

August 22-26, 2022 Edition

Following
The Year Of Jesus Part 34

Jesus Adds A Tax Collector

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we are going to be looking at one of Jesus' apostles- a man named Matthew. Who is Matthew? Well, he's probably the single most controversial choice that Jesus made when building His team. You know how people feel in this country about the IRS? That's nothing compared to how first century Israelites felt about tax collectors. Why?

Well beyond the obvious (we don't much like paying taxes, do we?) the tax collectors in ancient Israel were considered to be the worst of traitors. Let me explain. When Rome conquered a country they would demand taxes from that country. These newly conquered folks never saw the wisdom of giving money to their conquerors so almost universally people tried to cheat on their taxes and hide their assets. Rome would employ tax collectors (they were actually referred to as "tax farmers" in Rome because they were constantly "raising" the taxes that needed to be paid".

Rome learned early on that the people best qualified to catch a local businessman who was cheating on their taxes was a local. So the first thing Rome did after defeating a nation was to employ local tax farmers. These tax farmers were given soldiers to back up their authority and they were given an amount that Rome expected to be delivered in taxes. Now here's where tax farmers got so incredibly unpopular- Rome only told them how much was required to send on to Rome. The tax farmers were at liberty to collect as much as they could so long as it didn't cause a revolt.

So ancient Roman tax collectors were like a modern day loan shark- they took what they wanted with the backing of Roman soldiers to give them the force they needed. And it made these tax farmers extremely rich. You can see a bit of this in the story of Zacchaeus:

Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!" Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." Matthew 19:8-10 (NLT)

For the first century Israelites living under the bondage of a foreign oppressor it wasn't the Roman soldiers or governors that they hated most in this world. That title belonged to the tax collectors. Why? Because they were Jews who had betrayed their countrymen in the name of wealth. What's fascinating is, most of the tax collectors of the ancient world were already despised by the locals they grew up with. I imagine it made the decision to become a tax farmer much less complicated for these people- "If they're going to judge me and ostracize me anyways I might as well be rich"

And that brings us back to Matthew. Matthew was a tax farmer. We know that Zacchaeus was a little person (he wasn't just short- the word Luke uses when telling us that Zacchaeus is "short" is the ancient word for a little person) and that would have made him an outcast in that day and age. So what was "wrong" with Matthew that led him to a life of tax farming? We don't know for sure but you can bet there was something. And Jesus makes a point of inviting this enemy-of-the-state to join His movement. Can you imagine how the other disciples felt when they heard Jesus' invitation? If you can't yet then read on and maybe you'll start to get an inkling.

For today maybe spend some time reflecting on why you think Jesus might have added this controversial figure to His team.

Tuesday Reflection: So yesterday we began looking at the story of Matthew- the tax collector that Jesus invited to become part of His team. Why would Jesus do such a thing? Tax collectors were the most hated people in first century Israel. There was nobody that a Jew despised more than tax collectors because Rome employed locals to help collect the taxes that they demanded. So why choose such a polarizing figure to join His team?

Maybe to show how serious He was about welcoming everybody. In fact if you look at Jesus' ministry on this earth you'll notice it's as though everywhere He goes there are 3 signs hanging around His neck and the first one is this:

Everybody's Welcome.

Matthew's call is a sign of just how serious Jesus is about that:

When Jesus was leaving, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector's booth. Jesus said to him, "Follow me," and he stood up and followed Jesus. Matthew 9:9 (NLT)

I guarantee you there would have been gasps and probably some "NO WAY"s that got out of the other disciples mouths before they could stop themselves. I don't believe there could have been a more controversial choice than Matthew that Jesus could have made. Especially since Jesus also had a disciple named Simon (not Peter- the other Simon) who was a "Zealot". Now that description of Simon could mean a couple of things but most likely it means Simon was a member of the revolutionary army of Israel- an underground movement where the Zealots would do whatever they could to make life harder for Rome, Romans and tax collectors. There was no higher honor among the Zealots than to kill a tax collector- it was a higher honor than killing a Roman soldier or dignitary.

Can you imagine Simon the Zealot's response when he heard Jesus call Matthew to join them? "Hey Jesus, this guy is a tax collector. How can you allow him to join us?"

Because for Jesus everybody's welcome. Everybody. Even someone like Matthew. I doubt you and I can really fully understand the disconnect involved but let's try. Most of us humans have someone (or a group of someones) that we consider to be the worst of humanity. No matter which side of the political divide you stand on our society tries very hard to make sure you hate the people on the other side. There are no honest differences of opinion in our culture anymore- people who disagree with us are either stupid or evil. There is no other reason for someone to think differently than I do (at least that's what our culture would have us believe). Now imagine that you have joined Jesus' movement on the ground floor and then He goes and calls someone that to you represents the very worst that this world has to offer.

Surely Jesus would never do that? He would never add a (fill in the blank with the worst kind of person you can imagine) to His team. Would He? Yes. He. Would.

Why? Because with Jesus everybody's welcome. Everybody. If you and I can't get used to that on this side of eternity we're going to have a wild wake up call when we get to Heaven and Jesus starts introducing us to friends of His that we considered to be our

enemies on this earth. Did you know that there are 3 places in the New Testament where we are told that Jesus did something for us and now we are being asked by Him to do the same for the people that we encounter on this earth? We're only going to talk about one of those this week so I'll give you the other two so that you don't spend the rest of the week twitching wondering what the other two were- they are: 1) love one another and 2) forgive one another. The one I want to leave you with today is found in Romans:

*So accept each other just as Christ has accepted you; then God will be glorified.
Romans 15:7 (NLT)*

Why should we do the hard work of learning to accept the people we encounter on this earth? Because Jesus did it for us. Now He expects us to become more like Him and a HUGE part of that is going to be learning to accept the people we always considered to be unacceptable. Is it easy? No. It's incredibly hard. I think that's why Jesus used this qualifier (if you are willing to listen...) when asking us to learn to love our "enemies":

But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you... Love your enemies! Do good to them... Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate. Luke 9:27-38 (NLT)

What does all of this mean? It's not rocket science. It means that everybody's welcome. Even (and maybe I'd say especially) the people you are thinking about right now and shuddering as you consider the implications that you might be spending eternity with them in Heaven. But here's the thing- they're shuddering as they think about spending eternity with you.

Wednesday Reflection: So we saw yesterday that Jesus lived His life as though there were 3 signs hanging around His neck- the first one we looked at in detail yesterday was "Everybody's Welcome". Today we will spend some time pondering the second sign that seemed to define Jesus' life- nobody's perfect.

In other words, the people you despise for being so "wrong" are still dearly loved children of God. They are people Jesus died for- just as He died for you. And now He expects us to accept one another (everybody's welcome) in spite of our differences and perceived errors and inconsistencies. We see this playing out in the story of the calling of Matthew. After Jesus "calls" Matthew to join His team Matthew throws a big party:

*As Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with Jesus and his followers. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked Jesus' followers, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"
Matthew 9:10-11 (NLT)*

This is a wild scene Matthew is describing for us. I'm not sure we can truly understand just how much of a scandal this would have been. I don't think there's a current example that would do justice to what's happening here but imagine maybe if the holiest person you can imagine was to go to dinner with the least holiest person you can imagine. I didn't

give specific examples because who we see as the most holy and the least holy are going to vary so much. Suffice it to say this was a scandal of immense proportions. And the Pharisees are genuinely mystified. How can He do such a thing? It just doesn't make sense. And it's not just the Pharisees that it doesn't make sense to- even Jesus' disciples are struggling. How do I know? Because they're outside of Matthew's house rather than inside with Jesus.

The Pharisees would never go into the home of a tax collector. It would have instantly made them "unclean". So in order for them to ask Jesus' disciples a question it would have to mean that Jesus' disciples (at least some of them) refused to go inside. What's going on? A revolutionary shift in the way we are being told that God views us humans- especially the ones polite society has written off as having gone too far for even God to save them. This story shows us that nobody has gone too far for God to save them.

You may be thinking at this point that we are at that point in the reflections where we pile on the Pharisees and talk about how wrong they were about everything. But this time at least I'm going to say, they kind of had a point.

In the first century who you ate with was huge. If you ate with someone you were inviting them into the very heart of who you were. It's why Jesus gets in so much trouble with the religious leaders- He was constantly eating with the wrong people.

What were the Pharisees concerned about? Contamination. We all are very well versed in the concept of contamination after the last couple of years of pandemic, aren't we? We know that contamination always goes one way- the sick make the healthy sick. It always goes that direction, right? I've never heard about a healthy person making someone's covid go away just by coming into contact with them. But we've all heard about how often a sick person contaminates a healthy person with their covid bug. The Pharisees thought the same thing was possible morally, spiritually and relationally. And to a certain extent they were right.

I remember when I was 20 years old I had spent the last few years doing my best to throw my life away. I knew that the path I was on was a dead end and I had tried to quit doing the things I thought were the main contributors to ruining my life. Nothing worked. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't leave the past behind and recover my life. I finally decided the only way to truly break free was to change everything about the way I was living my life. That finally worked. I was able to leave the destructive forces that had messed me up so badly and move forward into a brand new life. Why? What was the difference?

The difference was that the things I was trying to "quit" were only symptoms of a much bigger problem that is laid out in the very first Psalm:

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the Lord's teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. Psalm 1:1-3 (NCV)

I thought I could change the course of my life by "quitting" some stuff that seemed like the big problem but I kept listening to who I'd always listened to, going where I'd always

gone and doing what I'd always done. Turned out those were the things I needed to change before I'd find the power to leave behind the destructive habits I had developed by listening to the wrong people (and not listening to the right people), going to the wrong places and doing the wrong things. Once I changed those three things I started to see salvation from the other things that I thought were the true problem but were only symptoms of a much bigger problem.

So yeah, the Pharisees had a point. How can Jesus hang out with those people and not become "contaminated"? Because, as we saw a few weeks back when He touched a leper- Jesus cannot be made unclean. He is cleanliness itself. He can't be made unclean. He can't be contaminated. He is the Great Healer. Nobody makes Him dirty.

But you and I? We're susceptible. So how do we live up to the idea that everybody's welcome and nobody's perfect and keep from being "contaminated"? Well, we've got to be smart. A recovering alcoholic probably shouldn't be hanging out with people at a bar to show how accepting he/she is. But, that same person could show how accepting they are in another arena that isn't a trigger or temptation for them. Do you want to know what I did to try to live up to Jesus' signs of everybody's welcome and nobody's perfect? I helped build a community where everyone is welcome no matter how messed up they may appear where we are reminded constantly that nobody's perfect- not me and not you. How will you live up to the call by Jesus to live your life as though you also have these signs hanging around your own neck (everybody's welcome and nobody's perfect)? I don't know but you could start by treating the people you go to church with as though they are welcome and you're glad they're here.

Thursday Reflection: Today I want to look just a bit more at the first two signs that defined Jesus' life- everybody's welcome and nobody's perfect. Remember how after Jesus called Matthew and went to his house for dinner how the Pharisees asked His disciples how Jesus could eat with such "scum"? Well, this was Jesus' response:

When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor-sick people do." Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." Matthew 9:12-13 (NLT)

How does Jesus respond? By suggesting that all of us are sick. That all of us are unclean. It's just that some people seem more sick and more unclean than others (usually depending on what we personally can put up with and what we can't). It's not that Jesus didn't come to call those who think they are righteous. He came for them too. But most of us who think we are righteous don't have the same need as the people who know how messed up they are. Most of us who think we are righteous have no problem believing that Jesus would come for us. Of course He would. I'm awesome. I'm not as messed up as (fill in the blank with someone you feel superior to here) so why shouldn't Jesus come for me?

But the folks who know they are sinners? They need to be convinced. They have been told their entire lives how messed up they are and how they've gone too far. So far even God Himself could never reach them. Jesus comes and with the calling of Matthew He makes it

painfully obvious that nobody is too far for God to reach them. In fact, God sent Jesus to make these people understand that He loves them. That everybody is welcome and nobody is perfect.

Since I am the pastor at Riverside Community Church where these signs are taken very seriously I don't generally deal with many folks who think they are righteous and who reject the "sick" people that Jesus came to heal/save- those kinds of folks don't hang around very long if they ever darken our doors at all. What I deal with on a much larger scale are the people who have been told all their lives that they are unworthy and that God can't stand them. The worst part of it all is how often the people who have been told that they are unacceptable by the "righteous" actually believe that it's true. And that's an important thing to understand about the "unrighteous"- they believe you actually speak for God. They think if you reject them then that means that God has rejected them. We at Riverside have been given a unique mission by God- to convince the "unrighteous" that Jesus came for them too. You wouldn't think it would be that difficult with all the stories and scriptures in the Bible that trumpet the fact that Jesus came for the people that polite religious folks deem unworthy but somehow we overlook those stories and instead we choose judgment and condemnation. But all of us are on the same level before the cross of Jesus. Not one single one of us would be/could be saved if it wasn't for His sacrifice:

We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. Romans 3:21 (NLT)

There are a lot of passages in the scriptures that are confusing and difficult to understand. This isn't one of them. This is as simple as it gets. No matter who you are or what you've done we all have to be saved the same way. I can't tell you how satisfying it is when I'm talking with someone that has always believed what nice religious folks told them about having gone too far for Jesus to save them when they finally start to wonder if it's possible that Jesus came for them too. I wish we could see the look on Matthew's face when he started to dare to believe that salvation could come to him as well. I wonder as well about the looks on the faces of the other disciples as they started to realize just how serious Jesus is about the whole nobody's perfect & everybody's welcome thing.

I mentioned the unique ministry that Riverside has been entrusted with and to use the word "unique" would be a huge understatement so let's just say what most people think about Riverside- we're weird.

We are. We are a weird community. Because of the people we reach out to an awful lot of the nice religious folks who grew up in church and have already been conditioned to serve and give extravagantly don't stick around at Riverside very long (if they ever gave us a try in the first place). These people mainly congregate at places where church is done "as usual". That means we struggle to fill ministries that most churches have no problem staffing and financing. That just goes with the territory and we've made our peace with it. But there are some mature followers of Jesus who seem to get and feel called to joining us in our unique mission in this world. We always say that Riverside is for the church-wary

and the church-weary but there's one more group of people that Riverside is for- the mature followers of Jesus who care desperately about the church-wary and church-weary.

If that's you then let me say, thank you. I truly appreciate you. You are a huge part of what makes it possible for us to do what we do in this community and without you Riverside would not be what it is today. Some might wonder why we stick with this strange mission if there are so many things that make this kind of ministry difficult and there are two reasons. One is that we feel strongly that this is what God has called Riverside to do and be. The other is because of how hung up Jesus is on mercy.

I know the phrase "hung up" sounds negative but Jesus is "hung up" on mercy in the best way possible. He cares desperately that we who have been shown such mercy do our best to turn around and show mercy to the people around us. There was a period of my life early on in my walk with Jesus that I became pretty rigid and judgmental. It took quite a while for Jesus to show me how wrong I was. But since that day I've noticed how important mercy is to Jesus:

There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you. James 2:13 (NLT)

That's just one of the verses about the importance of mercy. I grew up in a church where there was a lot more judgment and condemnation than mercy and Riverside is probably an over-reaction to the religious environments that many of the leaders at Riverside grew up with. But that doesn't mean we're wrong (I mean we are most assuredly wrong over and over again but that doesn't mean we're wrong about the mission Jesus has given us in Eagle River to be a church that is serious about the two signs, everybody's welcome and nobody's perfect). I understand that Riverside is probably an over correction but what I realized a long time ago is that we're going to make lots of mistakes at Riverside. That can't be helped. When faced with a decision about what to do when we're not sure if radical acceptance and mercy is called for or correction and we're not sure exactly which route is right we made a conscious choice- if we're not sure what the right course of action is WE WILL ALWAYS ERR ON THE SIDE OF RADICAL ACCEPTANCE, UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND MERCY.

Always. It's a big part of what we mean when we say "we do church different". It's not the only way to do church. I don't even think it's necessary the best way to do church. It's just the way we believe God is asking us to do church at Riverside.

Does that make us right all the time. No. But I'd a whole lot rather that when I get to heaven Jesus has to ask me why I was so free with the mercy rather than judgment and correction. How about you?

Friday Reflection: The last of the 3 signs that pretty much described the way Jesus lived His life was this one: anything's possible. Why is anything possible? Because the power of treating the people of this world as though everybody's welcome and nobody's perfect means that you can't give up on anyone- anything's possible in that scenario.

In that scenario Simon the hothead who never stops to think before saying something dumb becomes Peter - one of the movers and shakers of the early church. In that scenario

Saul becomes Paul and he would go from Christianity's greatest opponent to its greatest proponent overnight- and who could have ever seen that one coming. And in that scenario the lost are found, the blind receive their sight and the dead are raised.

Sounds pretty powerful, huh? That's because it is. It was the disciples complete commitment to the first two signs (everybody's welcome and nobody's perfect) that caused the church to change this world so dramatically when by any standard you measure it by we should have died out after that first generation of followers who had known Jesus died. But we didn't. The church has continued to grow and in spite of the mistakes and downright blunders (not to mention the use of the Name of Jesus to justify things Jesus never would have condoned) of the Jesus' followers. Why is that? How is that possible?

Because of the power of the first two signs. If you treat people like they are accepted unconditionally in spite of their mistakes you will find miracles happening all around you. But it takes those first two signs to make the final one possible and in order for any of us to live our lives as though those signs are around our neck the same way they seemed to be around Jesus' neck is by going all in with Jesus and His philosophy. One day John the Baptist's disciples came and asked Jesus why He and His disciples didn't observe the ritual purity laws (by going to Matthew's house and other infractions that the Jews perceived He was guilty of) Jesus said this:

Who would patch old clothing with new cloth? For the new patch would shrink and rip away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger tear than before. "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine is stored in new wineskins so that both are preserved." Matthew 9:16-17 (NLT)

What does that mean? I spent a lot of my life being confused by this passage. Basically Jesus is saying if you try to patch a hole in an old garment with cloth that is new then when you wash your patched garment the old part (which has already shrunk in the wash) won't shrink but the patch will shrink and what do you supposed would happen then? That's right- the whole robe would be ruined. Jesus then uses the metaphor of wine skins. You wouldn't put new wine in old wineskins, would you? Well... I don't know. Would I? No you wouldn't because wine skins start out pliable and expandable but over time they become hard and rigid. Put new wine in a new skin and as the new wine off-gases the new skin will expand with no trouble. But put new wine in an old skin and as the new wine off-gases the old skin won't be able to expand and it will burst.

What's Jesus saying? He's saying that you can't just take Him and use Him as a patch on your old life. It's very much like what Psalm chapter 1 is talking about- you can't keep doing what you've always done and expect any kind of change. To achieve change in your life you've got to change everything- what you listen to; who you hang out with and where you go. Try to slap a patch on your old life and it won't work- even if that patch is Jesus.

But if we stop trying to make Jesus conform to our lives and instead conform our lives to His then watch out! Anything's possible then. Jesus can and does still do miracles in the

lives of those who conform their lives to His life. Afraid it's too much? Afraid you won't be able to do it? Don't be. I'm not saying it'll be easy but Jesus makes everything possible. So I'll leave you with this- one day Jesus said something that really surprised His disciples. They wondered after His statement how anyone could be saved/changed/transformed and this is what Jesus told them:

Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible." Matthew 19:26 (NLT)

Just because something is impossible for me or you does not mean it's impossible. You just need to add Jesus to the mix. But He is nobody's patch. Remember that and there is nothing you won't be able to accomplish that He calls you to while you go through this life as though there are 3 signs hanging around your neck:

Everybody's Welcome; Nobody's Perfect; Anything's Possible.