

CONTAGIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

This past week Alaskans celebrated perhaps their favorite holiday...PFD DAY!! Yes siree, that one day a year when we Alaskans finally get what we deserve – free chicken! I heard a moderate amount of grumbling that the chicken wasn't as big as it should have been and many of us are suspicious that the government is holding out on us and taking some of OUR free chicken. It's not right I tell you! How could they even think of cutting back on the amount of our completely unearned income! The audacity – we are being ripped off! After all, we pay this state Income tax, er, no, uh, Sales Tax, nope, wrong again, well, we have Extraordinarily high air-conditioning bills! That should count for something! OK, I realize that I have just put my job and, perhaps my Alaskan residency; in jeopardy here by spewing such venomous blasphemy against the sacred cow we call the PFD and the Alaskan tax code, however, if you think you have it bad when it comes to unfair taxes and government gouging the little people, let me take you back in time some two thousand years and introduce you to the tax-collecting practices of the Roman empire.

If a man really wanted to be wealthy back then, he didn't become a thief (technically), he became a tax-collector - because if you had the taxing franchise in your region back then, you had the key to the bank.

You'd send out tax bills for whatever base amount Rome wanted to collect; but then you could tack on 10, 20, 30, 50, or even 100 percent—whatever you wanted to add on to the tab—for your own profit. And you could dispatch Roman soldiers to beat up anybody who wouldn't pay up! You had a literal license for extortion, which is precisely why the Jewish people hated

tax collectors so much. They were usually a sleazy, greedy, and deceitful lot, who profited off of everyone else's misery.

Now, it just so happens that the author of the first book in the New Testament, Matthew, also called Levi, was a tax collector in his pre-Christian days. Matthew, as we'll explore today, threw a party for all his tax-collecting buddies to announce that he was closing up shop and signing up for a tour of duty with a teacher named Jesus. What I want to do in this message is point out some of the highlights in this story and then draw out some applications that I think will be helpful to you.

The first highlight you can see is that *Jesus handpicked Matthew and personally challenged him to follow him*. We don't know what Jesus saw in Matthew, but Jesus wanted him to be his disciple.

Now, we have to assume that Matthew had heard about Jesus and that the Holy Spirit had already been active in his heart for quite some time because, when Jesus said, "Follow me," Matthew didn't say, "Well, who are you?" or "What for?" or "To where?" or "For how long?" Obviously, Matthew had already been prepared.

Luke 5:28 says in one sentence that Matthew left everything to follow Christ, and "everything" to a tax collector was a whole lot of money and material possessions. It's widely believed that Matthew paid a higher financial price than any of the other disciples of Jesus. He walked away from a fortune to obey Jesus' call; it cost him everything.

The very next verse, Luke 5:29, tells us that right after he accepts the challenge to be a follower of Christ, he throws a major party, a big banquet, the text says, for his fellow tax collectors and friends. I'm convinced, as are others, that the party was thrown not only as a kind

of good-bye celebration to his colleagues, but also to introduce his friends and cohorts to Jesus and some of his other disciples that Matthew would be teaming up with in the future.

If you think about it, what Matthew was doing was throwing an evangelistic mixer, what I like to simply call a “Matthew Party,” hoping and praying that Jesus and his followers would be able to influence some of his tax-collecting buddies by just rubbing shoulders with them in a social setting. Maybe they would be able to build some bridges. Maybe they would even have some spiritual conversations that could be followed up on later.

But Matthew took a risk and crawled out of his comfort zone and brought these two groups together. And he prayed fervently that something significant might happen in the midst of his Matthew Party.

Matthew’s party says an awful lot about Matthew. His party shows us that Matthew had a tender heart toward those he knew who were headed to hell. He knew he was now heavenbound, but he wanted to hang on to as many of his buddies as he could and bring them along.

The second highlight of the story is that *the Pharisees have a major problem with evangelistic Matthew Parties*. Their primary objection is the guest list. They don’t feel comfortable with the fact that Jesus is rubbing shoulders with the likes of Matthew’s tax-collecting buddies. You see, in their eyes, tax gatherers and other irreligious riffraff did not deserve time and attention from Jesus or from any respectable religious leader or teacher.

The attitude of the Pharisees tells us something about the heart of the Pharisees. All they saw in Matthew’s buddies were profane, greedy, immoral, worthless sinners. Certainly no God-fearing person had any business rubbing shoulders with the likes of them. They were wicked, lost causes worthy of the damnation that was awaiting them. The hearts of the Pharisees were stone-cold toward them.

The next highlight is *Jesus' response to the Pharisees' concerns by comparing himself to a doctor*. Jesus appeals to the Pharisees' logic by asking them how smart it is for a doctor to surround himself with only healthy people. It's a quick way to ruin a potentially good medical practice, isn't it?

Smart doctors, Jesus says, surround themselves with people who need their services. They apply their skills and services to those who are actually ill. Similarly Jesus said about himself and his own mission, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Just like a doctor would surround himself with the ill, I surround myself with the sinful."

Now, Jesus isn't for a minute suggesting that the Pharisees are sin-free. He's not suggesting that they don't need intervention, his intervention, in their lives. Romans 3:10 tells us that there's none who are righteous, not even one. And Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"—including these Pharisees!

What Jesus is saying is that some people are more aware of their sinfulness and their spiritual neediness than others. Jesus is merely announcing that he will always make time for those who carry a humble sense of their own sinfulness in their hearts. He will, like a smart physician, focus his attention on those who are sick, but open about it and anxious for treatment.

But those who steadfastly refuse to admit their fallenness, their sin, and their need, well, healthy people don't hang around doctors very often, do they? So what's a doctor to do? Obviously, this is a thinly veiled shot at the self-righteousness and pride of the Pharisees.

The central thrust of this passage is very similar to the emphasis in Luke 15, where Jesus tells the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the wayward son—where the lost sheep matters so much to the shepherd, and the lost coin matters so much to the woman, and the wayward son matters immensely to the father. Jesus was teaching the Pharisees that lost people

really do matter to the Father. Irreligious “riffraff” matter to God, they matter to Jesus and, he is saying, they ought to matter to you Pharisees, as well!

This story is dripping in irony. Think about it. Here’s Matthew, a mere rookie Christian who has only been a believer for a matter of days; and yet he is so concerned about the condition of his tax-collecting buddies that he takes a risk and throws an evangelistic party, trying to create some spiritual interactions that might just lead to a few of them finding God’s forgiveness and leadership for their lives. So Matthew will take that risk. He’ll pay the price. He’ll take the scorn of the Pharisees. It doesn’t bother him. He’s got a heart of love and concern for his buddies.

Contrast the rookie Matthew with the veteran spiritual leaders of the day, the lofty Pharisees—those highly educated, thoroughly trained, well-seasoned paragons of spiritual strength—who had just missed the entire point of what Matthew and Jesus and the other disciples were trying to do at Matthew’s party.

The Pharisees had become so obsessed with impressing themselves and others with their righteousness that their hearts had become calloused and cold toward those who, at least by appearance, needed spiritual help the most.

Do you understand Jesus’ lesson for us today? It’s so easy for us to fall into perfectionistic traps as we attempt to grow up in the Christian faith. It’s so easy for us to start gauging our spiritual maturity by how much we know, how much we serve, or how many church events we attend.

But Jesus is saying, “Be careful. Those are all good things, but be careful that you don’t get so wrapped up in the *doing* side of the Christian life that you neglect the *loving* side of the faith—especially the loving of lost people. Don’t let your heart grow cold. Be careful that you are also mature in *compassion* for those who are on the fast track toward destruction.”

You know, the longer you walk with Christ, the softer your heart should become toward spiritually wayward people, because you ought to see the whole world predicament more clearly. You ought to see Scripture and eternity more clearly. The older you get, the deeper you ought to feel about the plight of people who don't know God.

According to what Jesus is saying here, if a Christian is growing properly, he or she will continually grow in compassion for spiritually off-track people. So are we all growing properly here at our church? No question that a lot of us are growing in knowledge, in worship, and in character. But are we also growing in tenderness toward lost people and in our desire to do something about it?

Are we getting bolder and more creative in our personal evangelistic strategies? I mean, are we planning parties like Matthew's? Are we crawling out of our comfort zones and taking risks?

Or as is far too often the case, are we becoming increasingly isolated and cut off from the very people we've been called to reach?

If so, that's trouble.

First of all, it's trouble for us. I think I can pretty much gauge the voltage level of my Christian life by the amount of contact that I'm having with non-churched people; if it has been a long time since I've been in one of those critical conversations where all eternity is hanging in the balance, when I'm explaining the gospel and the guy's asking and I'm answering challenging spiritual questions. When that kind of thing's going on in my life, I'll tell you what, I pray with greater fervency, and there's more intensity in my preaching. It really makes a difference to me if I'm involved with people who need Christ!

Some of you have a layer of dust over your soul about an inch deep, and you say, “I can’t seem to get it off. What’s the matter with me?” You just need to strike up a relationship with a spiritually mixed-up person and start spending some time hanging out with them, and praying for them, and starting spiritual conversations with them so you see what God might do. Some of you just need to throw a party like Matthew’s—to stir things up a little bit!

If we aren’t actively doing these things, not only is it trouble for us—it’s trouble for *them*. I don’t want to lay an undue burden on anybody, but you really might be the critical link for your friend. You might be the only respectable, high-integrity Christian some people in and around your life will ever know.

Some of you work in environments where you’re the only Christian. You’re the only Bible some people read. You’re the only replica of Jesus they ever lay eyes on. So if you’re isolated and cut off and have no real contact with them, it’s trouble. It’s trouble for them, and it’s trouble for you. It’s also trouble for the kingdom because the kingdom is only going to advance through the evangelistic efforts of people like you and me.

You see, somehow we have to strike a balance in our lives between contact with Christians—which is very important because we need to be in spiritually supportive relationships; and contact with unbelievers.

Without a proper balance of contact with believers and unbelievers, it’s only a matter of time until our hearts start growing cold toward people outside of God’s family. We all need to take steps to develop and deepen contagious relationships in our lives—ones through which we can winsomely and infectiously communicate God’s love and truth.

I wonder what the temperature is in your heart toward spiritually wayward people right now? Is it where it needs to be?

With the time that remains in this service, *let me try to seed your mind a little bit with a few ideas*. The first is what we might refer to as becoming a *contagious consumer*. All of us buy gasoline, go to restaurants, dry cleaners, grocery stores, and other places for the necessities of life, right? With just a little forethought, those mundane errands can become evangelistic opportunities and adventures!

If you'd be strategic about going back to the same gas stations, restaurants, and stores enough to establish a rapport with the personnel there, it might just lead naturally to a spiritual conversation. And that might eventually lead to your bringing them to church and sharing the gospel with them—and one day leading them to faith in Christ!

The opposite side of the coin is true, as well. I know that we have some waitresses and clerks and salespeople who, with a little prayer and forethought, could cultivate contagious relationships with some regular customers that might, over time, lead to spiritual conversations and influence. It can go either way.

My main point here is some of us are coming into contact regularly with non-Christian people, but we're not being heads-up enough to take advantage of those brief interchanges.

Some of you are thinking, "I'm around non-Christians all of the time, but how do you broach spiritual topics?" Here's something you can say to people you see often. Start by asking the typical, "How's it going?" They'll reflexively say, "Oh, fine." Then get a bit closer to them, and sincerely say, "You can tell me the truth. It can't always be fine. How's it *really* going?" Just that little line can open all kinds of doors. It lets the person know that you care about whatever is not going fine, that you have a listening ear and a sensitive heart. This can lead to incredible witnessing opportunities.

Another idea is *strategic recreation and exercise*. Many of you exercise and participate in sports in order to stay in shape and to have some fun. Often these activities lend themselves to including non-Christian friends. If you invite someone too quickly to a Bible study they might just get nervous. But if you invite them to a hockey game, or maybe to join you for a fishing trip, they'll probably say, "Hey, why not?" Then, as you spend time together and as God leads, you can move conversations deeper into personal matters, and finally into spiritual matters.

Recreation and exercise can form natural settings in which to engage and encourage your friends. So why not get a little more strategic about these activities? Use bike riding, running, weight lifting, or aerobics as ways to build relationships and deepen conversations with people who need Christ, praying that fruit will be borne along the way. Alan Ezzell employs this idea superbly. He has been working his fishing partners for years and it's beginning to bear fruit. Third, *strategic civic, community, school, or political involvements* can produce wide-open doors for developing contagious relationships and conversations.

For too long many Christians have shied away from civic or political involvements, and the results have been unfortunate on a couple of levels: first, because when Christians stay away from these kinds of activities, the Christian value system and perspective are often not represented well in education or in government. But also, on the level that we've been talking about here today, because we miss key opportunities to hang out with non-churched people in those settings. Maybe some of you could kill two birds with one stone by getting involved in some of these groups as God leads you.

And how can we talk about rubbing shoulders with unbelieving people and not mention *the workplace*? I hear sincere Christians bemoan the fact that they're surrounded by non-Christians. I'm afraid they're losing the biblical perspective on what it means to be salt and light.

Salt has to have something to flavor. Light needs to be around darkness or it doesn't make much of a difference.

I can sympathize with those of you who get tired of the deceit or perhaps the profanity, but what a fertile environment in which a Christian can make a difference! My suggestion would be this: don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed with the fact that the odds seem to be against you. Instead, just identify one or two coworkers you feel some affinity with and in whom you sense some spiritual openness, and start taking your breaks or spending your lunch hours with them. Fast and pray and look for opportunities to have a spiritual conversation with them. If you can lead one or two of them to Christ, you'll have a little nucleus within the organization. Then you can invite other people to join that little nucleus!

But you've got to break out of your comfort zone. You've got to stop isolating yourself and focus instead on lovingly reaching out. Take a risk or two. See what God does! There's no shortage of people we can reach out to.

As we come to the close of this service, I just want to remind you of a spiritual rookie named Matthew. Remember this despised tax collector who, upon his conversion, threw an evangelistic party in order to get Jesus and his disciples in there rubbing shoulders with his not-so-spiritual friends.

I'd love this church to develop more of the heart of Matthew. I'd love for there to be Matthew Parties springing up as the Holy Spirit gives you boldness and creativity!

And remember Jesus' words that a doctor ought to be strategic with the use of his time. He ought to spend plenty of it with the sick. We should be strategic and balanced with the limited hours that we have to invest in the kingdom, and a portion of our time needs to be spent rubbing shoulders with people outside of God's family.

Next week in the service we're going to talk about one of our greatest spiritual weapons.
The title of the message is "Contagious Stories." We'll see all of you then.