

Walk Across the Room

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Matthew 9:9-13, 35-38

⁹*As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's desk and said to him, "Follow me." So he got up and followed him.*

¹⁰*While he was having dinner at Matthew's home, many tax collectors and notorious sinners arrived and began eating with Jesus and his disciples.*

¹¹*The Pharisees saw this and said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and notorious sinners?"*

¹²*When Jesus heard that, he said, "Healthy people don't need a physician, but sick people do.*

¹³*Go and learn what this means: 'I want mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call righteous people, but sinners."*

³⁵*Then Jesus began traveling through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every illness.*

³⁶*When he saw the crowds, he was deeply moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

³⁷*Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is vast, but the workers are few.*

³⁸*So ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest."*

Just walk across the room. Not much of a statement when you hear it, but it's actually the title of a book by Bill Hybels, a man who works hard at sharing his faith with other people. Hybels has written a new book on evangelism titled, "Just Walk Across the Room." The title came from an experience not long ago, when he was in Chicago for a large convention attended by business and professional people. He sat across the table from a Muslim man. Everyone around the table introduced themselves and after they'd done that the Muslim man leaned over and whispered to Hybels, "I love your books." Hybels

actually turned around to see who he was talking to because Hybels' books are for Christians and this man appeared to be a Muslim.

When there was a break they got together and Hybels asked him, "How is it you've read my books?" The man answered by telling the story of a cocktail party he was at. He was a stranger at the party and no one was talking to him. He found himself alone, eating in a corner. On the other side of the room a group of people was gathered, and he saw a man from the group begin to make his way across the

floor. Soon the two were talking about life, business, and family. They touched on the issue of faith as well. That conversation began a friendship that carried on for months to come. Eventually this Muslim man became a Christian and began reading Hybels' books.

Bill Hybels wondered if just a walk across the room could make an impact for eternity. He decided, at least in this case, it certainly had. Now he is calling people like you and me to make walks across the room. Or across the office. Or to the fence. To just talk to and love people, in the hope that maybe that small investment of care will have an eternal impact.

Here's a startling but true statistic: The longer people are Christians, the less vital contact they have with people who are not. You know that's true. We become Christians and we enter this relationship with God, and all the sudden we have a whole new set of relationships. We have a whole new set of desires and commitments, and pretty soon our life is so full of those things that some of the friendships and contacts we used to nurture are no longer there. We've lost them.

It's something that all of us who know Christ wrestle with. In addition to that, we're engaged in a cultural war. We're in a battle for the soul of our nation and people often have different opinions and different values than ours. It's easy to see these people as the enemy and not really want to walk across the room to interact and care and love them.

We're all familiar with the letters "WWJD." They stand for: "What would

Jesus do?" Well, we know this much. He would not isolate himself from people who do not have a relationship with God. We know that's the case because when he was here he didn't do it. He reached out. He cared. He became involved. There are a lot of good things going on at Dungeness Community Church. Our worship services are vital. Our missions ministry is growing. We're exercising more compassion for the community in which we live. Our small groups ministry is as healthy as it has ever been. But, when it comes to us being actively involved and engaged with people who do not share our faith, I'm not sure we fare so well.

I plan to spend the next two or three weeks talking about that very issue. I want to see if we can't be encouraged to walk across the room every now and then, to have a conversation over the fence that maybe we wouldn't have taken the time for before. Have a Super Bowl party in our neighborhood. Just engage the people around us.

Who are the tax collectors?

Matthew chapter 9, verses 9-13, tells a familiar story. The first people mentioned are five much despised tax collectors. Actually, these men were probably more like customs officers; at least Matthew was. He was in Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee. When boats arrived there he collected the customs fees. Here's the way it worked. Matthew had a contract with Herod, who represented the Roman government. Matthew had to come up with so much money each year for Herod, but he could charge as much as he wanted and whatever additional monies he collected were his.

Everybody knew Matthew and his fellow tax collectors were charlatans. The people called them collaborators and thought of them as traitors because they worked for and served Rome and Herod, not the common man. They would be like loyal Palestinians in today's Israel ... on the wrong side, working for the wrong people. Traitors. Collaborators. Very much despised.

The second group of sinners

The second group of people we need to understand, if we're going to understand this story, is the "sinners." They were the notoriously immoral men and women. In our day they would be people who abuse drugs and alcohol. Men and women who are sinning sexually. Pornographers. People who are seen as openly sinful.

Meet the religious leaders

The third group we need to know about is the Pharisees. We would have liked the Pharisees. They cared about scriptural issues. Their movement was born in the midst of the spread of the Greek and Roman culture throughout the world. That cultural change began to threaten the unique religious life that Israel had. So the Pharisees decided they needed to find ways to be pure. They wanted to preserve their spiritual religious life by finding landmarks they shared that said, "We're unique; we're distinct; we haven't become like the pagan Romans." They thought one way to keep themselves distinct from the culture that was beginning to overtake them was to keep the Sabbath day. Nobody else did that in the Roman Empire.

Eating certain foods, according to the Old Testament Law, would also make them a very distinctive people. They included certain kinds of ceremonial and ritual washings before they ate. That wasn't for hygiene. It was to say, "We're a pure people now beginning to eat this pure food, this diet that God has described in the Old Testament." And they were always very careful never to share a meal with anyone who didn't have a like mind regarding these ceremonies and rituals.

Jesus, the Rabbi who didn't conform

Now we can understand the conflict of this passage in Matthew Chapter 9. Jesus, a noted and respected Rabbi, is eating unclean food, no doubt, with notorious sinners. This was a compromise of mammoth proportions in the minds of religious leaders and the "sinners." They could hardly believe what they were seeing and hearing.

Here's the word that was used about Jesus in his interaction with the notoriously sinful in the land of Israel that day, he was their "friend." Not their Rabbi. Not their savior. He was their friend. That's a bit of a surprise, I think.

A number of weeks ago we were invited to go to dinner with two couples from this church. We went to a really nice restaurant and had a really nice time. The food was good. Afterwards we went to the home of one of them and enjoyed dessert and some time together. Whenever I think back on that night I actually can't remember what I ordered. It was good, I remember that, but it was the conversation. It was the relationship. It was the sharing back and forth that

was the richness of that meal. Well, that's what Jesus was doing.

He didn't preach to these people. He ate with them. He fellowshiped with them. He came into their world. In the Greek text it says in Verse 10 that while Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, "Behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him." It blew them away. They thought: "There's a Rabbi -- a respected Rabbi -- who is eating with people like us." Jesus started the meal with just Matthew and his family, but when others heard about it they ran to Matthew's house, because: "Behold, he's there and he's eating with us." They couldn't believe what was happening!

What did Jesus say to them during that meal? Matthew wrote this book. He was there. What did Jesus say to them? Matthew doesn't record it. I would have thought that's pretty important information. Evidently Matthew didn't agree. What mattered to Matthew and his cronies was that Jesus would bother to sit down and eat with them at all. Evidently, Jesus didn't preach a sermon. If he did it wasn't memorable. Evidently, there wasn't a lot of spiritual dialogue going on. Matthew doesn't talk about any conversions coming out of this. Jesus just spent time with them.

A lot of times you can find out what's important in the scriptures by what they leave out. It is quite noteworthy that Matthew doesn't record a single sentence of what Jesus said. What brought everybody there was that he was willing to be their friend. He was willing to be in their house. He didn't require them to change their diet. As a matter of fact, in Matthew Chapter 11, the Pharisees, in a bit of sarcasm, said,

"He's a glutton and a drunkard." Jesus ate their food and drank their wine, and the Pharisees were appalled. "He's a glutton. He's enjoying meals with those kinds of people," they said in disgust. Here's the word, Jesus is a "friend" of tax gatherers and sinners. And you know the Gospel. This was not an isolated event. This isn't something he did once and once only. It's something he did time and time again.

The ingredients of love that fed Jesus

What motivated Jesus to do this? What enabled him to break with the customs of the religious people of that day and engage himself repeatedly as a friend of people who were otherwise thought of as sinners? If I asked you for one word you'd come up with the right word; it's "love." It's love that made Jesus want to be a friend of people who nobody in the religious community of his day would dare be seen with, let alone befriend, eat, and drink with.

There are three ingredients of that love that sort of scream to us out of this passage. The first element of love that motivated and enabled Jesus was "forgiveness." Matthew Chapters 8 and 9 are put together by Matthew to talk about the miracles of Jesus. In them, he uses a strict outline. He gives us three miracles and then he discusses discipleship. Then three more miracles and he discusses discipleship again. What he's trying to say is these miracles -- rightly understood and responded to -- have something to do with authentic discipleship.

The last of the three miracles related by Matthew, just before he writes of Jesus eating with him and his friends, is where

Jesus heals the paramedic. Do you remember the first thing Jesus said to the paramedic? It's at the beginning of this chapter, verse 2: "My son, your sins are forgiven." Oh, this makes sense. If God forgives and loves these people, how could Jesus, how can you and I, do anything different? If God is open to these people if and when they are ready to respond, how can I not be?

Jesus is not condoning everything they've done. He understands the mistakes they've made. They understand their mistakes. Evidently, because they understand, Jesus doesn't feel the need to pound it home. He knows that if they'll respond to God, they'll be forgiven. How could Jesus relate to them any differently? How could he be more stringent? How could he separate himself? How could he ignore them if God wasn't prepared to do the same?

Jesus knows they have a problem. "I came to help the sick, not the healthy." But he was motivated and he was enabled to reach out to them anyway, because he had this love that has, as the first ingredient, forgiveness. Again, it's quite striking, isn't it, that we're not told what Jesus said? My guess is he just ate with them, enjoyed them, fellowshipped with them, and never did point a finger at them. So, the first element of love that enabled Jesus to have a relationship with people like these notorious sinners was forgiveness.

Forgiveness with compassion

The second element of love that enabled Jesus and motivated him to reach out to these people was compassion. Verse 36 of Chapter 9 says: "When he saw the

crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Do you get the rhythm here? Jesus was compassionate toward these men and women and his compassion caused him to reach out to them. And it's his compassion that motivated him to send out people like you and me to touch their lives. So what's compassion? Compassion is feeling their pain; knowing their agony.

Jesus didn't just see somebody as a pornographer. He saw him as a man who had no idea how to have any intimacy in a relationship and found a cheap imitation instead. Jesus didn't just see people as those who abused alcohol and drugs. He saw them with the same eyes that see a friend of mine. When she was three years old her mom died. Her dad physically abused her. She's been in incredible pain all of her life and ended up thinking the one thing that could dull the pain was some good old Vodka.

Jesus saw right around the problem to what caused it in the first place. He was full of compassion. He didn't stop at the problem; he found what was behind it. He ran into sexually promiscuous men and women and saw people who were in pain, and it moved him.

He entered into their realm so that they might know some light and liberty. If they didn't respond to his message, at least they would know God's enduring love for them, despite where they were at. What enabled Jesus and motivated

Jesus to get into these relationships was love that is made up of forgiveness and energized by compassion.

Mercy is love in action

The third element of that love is that it is full of mercy. If compassion is feeling what others are feeling, mercy is acting out of that feeling to do something to alleviate the situation they find themselves in. Mercy usually has to do with real actively, not just one's emotional feelings or response to the hurting people around us. In this case, what mercy dictated Jesus do was to have dinner with them, spend time with them, chat with them, maybe share something with them, though we have no indication that he did that at all. What impressed Matthew was that Jesus showed up at his house and he and his buddies felt comfortable ... and Jesus felt comfortable as well.

It's this mercy that Jesus says needs to characterize all his people. That's what he means in the phrase at the end of the text when he says to his critics: "Go and learn what this means." Then he quotes an Old Testament passage, Hosea Chapter 6, verse 6: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

He just kicked the slats out from under these Pharisees. What's he's saying is that God isn't so concerned that you're offering sacrifices every day at the Temple. God isn't so concerned that you're pure in your dietary habits and you go through this ritual cleansing. God isn't so concerned that you show up at the Synagogue every Saturday. What God wants from the life of His people is the kind of compassion and mercy that acts on behalf of those around us. That's

what He's after. Jesus just blew the whole religious system of the Pharisees. He said, "Listen, you want to order priorities? Here's the priority: mercy not sacrifice."

What this means to us is that mercy is not just reading your Bible, not just praying, not just showing up at church, and not just leading a Bible study. No, if those things aren't producing mercy that acts in the lives of others there's a problem. I'm looking for an active kind of love, Jesus says, because that's what God is looking for. That's what Jesus is saying when he quotes to them Hosea Chapter 6, Verse 6.

Actively pursuing those who are outside the family of faith

Let me try to summarize what I've been saying. Jesus actively pursued relationships with people outside the household of faith. Jesus actively chased after men and women who were left alone by the religious of the day. And apparently what impressed the sinners in Matthew's report -- because Matthew was there -- was not so much what was said or the truth Jesus taught. What impressed them was his mere presence with them. "Behold, the Rabbi is at Matthew's house, and many of them showed up in unbelief that somebody of his stature could care like this." It was the heart of Jesus' calling. It absolutely has to be at the heart of ours as well. We've got to take time to love, and care, and speak in the context of that loving, caring relationship.

This past week I was listening to a tape by Lee Strobel. Like Bill Hybels, he's from Willow Creek Church. Strobel is a very effective man in terms of sharing

his faith with others. On this tape, he recounts the story of a woman whose name is Maggie. As a young child she was abused by some people who claimed to be Christians, and as you can imagine it poisoned her attitude against God and against the church. After she got to know Strobel, she shared this: “The Christianity I grew up with was so confusing to me even as a child. People said one thing but they did another. They appeared spiritual in public, but in private they were very abusive. What they said and what they did never fit. It was such a discrepancy that I came to hate Christianity and did not want to be associated with the church in any way.”

Maggie’s story

Maggie met Strobel after attending a debate that was being held in a church between an atheist and a Christian. Strobel was the moderator. She says she went to the debate believing that Christianity would be crushed and humiliated. As it turned out, at least in her mind, the Christian standpoint won out. She began to write to Strobel and to share some of the questions she had.

When Strobel realized she had more questions than he could answer, he invited her to go to a group a couple of his friends led, where they just talked about questions men and women had about a relationship with God. She recounts what she found in that group: “When I came to Willow Creek and my small group I needed gentleness. I needed to be able to ask any question. I needed to have my questions taken seriously. I needed to be treated with respect and validated. But most of all, I needed to see people whose actions matched what they say. I’m not looking

for perfect, but I am looking for real. Integrity is the word that comes to mind.”

She said, “I need to hear real people talk about real life and learn if God is a part of real life. Does He care about the wounds I have? Does He care that I need a place to live? Can I ever be a whole and healthy person? I have asked questions like these of my group and have not been laughed at or ignored or invalidated. I’ve not been pushed or pressured in any way.”

“In fact,” she said, “I don’t understand the caring I’ve received from Christians who lead my group. I don’t understand that they don’t seem to be afraid of questions. They don’t say things like, ‘You just have to have faith,’ or ‘You just need to pray more.’ They don’t seem to be afraid to tell who they really are; they just seem genuine.”

Maggie wrote a poem to the whole group and Strobel got a copy. Later she allowed him to share it with the church, which has about 8,000 people on a Sunday morning. Here’s Maggie’s poem:

*“Do you know?
Do you understand that you represent
Jesus to me?
Do you know?
Do you understand that when you treat
me with gentleness
it raises the question in my mind that
maybe he is gentle too?
Maybe he isn’t someone who laughs
when I get hurt.
Do you know?
Do you understand that when you listen
to my questions and you don’t laugh
that I think: “What if Jesus is interested
too?”*

*Do you know?
Do you understand that when I hear you
talk honestly about arguments
and conflicts and scars from the past
I think maybe I'm just a regular person,
instead of bad, no good little girl who
deserves abuse?*

*If you care, then I think maybe he cares.
And then there's a flame of hope that
burns inside of me.
And then I'm afraid to breathe because
it might go out.
Do you know?
Do you understand that your words are
his words?
That your face is his face to someone
like me?*

*Please be who you say you are.
Please God don't let this be
another trick.
Do you know?
Do you understand that you and you and
you and you and you and you
represent Jesus to me?*

Maggie didn't make it up. We represent Jesus to others. It's exactly what Jesus said: "You are my ambassadors. You are my representatives. They will see in your love the reality of who I am."

When Strobel called Maggie to ask if he could read her poem she said, "Lee, you haven't heard?" He thought for sure another Christian had messed things up, but she said, "No, it's good news, Tuesday night I gave my life to Christ." Strobel asked Maggie, "What got you across the line of faith? What five proofs of the resurrection did you hear?" "It wasn't like that," she said. "Okay, what ten things did you hear that convinced you that the Bible was the word of God?"

Again Maggie answered, "It wasn't like that."

"What happened," he asked her.

"Well Lee, I just met a whole bunch of people who are like Jesus to me."

Walk across the room

Jesus is in the house. He's loving Matthew and his cronies when no one else would do so. Talk a walk across the room. Instead of not speaking to your neighbor on the other side of the fence, go speak to her. Instead of ignoring the person at work who everybody seems to dislike, go be with him. Throw a Super Bowl party for some friends and neighbors. Just begin building some relationships that in time might actually have an eternal impact. Can you imagine anything more exciting? You pop into Heaven and you've brought as many people as you could with you?

Walk across the room. Do it for yourself. For a lot of us, our lives are pretty in grown. The love of God doesn't flow. It doesn't flow because we don't walk across the room. Do it for your friends; your fellow employees. Just walk across the room. Just do some simple loving act and keep at it. I'll bet you some doors will open. Do it for Christ's sake. He is seeking these people and he never quits seeking them. Do it for yourselves. Do it for them. This is what Jesus desires: mercy in the lives of people, not religious exercise.