

Compelled To Befriend

March 22, 2015

If you are like me, you are finalizing your taxes. That makes it the worst time of year. I always hope to get money back from the government, but the last few years, they have made me write a check. Writing that check always causes deep feelings of frustration. Can anybody else relate? If you know that feeling, it will help you understand this morning's message.

This morning we continue our mini series preparing us for Easter called, "Compelled by Grace." In this series we see how God's crazy love for us through Jesus compels us to do crazy things.

This morning we are studying two passages in Luke that show us how Christ's crazy love for us compels us to befriend people we would normally avoid. Christ's crazy love compels us to befriend even people working for the IRS. In Jesus' day they were called tax collectors.

This morning we meet two tax collectors. One is Levi in Luke 5. The other is Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Let's read both of those passages before we begin our study.

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Luke 5:27-32 (ESV)

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not,

because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Luke 19:1–10 (ESV)

These stories are similar. They have much to teach us about who and how we befriend.

Levi — The love of Christ compels me to party with those far from God.

Since the third century, there’s been a big debate as to whether or not Levi is also known as Matthew, who becomes one of the inner 12 disciples of Jesus. The verdict of history is unclear. We’re not sure Levi and Matthew are the same person. If they are, it makes the disciples of Jesus a motley crew because tax collectors and fishermen avoided each other like the plague.

What is a tax collector?

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, “Follow me.” Luke 5:27 (ESV)

Just as nobody builds a friendship with the IRS agent that audits their taxes, in their first century tax collectors were also despised. In this passage we see Levi collecting taxes at his tax booth. Toll roads are not a modern invention. He collected taxes from people that used the Roman road he supervised. Unfortunately, they didn’t have iPass. Everybody stopped. He inspected their cargo and charged them accordingly. He may have charged them on a per-axle basis.

The way he acquired his job was by bidding for it to the Roman government. The highest bidder that promised the most money acquired the job of tax collector. Tax collectors paid money to the Roman government before collecting taxes. The taxes collected served to reimburse you. The way you made money was overtaxing people and keeping the profit for yourself. You squeezed money out of people to build your profit margin. If you didn't like somebody, you taxed them more. You collected taxes with the full authority of the Roman government and soldiers behind you. Since most of your wealth came from extortion, you had no friends.

To make matters worse, Levi was Jewish. He was ripping off his own people to fund an evil overbearing government. People in his neighborhood consider him a traitor to his nation because he worked for Rome. They considered him a traitor to God because he worked to oppress God's people.

As you can guess, Levi had absolutely no friends, at least no decent God-honoring friends. No godly people wanted to spend time with him. Nobody trusted him. His only friends were other tax collectors and sinners, the people from the dark underbelly of society. That is Levi.

Jesus took the initiative, I must take the initiative.

And he said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. Luke 5:27–28 (ESV)

I want us to notice who initiated this relationship. Jesus initiated. He didn't ask Levi to get his act together. He didn't wait for Levi to come to him. He didn't wait for Levi to go to synagogue. Jesus went to Levi, the guy every good religious Jew avoided, and told him to follow him. Jesus sought out the very

person nobody loved. Jesus sought out the person where nobody, except his mother, would be mourning at his funeral.

Jesus told Levi to “follow him.” That meant Jesus was asking Levi to be part of his team. He was asking Levi to be his friend. He was asking Levi to be one of his followers and do life with him. In that culture, Jesus was considered a rabbi. Rabbis gave people the opportunity to be their students by invitation only. Rabbis only chose students that made them look good. Jesus chose tax collector Levi. Jesus was inviting Levi, the tax collector nobody loved, to be associated with him.

Some of you this morning feel like Levi. You feel rejected. You have no godly friends. Your only friends are people just as messed up as you. You are lonely because there is an “in” crowd but you are not part of it. If that is you, I want you to hear from the heart of Jesus. Just like Levi, Jesus is seeking you. Jesus is asking you to follow him. He offers to be your friend. He asks you to leave behind everything you were relying on for identity and significance. Jesus is calling you to be his disciple. Let him be your rabbi. Give your life to following Jesus because he loves you. If that is you, this morning come to Jesus. He is seeking you.

People that will never attend church will attend a party.

And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. Luke 5:29 (ESV)

Levi left his job and started to follow Jesus. Levi didn’t just leave his friends. He cared about his friends. He wanted them to know Jesus. Most of Levi’s friends were the type that would never be caught dead in a church or a

synagogue. The only friends of a tax collector are other tax collectors and really sinful people. Levi hit on an idea. Why not throw a party?

Levi's friends that need Jesus would have never come to a church or synagogue, but they would come over his house for a party to meet Jesus and his new Christian friends. Everybody loves a party. So Levi threw a party where his fellow tax collectors and sinful friends could mix with and be introduced to Jesus and the disciples. This strategic party was probably the only way most of his friends will every rub shoulders with Christian people to hear about God's love. That is why he threw the party. It was a party with a purpose.

Did you realize that throwing a party is ministry? Most churches are not good at this. Most Christians are not good at this. If you threw a party and invited people with a bad reputation, most of your Christian friends would criticize you. It isn't any party. It is a party with a purpose. It is so those who would never go to church can build friendships with Jesus and Christians. *Remember that the love Christ compels us to do some crazy things.*

We should be having intentional parties in our home for those far from God so they meet Christian people. That is one of the crazy things God's love compels us to do. When was the last time you threw an intentionally mixed party? For most of us it has been far too long. We are too serious. We don't like to have fun. Remember the love of Christ compels us to do some crazy things, like throw parties with super nachos and hot wings with a big screen TV to mix Christians with those far from God. This is ministry. It is biblical.

If you are in the market for a home, I encourage you to buy a home that allows you to entertain. Your home is not to be your little piece of heaven on earth that no one can touch. One of the purposes of your home is hospitality. You may have a great living room but if nobody hears about Jesus around your coffee table, who cares? You may have a super kitchen, but if your only large meals are Thanksgiving and Christmas for your family, you are underutilizing the evangelistic value of your kitchen. Use your home as a place to mix your Christian friends with those far from God. Levi did. Jesus loved it. The crazy love of Christ compels us to do crazy things. Remember that many people will not go to church but they will go to a party at your home.

Religious people will grumble.

And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Luke 5:30 (ESV)

Do you know why religious people grumble? They see themselves as better than others. They see themselves as more deserving of God's love. The religious people may have some sins under control. They may not be ripping people off. They may not be struggling with addictions. They may not be sleeping around, but they are just struggling with other sins. They are struggling with pride. They are struggling with self-righteousness. They are struggling with the false idol of a big ego. Religious people are not more deserving of God's love.

When religious people struggle with Christians eating with tax collectors and sinners to reach them for Jesus, the reason they struggle is because they have lost sight of their own sin.

If you struggle with throwing a party to mix your Christian and non-Christian friends, the reason you struggle is probably because of the self-righteousness of your heart.

Remember a good doctor doesn't quarantine himself from the sick. He helps the sick.

And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Luke 5:31–32 (ESV)

I love Jesus' reply. "You say they are sinners? I agree with you. The question is what are we going to do about it? Are we going to create nice holy huddles just for Christians called churches that feel like a different culture or are we going to go to them because they will not come to us?" Remember that Jesus took the initiative to reach Levi. Levi took the initiative to reach his friends. In the same way, Jesus took the initiative to reach us. We should take the initiative to reach our friends.

A good doctor doesn't quarantine himself from sick people. He hangs out with the sick people to heal them. A good doctor goes to places where his expertise is needed so he can heal people. Healing is his mission. A bad doctor avoids sick people. A bad doctor just hangs out with other doctors because he feels comfortable around them. A good doctor stays on the mission of healing sick people.

My friends, we are doctors. We know Jesus. We have the cure for sin, hopelessness, death and pain. Our job is to cure sick people. To be good doctors, we need to find ways to reach the sick. Throwing a party to mix our

Christian friends with those far from God is a strategic way to accomplish this goal.

Remember, some people will not come to church but they will come to a party at your house. It may be the only way they hear about Jesus.

Zacchaeus — The love of Christ compels me to eat with those that will never attend church.

What is a chief tax collector?

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. Luke 19:1–4 (ESV)

Zacchaeus was a little man that was rich man. He was not your ordinary tax collector. He was a chief tax collector. Tax collectors functioned like the mob. Their job was extortion. Zacchaeus was the mob boss. It was a pyramid scheme like Mary Kay or Advocare. The higher up the pyramid you went, the more money you made. Zacchaeus was toward the top of the pyramid. He was very powerful, very rich, very hated and very short. He bankrupted people, seized their possessions, took away college funds and drained retirement accounts.

In today's language, he would be a multimillionaire or a billionaire. He was the guy with a private jet and a team of maids to clean his vacation home. He only drank fine wine, not the cheap stuff from Hy-Vee that is the same price as a bottle of soda.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but the crowds were big. Zacchaeus was small. He may have been rich but he was despised by his own people and

considered a traitor. There was no way the general public would help him see Jesus. He was on his own. He decided to run ahead of the crowd and climb a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus from the air.

You have to picture this. It is funny. Picture a guy that looks like Danny DeVito. He was short, round and overdecorated in male jewelry. You see him running down the road. That is funny in itself. A man of Zacchaeus' stature never ran unless he was in a health club or being chased by a German shepherd. Next you see the short round mob boss wearing jewelry climbing a tree and perching in it like a bird.

You have to laugh at this. In this day men wore robes. Perching in a tree was an undignified position where people could look up your male dress. This was an especially embarrassing position for your local billionaire mob boss when everybody was staring at your legs. In that day showing your legs was undignified. Chances are people probably saw a lot more than Zacchaeus' ankles.

This is what he was willing to do to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

Jesus took the initiative. I must take the initiative.

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. Luke 19:5–6 (ESV)

This is the same thing we saw Jesus did with Levi. I think that is important to notice. He didn't wait for those far from Zacchaeus to come to him. Jesus went to him.

How did Jesus know Zacchaeus' name? We don't know. Maybe God told it to him. Personally I think the disciples saw Zacchaeus perched in the tree.

They saw his legs dangling and they broke into laughter because they couldn't believe short, round Zacchaeus, the mob boss, was in such an embarrassing position. I think the disciples pointed him out to laugh at him.

Jesus shocked everyone. Instead of mocking Zacchaeus, he called to him and told him to get out of the tree because he wanted to have lunch at his house. Jesus turned what probably started as a time of mocking Zacchaeus into giving Zacchaeus the honor of eating with him. In that day, asking to eat with someone was a way of extending friendship and acceptance.

Jesus didn't do this privately. He did this publicly in front of the crowds. You know everyone was tweeting this. Photos of Jesus helping Zacchaeus out of the tree were on Facebook walls. I am sure someone was blogging and saying how Jesus crossed the line and was now eating with a sinner, which is something good Jewish boys shouldn't do.

In the Jewish culture, eating with a man that was a known criminal made you a partner to his crime. Shunning was the typical Jewish practice for tax collectors and sinners. Jesus wasn't shunning Zacchaeus, he was publicly eating lunch with him!

Remember the love of God compels us to do crazy things. It compels us to befriend people that no other good church people would even have begin a conversation.

Religious people will grumble.

And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." Luke 19:7 (ESV)

This is what we expected. The religious people in that day loved Jesus but they didn't love the company he keeps. The religious people in that day want to be doctors that hang out with other doctors, not doctors that hang out with sick to heal them.

Sometimes a meal is a better way to reach someone than a church.

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham." Luke 19:8–9 (ESV)

In this meal, where mob boss Zacchaeus was offered friendship by Jesus and his disciples, while the religious hecklers were outside grumbling, Zacchaeus became a Christian. We don't know the content of the conversation but we know that over a meal Jesus talked about God and his love for sinners. Jesus showed God's love for sinners by extending friendship to Zacchaeus and eating with him. Over a meal, not in a house of worship, God changed Zacchaeus' heart.

It is important to note this happened over a meal. Over a meal people bond. Over a meal friendships are built. Over a meal people become open with one another. Conversations happen on a much deeper level. That is exactly what happened with Zacchaeus. This is why experts say it is important for families to have dinner together. They bond.

Sometimes the best way to reach people far from God is not bring them to church but to simply have a meal with them in your home.

True repentance is coupled with a desire for restoration.

Legal restitution in the Mosaic Law was 20 percent (Lev. 5:16; Num. 5:7). Zacchaeus assumed the much harsher double penalty that was reserved for

cattle and sheep rustlers (Exodus 22:1). When you become a Christian, God gives you a new nature. Your new nature doesn't just repent of sin but it wants to restore the damage caused by your sin. Many Christians understand repentance of sin but they don't understand that true repentance is coupled to a desire for restoration of the damaged your sin caused. This means if I stole your Hyundai, I will replace it with a BMW in your driveway. The keys are under the mat. If I overtaxed you by \$4,000, here is a check for \$16,000. We don't know how much money mob-boss Zacchaeus needed to repay. Given his profession, I suspect it was a fair amount.

Too many Christians don't connect repentance with restoration. We should do this. Too many of us feel sorry for our sin. We ask God's forgiveness of our sin but we don't have the courage to go to the person we sinned against and ask their forgiveness too to restore the relationship. Repentance without an attempt at restoration is cheap repentance. It is thin repentance. True repentance is always accompanied with a genuine attempt at restoration. The best repentance is tied to a desire to return a blessing to the person you sinned against as you try to restore the relationship.

This means if you hurt someone with your words, you also have the courage to apologize to his or her face. The best repentance goes a step beyond that. You also send a note of apology and in the note you put a gift card to your favorite restaurant showing your willingness to put your money where your mouth is and hope to transform your sin into a blessing. True repentance of

sin will always be followed with attempts at restoring the damage caused by your sin.

How did Jesus get a rich man to the kingdom of God?

As I reflected on this story, I kept thinking of Luke 18:25.

For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Luke 18:25 (ESV)

This is a figure of speech. It simply means it is really hard for a rich man to be saved. Zacchaeus was a very rich man and a very corrupt man. How was he saved? How did Jesus get the camel through the eye of a needle? By having dinner with the camel.

Zacchaeus would never go to a place of worship. He was saved by Jesus taking the initiative to build a friendship with Zacchaeus when everyone was mocking him and avoiding him. Jesus took the initiative to have dinner with him so he could tell him about God's love. When we eat with people, we bond with people and can talk about spiritual things.

Folks, who are the Zacchaeuses in your world that would never go to church? They are people that most Christians avoid but God could use you to change their lives if you simply took the initiative to have a lunch with them just like Jesus did with Zacchaeus.

Did Zacchaeus experience lasting change?

You probably wonder if giving half of your possessions to the poor and restoring everyone you ripped off four fold was just an emotional reaction. Did Zacchaeus follow through? Was there heart-felt change?

Clement, the ancient bishop of Alexandria shortly after the time of Jesus, mentioned Zacchaeus in one of his sermons. Apparently Zacchaeus continued to follow Christ. He was eventually appointed, probably by the apostle Peter himself, to be bishop of Caesarea.

Zacchaeus went from mob boss to the chief pastor of a city! All this began when he had one meal with Jesus. A meal that nobody else attempted because they avoided the lost. Jesus came to seek and save the lost by eating with them. He calls us to do the same.

Application

What have we learned from these stories of Jesus' meals with ancient IRS agents that we can take into our week?

1. Jesus loved the people that most religious folks ignored. The love of Christ compels me to do the same.

It is easy to love people that are just like us. It is easy to love people near to God. It is hard to love people far from God. The love of Christ compels us to love them and seek them. I don't know who those people are in your world. Maybe they are at the gym. Maybe they are your coworkers. Maybe it is other ladies you meet in school activities. If you are a teenager, it might be the people on your sports teams that you don't like. Don't ignore them. Seek them. A good doctor puts themselves with the sick. They don't just hang out with other doctors. Just took the initiative to build a relationship with people far from God. We are to take the initiative to build a relationship with people far from God.

2. Jesus took the initiative to build friendships with people far from God. The love of God compels me to do the same.

It is easy to stay in our comfortable group of friends. Jesus didn't do that. He went out of his way to eat with people that the good religious people ignored. Don't expect people far from God to come to you. Make plans in your life to go to them.

- That means joining a class at the YMCA to meet people.
- That means eating lunch in the break room at work to develop friendships with your coworkers.
- That means getting involved in Kiwanis or other public service organizations around town.
- That means volunteering to help in the school.
- That means taking the initiative to hold a BBQ for your neighbors.
- That means baking cookies and delivering them to your neighbors.
- If you have a little extra land that means having a community garden and inviting your neighbors to be part of it.

Take the initiative. Stop waiting for lost people to come to you. You go to them.

3. Throw parties where your Christian friends and people far from God can mix.

- Throw block parties and have church friends help you pull it off plus attend so they can meet your neighbors.
- Get a big screen TV in your basement. Provide super nachos, hot wings and drinks to make friends with some of your neighbors. Invite them over to watch football. Make it a Levi party.

- A few guys from church can get together and coach a local sports team so they can mix with parents far from God.

4. Invite people to a meal at your home that would never come to church.

Make a list of people that are far from God and find a way to eat with them. They may never come in a church but they will eat with you.

5. Expect religious people to grumble.

The reason religious people grumble is because they are not on mission. Religious folks want to be doctors that hang out with other doctors. They are about living in quarantine from the world rather than living like Jesus trying to seek and save the sick in the world. As doctors, we have the cure for sin, sickness and death. Let's be good doctors and help the sick people.

The love of Christ compels us to do crazy things. It compels us to befriend the people that others avoid. It compels us to throw parties where our Christian friends can mix with people far from God. It compels us to eat with people that would never come to church.

As we prepare for Easter, I am asking each of us to be good doctors on mission. Take the initiative and build friendships with people far from God. Have a meal with them. If they are open, invite them to church on Easter. The one day of the year most people far from God are most likely to go to church.

The love of Christ compels us to do some crazy things.



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