

You Are Cordially Invited...

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One day Matthew threw a lavish party for Jesus (**Luke 5:27-32**).

Matthew had just met Jesus, he had just been invited by Jesus to experience a complete life change, he had just quit his job as a tax collector, and now he wanted all his friends to meet this amazing new friend of his.

Maybe Matthew positioned it as a going-away party, a farewell party, for himself: he's quitting his job, he's going on the road with Jesus, so he throws a party and invites all his work buddies to say good-bye.

And Matthew could afford to throw a big party, because he was a tax collector, and tax collectors had a great racket.

They didn't have the IRS back then. You didn't just go down to H&R Block and have your taxes figured, and mail them in by a certain date. The Roman government had such a sprawling empire that they divided up all their conquered territories into districts, and they auctioned off, to the highest bidder, the right to collect the taxes in a given district.

Someone would purchase the taxation license for, say, Capernaum, in the same way that today someone might purchase the right to sell state lottery tickets or Oakland Raiders gear. This individual would pay the Roman government the agreed-upon price — but then charge the citizens whatever he could get away with charging. Anything extra he could make off the people, over his actual cost, that was his profit.

If he was unscrupulous, he could extort all kinds of money out of regular everyday tax-paying citizens: give them a hard time over their deductions, threaten to turn them over to the authorities, raise the specter of legal hassles or even jail time.

And the tax code back then was no simpler than it is today: it was complicated, and it wasn't widely published.

So this was a situation just begging to be abused — and that's what the tax collectors did, on a regular basis.

Tax collectors, in Matthew's day, were the scum of the earth.

Matthew worked at a tax office on Lake Shore Drive in Capernaum. Capernaum sat on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was a crossroads, like Chicago or Kansas City. It sat at the intersection of a number of different roads and routes, including the major highway from Syria down to Palestine. People moving through the region by land or by water had little choice but to pass through Capernaum.

So it made sense to collect taxes there, because there were lots of different taxes

related to travel:

You were taxed for using certain roads.

You were assessed a certain tax for having a cart.

You were assessed another amount for each wheel of the cart.

You were assessed another amount for the animal pulling the cart.

You were taxed for using the harbor.

There were purchase taxes on certain articles.

There were import and export taxes.

There was a 1% income tax.

There was a tax paid by all men ages 14 to 65 and all women ages 12 to 65 simply for the privilege of existing.

If you were a farmer, you had to pay tax on the ground itself: one-tenth of all the grain you grew, and one-fifth of all the wine and oil you produced. You could pay up with grain, wine, and oil, or with the equivalent amount of money.

A tax collector could make you stop right on the road, inspect your stuff, and charge you a tax on the spot. If you didn't have the money, he might offer you a loan at an exorbitant rate of interest.

Tax collection was a volume business, and the tax collectors benefited from all this volume.

So Matthew, whether he was personally dishonest or not, was making a ton of money. He was probably very well-off, and this party he decided to throw for Jesus was huge.

The party guests fell into two basic categories: Jesus' followers — and **Mark 2:15** tells us Jesus had lots of followers by this point in his ministry — and a whole bunch of Matthew's fellow employees from the tax office.

Plus, there were still "others": not tax collectors, but also not followers of Christ.

The religious leaders referred to these guys as "sinners," meaning people who did not live up to their formal religious standards, people who were not welcome in their places of worship.

The strictest religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees, weren't part of the bash. Maybe they didn't get invited because Matthew knew they wouldn't attend. Anyway, we know they didn't eat or drink anything at Matthew's house because that was against the Pharisees' religious rules.

The Pharisees are scary to me. If you look at their doctrine, it's very similar to the typical evangelical church's doctrine.

But the Pharisees went further. They decided that to honor God, to keep themselves holy, they would attach all these rituals to what God had originally called them to do, under the Old Testament law — they would build these "behavioral barricades" around their lives to keep them from even coming *close* to breaking any of the Ten Commandments.

And then, if you didn't go as far as they went, well, they couldn't even associate with you. They couldn't have a meal with you, because that would make them impure.

So when Jesus actually went into Matthew's house, and actually sat down at his banquet table, and actually ate the food, and actually drank the wine, and actually had conversations with known sinners — tax collectors and who knows what these other people did for a living — the Pharisees were horrified.

Jesus' response to them, in **Luke 5:31-32**, was very simple and very straightforward. But his words were loaded — like a truck full of nitroglycerin.

If we come to understand these words, and then truly live by them, this principle explodes the way we see people — it explodes the way we think about people and talk with people and interact with people — it explodes the way we see ourselves and think about ourselves — it explodes the way we live our lives.

Here's what Jesus said: **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."**

To feel the full weight of this seemingly elementary comment, we need to understand that Matthew, when he wrote his Gospel, wrote primarily for the Jewish audience of his day — and the Jews in that culture, like Bible-believing Christians in America today, saw themselves as the spiritual leaders of society.

So we have to look at Matthew's Gospel from our perspective as people in spiritual leadership — evangelical Christians, who invite other people to share our faith.

Of course, when we look at Matthew's party, we want to relate to Matthew. I say to myself, Man, if I were Matthew, I would have done the same thing: I would have invited all my friends to meet Jesus!

And Matthew is indeed a wonderful model for us. He shows us a way of introducing people to Christ that can be even more effective than the traditional method of inviting them to church — and that's by introducing them to Christ yourself, personally: through your own life, your lifestyle, your personal interaction with them, in your normal everyday life, in your daily work, in your chit-chat with your next-door neighbor, in the way you handle conflict with people, in the way you express inner peace even in stressful situations, in the way you express quiet confidence even in terrifying times, in the way Christ lives in you and "shows through" you!

The Matthew model breaks us out of the four walls of the church and gets us into our neighbors' lives. It's the fulfillment of Jesus' admonition to us in **John 13:15**: **"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."**

We can produce all the church services we want, but if we don't make Christ present in our own homes, in our own daily lives, in the way we live life in and around non-Christians, then people will look at our individual lives and say, *Big deal. They're no different than anybody else. Their church must be nothing more than a social club.*

Matthew is a great model for those of us who get hives over the idea of "sharing Christ" with our non-Christian friends. Do sermons on personal evangelism give you a knot in the pit of your stomach? I can relate. As verbal as I tend to be, and as public as my teaching ministry is, when I go one-on-one — with my old friends from the theater community, for example — the idea of persuading somebody to

embrace my faith is really unnerving.

But Matthew himself may have been just like us in that way. Nowhere in Scripture is there a record of a single word Matthew said personally. He could write up a storm — he wrote the most in-depth of the Gospels — and he lived with Jesus for three solid years, but he was not noted as an evangelist. He was not known for his ability to grab a total stranger by the arm, engage them in a conversation about spiritual matters, lead them to see their sinful condition, guide them into praying the Sinner's Prayer, and filling the church with his personal converts.

All Matthew could do was throw a party.

All he did was open his home, open his life, share good times with his neighbors and friends.

And when they spent time with Matthew, they found that — hey, Jesus lives here!

If Christ really lives in my heart, if I am really walking with him, then I am going to make an impact for Christ on my friends. I am going to be the Christian friend they turn to in their moment of crisis. I am going to be that person in their life who's "different," so when they bump up against a problem or a situation where they need answers on more of a spiritual level, I'm the one they turn to.

We need to understand that people come to faith in Christ by a *process*, a series of impressions.

We often refer to this process with the metaphor of links in a chain:

Somehow, at some point, a person receives their first impression of Christ. That's the first link in their chain.

Then someone else makes an impression. Or some event, or something they read, makes an impression.

Link by link, they understand more and more about who Jesus is, and why they need him in their lives.

Until finally one day, by the grace of God, by the work of his Spirit, there's a final link. Something ignites the fire in their heart, and they choose to give their life to Christ.

God does not call all of us to provide the final link.

We are obligated to be *one* link in the chain — to represent Christ in *whatever way we can*, whatever role God happens to give us at the moment, whatever setting we find ourselves, in our normal everyday life, our regular day-to-day conversation, our dealings with people.

God forbid I should become a broken link in someone's chain by expressing a harsh, judgmental attitude toward someone, or by being cruel or insensitive, or by twisting the truth to gain the advantage over someone, or by any of the dozens of natural instincts that I need Jesus to replace in me!

Let me be Matthew — let me share Christ with those around me, in a way that's natural for them and for me.

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So yes, I want to be Matthew in this story.

But my more natural tendency is to be a Pharisee.
Look again, and you'll see me there.

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick,” Jesus told them. He saw himself as a doctor, someone who could bring healing. And he saw the common people, the “sinners,” as *sick*.

The Pharisees didn't have anything remotely like this mindset. They saw God as a taskmaster, and people as his slaves.

And they saw themselves — the Pharisees — as the cops who enforce the master's decrees.

The idea that Jesus was a doctor, someone interested in bringing healing, was foreign to them.

This illness analogy was horrifying to them — because if people are sick and God is a doctor, then the Pharisees would have to be — the *nurses!*

Instead of enforcing the laws, they would have to *serve*.

They would have to bandage spiritual wounds, if not physical ones.

They would have to bathe spiritual paraplegics, and maybe even physical ones.

They would have to spoon food into the mouths of helpless hospital patients, figuratively if not literally.

They would have to risk disease themselves — spiritually and maybe even physically.

We don't like to think of ourselves having the same kind of reaction, but think about what happens in your head when you see a newcomer walk into your church? What's your first instinct? To go up to them? To welcome them warmly? Or to sort of hope that someone else will?

I want to stay in my comfort zone.

The fact is, I *love* to serve ... but only in the ways I'm *comfortable* serving.

I don't *really* want to serve if it means getting uncomfortable.

As it turns out, Jesus is showing me that *I'm a Pharisee*.

But Jesus looks at that same newcomer, and he doesn't see a stranger. He doesn't see a threat to our comfort zone. He looks at that person and he says, *They're sick. They're hurting. They need help. They need healing. They need me.*

Or maybe I see a new person and they seem too old for this group — or too young.

Or they're awfully dressed up — or they dress really crummy.

I compare them to myself, and judge them accordingly. Now Jesus shows me what I *am* ... and *I'm a Pharisee!*

Yet Jesus looks at those same people and says, *They're sick. They're hurting. They need help. They need healing. They need me.*

Or maybe — and here's where the Jesus-rubber meets the Pharisee-road: When I start to learn *what kind of problems this person has*, I immediately pigeonhole them.

Oh brother, they're gonna be trouble.

Oh man, I once dealt with someone who had that kind of addiction.

Oh man, people who have that kind of problem NEVER get over it.

Oh man, I gotta keep my distance. If I'm not careful, this one will eat me alive.

Or perhaps we say something along the lines of:

They have WHAT kind of sin in their life? WHAT kind of sin in their background?

Look out.

Be on your guard.

This person is a tax collector.

Don't get any on you.

Do I, to be honest, have a little bit of that reaction to someone's sin? *I'm a Pharisee.*

But Jesus doesn't see that person as dangerous. Jesus looks at that same person and

says, They're sick. They're hurting. They need help. They need healing. They need me.

We as followers of Christ urgently need to learn to see non-Christians as spiritually sick, as hurting, in pain, and in need of healing.

They are hurting themselves and others *because of* not having the Spirit of Christ in their lives.

They are suffering.

They are losing.

They are experiencing a kind of pain that we're not experiencing.

Not that we don't have problems; we do. But they don't have the supernatural resource available to them that we do. They don't have any way to experience the peace, the joy, the quality of life that we experience as a result of having Christ in our lives.

Our hearts need to overflow with compassion for people who don't know Jesus.

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"I have not come," Jesus told the Pharisees at Matthew's place, **"to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."**

And we're all sinners. **Romans 3:10** throws a wet blanket over every single one of us:

"There is no one righteous," Paul states, **"not even one."**

But as Christ-followers we've committed ourselves to changing direction. We're on a new road spiritually.

Will we welcome others to join us on this new road?

The answer isn't an automatic "yes."

It's been said that the average person, within seven years of coming to Christ, will have *no more* non-Christian friends. We get so caught up in our church that we don't have time to go shoot pool with the new next-door neighbor. We don't have the energy to check in on that friend from work and see how they're doing at home since their teenager started giving them so much trouble. We don't make the effort to connect with non-Christian people in caring ways.

That's what happened to the Pharisees, and that's what will happen to us, except for the grace of God. As we go down the road with Christ, it will be our natural tendency to drift away from those who need us most. We will have to ask God — and *keep on asking* God — to make our hearts soft and warm and open to people who

need him in their lives, by the work of his Spirit.
We need to be Matthew — and *stay* Matthew.

I need to do an annual self-audit. How much passion do I still have — how much time do I still invest — how much energy do I still expend — on non-Christians?
As we grow in Christ, changing into the “new creatures” of **2 Corinthians 5:17**, we’ll find that non-Christians are becoming less and less like us. The challenge is to keep saying to people — even though they’re less and less like us — “Hey, come to the party. It’s for you. Meet Jesus. He’s amazing!”