

**“Contagious Relationships”****Luke 5:27-32**

Well, this past week was the deadline for filing taxes. It's always a stressful time of the year, at least for me. It would probably be more stressful if I filed my own, but I'm grateful for a Christian tax guy who handles that for us. There is a lot of angst about whether or not you are going to have to pay and then if you have to pay, how much. Every year it seems the tax code changes and new legislation is introduced to take more and it's troubling, especially if you are making less. Then it also seems like some new tax is added to something.

Then there is always the wonder if you will be audited. Whether they deserve it or not, the IRS has a bad rap. You watch commercials on television that tell you not to fight the IRS alone. They make it sound like the IRS is some alien monster. Call our firm today and we'll help you get your tax debt settled sometimes as much as half what you owe. Of course the other half you save you have to pay the firm for fees associated with helping you get it reduced. You still end up paying the same.

Think about what it must have been like during Jesus' day. Tax collectors then may have had an even worse reputation than they do today. Today you walk into a McDonald's or Little Caesar's or Speedway gas station and you see signs posted about starting your own franchise. In Jesus' day they had tax franchises. An individual could bid on a region and the franchise went to the highest bidder. For that individual it was like writing his own check because it was very lucrative.

Rome set a standard tax rate that the tax collectors would receive as a base for taxes. The tax collector could then tack on 10, 20, 30, 50 or even 100 percent, whatever they wanted to add to the tax tab. Whatever was above the tax amassed for Rome was profit to the tax collector. If someone didn't pay or didn't pay enough you had the authority to send

Roman soldiers to collect it, using force if necessary or at the least strong intimidation. Some tax collectors hired thugs to beat it out of people wouldn't pay up. The tax collector had a literal license to extort and exploit the people. Many became loan sharks to those who couldn't pay, but demanded a high interest in return. You get the sense it was like a Mob boss sending out his goons.

They had poll taxes, property taxes, and income taxes. They taxed the transportation of goods as well as the goods themselves. Letters that were sent to others were taxed, using a road, and crossing a bridge. Virtually anything they wanted could be taxed and you had to pay up. It was taxation without representation.

They were greedy, sleazy, and deceitful, profiting from the misery of others. You can understand why tax collectors were the most hated and despised men in Israel. They were considered the dregs of society, lowest on the social scale next to slaves.

It just so happens that our message is about someone who was a tax collector. Turn in your Bibles to **Luke 5:27-32**.

**“After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth.”**

Levi is his pre-Christian name. We know him better as Matthew, who also was the author of the first Gospel. Our text tells us that he was sitting at his tax booth. They set up their booth on main roads where people traveled, especially merchants. What we learn from Mark's gospel account is that Levi was by the seashore. When fishermen came in from a night of fishing, there was Levi with his ledger on the desk, quill pen in hand and perhaps a scale next to the table. The fishermen had to pass him on their way to the market to sell their catch of the day. Even before they made any profit they had to pay taxes.

In the passage we will explore today Matthew threw a big party for all his tax-collecting buddies. In a way it was an announcement to them that he was closing up his tax shop and signing on to follow a new Rabbi named Jesus. Let's look at this story, point out some highlights and then draw some applications that I hope will be helpful to each of us as we pursue becoming a contagious Christian. Today it's about contagious relationships.

*The first highlight is that Jesus handpicked Matthew and personally challenged him to follow.* It's unclear what Jesus saw in Matthew given his profession, but Jesus wanted him to be His disciple.

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 "Where to?" or even "For how long?" It seems obvious from Matthew's response that he was already prepared to follow. He needed the invitation.

As it is used here, the word **"follow"** means to go behind. With the exception of one use in Revelation, the word is used exclusively in the Gospels, limited to the Disciples of Christ. This word means to begin at once and to keep it up. It is not just a casual following. [Robyn and David have started this thing called letter boxing. They follow clues to some destination where they find a box. Inside the box is a stamp. They have a stamp as well and put their mark in a notebook and stamp their own notebook with the stamp from the box. It's a fun and casual experience.](#) For Matthew this is no casual Sunday afternoon walk in the park. It refers to Matthew's definitive decision to leave everything and go after Christ. It was a commitment to break all other ties. He was not forced or coerced or bribed or hypnotized. Matthew had an attachment to Jesus that was driven internally. The word also implies participation in whatever fate would befall Jesus (**John 12:25-26**).

So **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, land, and material possessions. All his retirement plans, pension funds, servants and a life of ease were now behind him. It's widely believed that Matthew paid a higher financial price than any of the other disciples to follow Jesus. His decision to follow Jesus cost him everything.

In the very next verse (v. 29) we see that a major change came as a result. He threw a big party for his fellow tax collectors and friends. It was not only a farewell party, but also to introduce his friends to Jesus and some of the other disciples that Matthew would be joining.

Matthew was throwing an evangelistic mixer, what we might call a "Matthew party" hoping that Jesus and his new friends would be able to influence some of his tax-collecting buddies by rubbing shoulders with them in a social setting. Maybe they would be able to build some bridges and engage in some spiritual conversation with his old buddies.

Think for a moment of some of your friends or neighbors. They may never want to step foot inside a church because they have this perception that we're really weird and weird stuff goes on inside. They think we're just a bunch of straight laced, conservative up-tight evangelicals that couldn't possibly know what it's like to have fun. Who wants to hang out with a bunch of Bible thumpers.

Matthew took a risk and crawled out of his comfort zone and threw a party with a bunch of his old friends and some of his new friends because that's all he knew how to do to be evangelistic. Matthew had a tender heart toward those he knew who were headed to hell. He knew he was heaven bound and wanted as many of his friends to hear about how they could be heaven bound too.

In Sunday school last week we learned about six styles of evangelism. Each of us has been uniquely gifted by the Lord and one of these styles fits us.

Peter has the direct style. This person is bold, confident, assertive and to the point.

Paul had the intellectual style. This person is inquisitive, analytical, and logical.

The man born blind whose sight was restored had the testimonial style. This person is a clear communicator, is a compelling story teller and a good listener.

Matthew had the interpersonal style. This person has relational warmth, is conversational, and friendship oriented.

The woman at the well had an invitational style. This person is hospitable, relational, and persuasive.

In the book of Acts we have Tabitha who exhibited the serving style. This person is others-centered, works behind the scenes, does things for others and is patient.

You may be like Matthew and like to have people around. Throw a “Matthew party” where you invite some of your unsaved co-workers or neighbors and some of your Christian friends who have some of the other evangelistic styles to help your friends get introduced to some spiritual topics that will open up other doors to share Christ. If your friends are intellectual, invite a Christian who is intellectual. You get the idea.

Matthew was handpicked by Jesus and he started right away to introduce people to the Savior.

*The second highlight from the story is that the Pharisees had a major problem with the evangelistic party Matthew was hosting.*

The objection wasn't the party, it was the guest list. They didn't like the fact that Jesus, who claimed to be a Rabbi, was rubbing shoulders with the likes of Matthew's tax-collecting buddies. To the religious elite, they were scum. They were considered ceremonially unclean because they associated with the Gentiles. That alone disqualified them from entering the Temple. They felt this riffraff didn't deserve the time and attention given by Jesus or from any respectable religious leader.

Their attitude tells us something about their heart. Matthew saw their hearts as being far from God and he wanted them to draw closer to Him.

The religious leaders saw their hearts as being far from God and undeserving of knowing Him. Certainly no God-fearing person had any business associating with them. They deserved the punishment that awaited them. As a matter of fact in that culture eating a meal with someone was like saying you were entering a covenant relationship with them. The Pharisees had a problem with that.

*The third highlight is Jesus' response to the Pharisee's concerns by comparing Himself to a doctor.*

One has to wonder if about this time Matthew was hanging his head in fear that maybe they were right and Jesus was now going to give him a tongue lashing for inviting Him to a mixer with these reprobates. Instead what Jesus does in answer to the Pharisee's objections is affirm Matthew's heart and goal of introducing his friends to the Savior.

Jesus appeals to the logic of the Pharisees' by asking them how smart it would be for a doctor to surround himself only with people who are healthy. It's a quick way to ruin your medical practice. Smart doctors surround themselves with people who need their services. They need people who are sick, just as sick people need a doctor to help them become well. That's what Jesus said about His own

mission. **“I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”**

This is both a rebuke for the religious establishment as well as a call to the unsaved to repent. Jesus was saying He couldn't help those who, like the Pharisees, already considered themselves righteous, but were in fact not. But, He could help those who were sinners and recognized they were sinners and who repented and trusted in the only way one can be saved. He truly is the great physician.

Jesus is saying that some people are more aware of their sinfulness and their spiritual neediness than others. Jesus was saying He would always make time for those who have a humble sense of their own sinful hearts. Like a smart doctor, He would focus His attention on those who were spiritually sick, but open to hear about a remedy for sin.

The central thrust of this passage is very similar in emphasis to Luke 15 where we read about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the wayward son. Where the lost sheep matters most to the shepherd, and the lost coin matters most to the woman, and the wayward son matters most to the father, Jesus was telling the Pharisees that lost people matter most to Him. **Is that our heart as well? Or are we only comfortable hanging around people who are like us? How can we go into all the world and reach the unsaved if we won't hang around them?**

**“Come out from among them and be separate saith the Lord”** does not mean we never associate with the unsaved, it means that when we are around them we don't become like them.

Because the irreligious riffraff matter to God means they should matter to us as well. They mattered to Matthew the new follower of Jesus. He did the only thing he knew – throw a party. Maybe we need to be just as daring as Matthew. My guess is they were all having a good time until the Pharisees

showed up and tried to throw a wet blanket on the fun.

Jesus wanted the Pharisees to see that it was more important to have a heart for the lost than to try and impress people with false piety. It can be just as easy for us to fall into the same Pharisaical trap of self-assessment and self-improvement. We can gauge our spiritual maturity by how much we know, how much we serve, how many church events we attend or even by who we don't hang out with.

Jesus is telling us to be careful. While those are good things, don't get so wrapped up in the doing side of the Christian life that we neglect the loving side of the faith, especially loving the lost. Let's not let our heart grow cold to the lost like the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

The longer we walk with Christ, the more tender our hearts should be toward spiritually wayward people. A growing relationship with Christ ought to help us see the world predicament more clearly, to see Scripture more clearly, to see eternity more clearly. The older we get in Christ, the deeper we ought to feel about the plight of people who don't Christ.

Beth Moore relates a story about sitting in an airport waiting for a flight when she noticed the expressions of those sitting across from her indicating that something behind her was appalling. Curious about what they were looking at she also wanted to see but didn't want to be obvious so she shifted her position to get a better look. Sitting in a wheel chair was an old man hunched over. His hands were gnarled and his face wore the look of years of hardship. His thin hair was long and disheveled. He was not handsome to look at.

As she sat there in some way the Lord told her to go and brush his hair. She argued with the Lord that she didn't have a brush and she didn't really feel like talking to a stranger at that moment, but in time

she obeyed. She bent next to his wheel chair and asked the man if she could brush his hair. He told her he would like that. Beth added that she didn't have a brush. He said there was a brush in his back pack behind the wheel chair. Opening up the pack she found the brush and began at the bottom of his hair to brush out the snarls. She explained that she had a little girl with fine hair like his and knew what it was like to brush hair. Eventually she asked if he knew Jesus. He said he did and that launched them into a whole other conversation. He explained that he had been in a nursing home recovering from a broken bone and was on his way to see his wife who had to go stay with a daughter in another city while he was rehabilitating. He shared how they met and married and had been married for over 60 years. It had been several months since he had seen his bride and was looking forward to seeing her again.

Beth hoped that he would be traveling to where she was headed so that she could continue their conversation. Pretty soon the call came to board and she realized they would be on separate planes. The flight attendant came to wheel him on the plane and they parted company. A few moments later the stewardess came to talk to Beth. She had noticed the two of them talking and came to ask what it was she had said to the man because as he was being wheeled on the plane he was sobbing uncontrollably and repeating "she made me beautiful for my wife." The stewardess wanted to know if that meant anything to her. Looking the other woman in the eye, she asked "Do you know Jesus?"

Every encounter is a divine encounter orchestrated by the Lord that in some way we might impress on others something about Jesus. Every conversation provides the opportunity to interject something of a spiritual nature.

This past week I was at the dentist. I don't know much about the hygienist who was working me over. It can be difficult to say much when your

mouth is wide open and you have those sharp instruments scraping away at your teeth, but in between rinsing we would talk. I made a comment about how horrible it was hearing in the news a couple months ago that thousands of patients had to get checked out for infectious diseases because the dentist failed to sterilize his equipment. I opened my mouth, let her clean and talk.

The next break in the action I commented about the Boston bombing. She asked "what is going on in our world today?" I had the opportunity to tell her what I believe about sin and about our need for God. What I said I hope planted a seed. I hope the next time I can ask her about her own spiritual journey.

**Does our heart ache a little more each day for friends and family and co-workers who are headed for an eternity without Christ that they might know the Savior? Are we getting bolder and more creative in our own personal evangelistic strategy?** Maybe throwing a Matthew party sounds pretty good. Maybe you can work with someone else with one of the other styles of evangelism to plan one. It probably will require you to get out of your comfort zone and take some risks. We might even fail at times, but that shouldn't dampen our spirits.

Think about some of the places you go where non-Christians are. Think about those places as mission fields, places where you already have relationships with people. There is your beautician, or the waitress at the restaurant you frequent or the mailman. It could be a teacher or classmate. **Are we devoting quality thought to how we can keep mixing with non-Christians in the hopes that by rubbing shoulders with them we'll be able to share Christ with them someday? Or are we becoming increasingly isolated and cut off from the very people we were called to reach?**

At a pastor's conference some time ago, the speaker asked about 400 pastors how long it had been since they had dinner with a non-Christian in the past



year. A lot of pastors were looking for ink pens or tying shoes because it was uncomfortably clear many of them had not.

Aside from family who are unsaved, it's been awhile for me. **What about you? Are our lives solely revolving around Christian service and Christian people so much that we barely have contact with spiritually needy people? Are we so busy at church that we are having a difficult time being the church to those we are called to reach?**

If we answer yes, then *it's trouble for us*. **Do we get excited when someone shares with us that they witnessed to a friend? Do we get excited and want to tell others that we shared Christ with someone?**

It's spring time and that means getting the lawn mower ready. I need to drop the deck and clean it up, sharpen the blades or put on new ones. I need to start the engine and let it run for a while. The chances that it will start right up are remote. The engine may not turn over, but dollars to donuts there won't be enough juice in the battery to start it up. It's going to need a jump.

Witnessing is the electrical charge that can jumpstart a heart that is running spiritually low. We think that just coming to church and serving a little here or there is all we need to keep our spiritual battery charged up. Instead it can be draining. We need to be sharing our faith to keep fully charged. If we don't share our faith it's trouble for us.

If we don't share our faith *it's trouble for them* – the non-Christian. Not to put any added burden or lay a guilt trip on anyone, but we just might be the critical link for our friend or neighbor or co-worker or classmate in coming to know Christ. We might be the only Christian they know or see.

You may work in a place where you are the only Christian. You're the only Bible some people read. You're the only replica of Jesus they see. You may

like the solitude of a corner during break just to get away from the gossip and profanity. It might be uncomfortable, but how else can you engage with them and see an authentic Christian. It's trouble for them.

It's also *trouble for the kingdom*. As I said a couple weeks ago, we are God's only plan for advancing His kingdom. He's not sending angels or bringing people back from the dead to spread the news – we are it. So, we need to go where they are. Statistics tell us that one out of four will come to church if invited. That means three out of four won't come so we have to go to them.

Go to your kids or grandkids soccer games and sit with other parents and grandparents. Go fishing or out to dinner or have them over for a game night.

In our DVD series the instructors talked about becoming a contagious consumer.

Build relationships with the same people at the same places.

We all buy gas. Go at the same time, to the same station when you know the same clerk will be behind the counter.

Try and get the same waitress at the restaurant when you go out to eat.

Get in the same grocery line to talk with the check-out person.

Mundane tasks can turn into opportunities to begin some spiritual dialogue. I'm working on developing some relationships at the gym. Could I run or bike outside? Sure. But it isolates me from contact. I don't have any non-Christian co-workers, so I have to be intentional to go to where they are.

Whenever I see someone wearing something that indicates the person was a veteran I like to go up and thank them for serving our country. I need to take it a step further and maybe say something about how difficult that must have been serving in a war. Then I could ask them if war made them think more or less about God. Any conversation can be turned into something that can interject a thought

about the Lord. You don't have to feel like you need to launch into a gospel presentation right away with a full sermon and a poem.

We all have the habit of greeting people with "how are you doing?" How does the other person typically respond? I'm okay or I'm good or fine. Take it another step further and ask them if that is really true or are they just being cordial. If they say they really are good, then just say something like "that's good to hear, on days when things are going well I like to thank God that everything's okay, but even on the bad days I try to thank the Lord because it could be a whole lot worse." Then you could ask them how they cope when they have bad days. Is there some religious thing they do to help them? If they don't want to pursue the conversation any further just thank them and tell them the next time they have a bad day to let you know because you'd like to pray for them.

When I ask how people are doing, I sometimes will ask them to rate their answer on a scale from 1 to 10. Regardless of their answer I could respond with something like "sounds like there's room for some improvement. What could you do to get that number up to an 8 or 9? When I'm not feeling so hot, I like to pray and ask for God's help. Do you ever ask God to help you? Is there anything I could pray about for you?"

Yes it can be risky.

They might ridicule you.

They might brand you as a religious nut case.

They might avoid you and want nothing to do with you in the future.

They might think you're crazy.

But hopefully you have gotten them to think, maybe not right then, but later about God.

You can plan strategic recreation and exercise.

Invite them to walk the neighborhood. You can talk about sports. Your neighbor may be a big Lions fan. You might ask what the Lions are going to do

this year without Jason Hanson kicking. Then you could talk about how committed he was to his family and community and church. You might even ask if they knew he was really involved in the Pontiac area with the rescue mission Grace Centers of Hope. He has a deep commitment to Christ.

Or you might ask them what they think of Tim Tebow and his patented kneeling prayer. Ask them if they think it's for show or is it genuine and why.

When I was going to the YMCA before it was too expensive, I got to know Joe and Arnie. Joe was Catholic and Arnie was Jewish. At times Joe could be quite profane. On occasion he would tell Arnie that he put a stack of Playboy magazines on the bench for him. We would at times engage in spiritual conversation. I don't see these guys anymore but when I think about them I pray for them that something I said would bring them to Christ.

Sports may not be your thing but community events are. You may be involved in civic, school or political activities.

Hobbies or other interests may be opportunities for spiritual discussion. Some of you enjoy ornithology. You may talk about the creative imagination of God through all the varieties of birds. How do they know where to migrate to? How do they know to come back to the same place?

Let's keep in mind the Biblical perspective when we are rubbing shoulders with non-Christians 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. We can get tired of the profanity and the deceit, but remember what a fertile environment in which a Christian can make a difference! Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed with the fact that the odds seem to be against you. Instead, just identify one or two people and start talking to them at breaks

or over the fence. Spend some time fasting and praying and look for the small openings to have a little spiritual conversation.

It will mean getting out of your comfort zone, but that's what Paul meant when he said **“when I am weak, then I am strong”** because **“greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world.”**

Remember too, that **“I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”** Keep in mind according to Acts 1:8 that it is God's Spirit who empowers us to witness.

Matthew was a spiritual rookie. He went out on a limb and introduced his old friends – all scoundrels – to the One who could change them the way he had been changed. You too can be a Matthew.

Remember that you are not alone. Matthew brought along Jesus who came to seek and save the lost and served people in their needs. Peter was probably there too. He was the one with the direct approach. To buffer the direct style of Peter was his brother Andrew who was probably there. He was relational. In the Gospels we see him always bringing people to Jesus.

My point is this: learn who around you has those different styles and utilize them in your efforts. At the least involve your Christian circle of friends in praying. Tell them about Sally or John or Phil or Karen that you are sharing Christ with them and ask them to pray with you. Hopefully this will give you some things to think about and plan for.

Next week we're going to look at someone who had a contagious story. Until then let's go out and develop contagious relationships. Like Jesus we have been called to bring **“sinners to repentance.”**

Pray with me.