." But then again, maybe they see that already. Amen.