

Pursuing the One

Message #5 in the series "Won't You Be a Neighbor?"

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As we prepare our hearts, would you join with me in our time of prayer?

Well, gracious Lord, open us up to your word. And open your word up to us. Teach us, Lord, what you would have us learn as you can inform our lives into the disciples that you have called us to be. All of this, Lord, we pray in Jesus' name and all God's people said, Amen.

Well, we have been in a message series that we are calling Won't You Be a Neighbor? And what we have been looking at is that Jesus is calling us to live our lives in intentional relationships with those around us. When we began this series, we met Pastor Matt, looked at the obstacles that prevent us from crossing over the driveway and to engage our neighbors. And then the next week, I introduced the concept of two types of neighbors. One was the intentional neighbors. We looked at our neighborhoods and metaphorically examined, What's our default? What do we normally do when we're confronted with somebody new? And then that became important when we examined What does it mean for us to be accidental neighbors when we're called on to be a neighbor to somebody, perhaps a total stranger in a given moment's notice? And then what we looked at the following week is that God is already at work in people's lives, and maybe the intersection of our lives with theirs is a divine appointment. God creates those divine appointments and introduces us to what we named persons of peace. And in order for us to see persons of peace, we had to be persons of peace. And then last week, Dave Gray introduced the concept of our posture, saying that posture is everything. How we approach someone else with our attitude sets the tone of what God can do in that exchange.

Today, I want to take the conversation just a little bit deeper, and we're going to focus in on yet another passage in the Gospel of Luke. So, I invite you to turn in your Bible to Luke, chapter 15. If you're using the Bible app, I'll give you a second to open your phone and engage us in that. We will look at this passage of Scripture. It's a very powerful passage where Jesus is going to teach us yet another dimension of how we can be intentional in our relationships. Intentional in being a neighbor. Being a neighbor. So, we're going to start Luke Chapter 15, starting with verse one. This is what it says,

“Now all the tax-collectors and sinners coming near to listen to him.” [Luke 15:1 NRSV]

I got to pause there and notice with me the humor of Scripture. Now I'm not talking Ha-ha humor, I'm talking about how it raises our awareness of some very clear distinctions that we do with one another in our human condition. Notice it says, “tax collectors and sinners.” Now, tax collectors back in the day of Jesus were a very unique breed of people. They were hated by the common folk. I know that that's such a foreign concept for us today, right? Because we all love those who collect our taxes. But back in the day of Jesus, these were individuals that were especially hated. Why the particular type of tax collector that is referenced here? These were most likely fellow Jews. They were Jewish individuals who aligned themselves with the Roman government in order to collect taxes from their fellow Jewish people. Now what makes this unique is that it was quite common for those Jewish tax collectors to get caught up in what it meant to collect money from others within their communities. And so, they would often charge more than what was expected. And by charging more, they would pocket that extra money. And so, these tax collectors were, most of them, fellow Jews who were bilking money from their communities. So, in reading this verse of scripture, we read now the tax collectors and sinners, well, certainly, there's a clash going on here. To not even be considered part of

the lowest of the low, meaning the sinners in the classifications of people. The tax collectors must have been really bad. So, they had sinners. But can you picture this with me? You have prostitutes and robbers who are going, "I'm bad, but at least I'm not a tax collector." Tax collectors were betrayers of the people. I know none of us ever classify ourselves, even in our brokenness and sin, as being better than other people who do worse things right. Yes. That's layered with sarcasm because I do it, too. But it gets better. So, it says Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But verse 2 starts,

"The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." [Luke 15:2 NRSV]

All right. I want you to notice a few things about these two verses as they're introductory to our passage that we're really going to dove into. So, these verses are often we just gloss right over because we want to get to the meat of whatever the parable is that Jesus is using to teach the greater, deeper truths. Right. So, there's actually a lot in these two verses. For example, I want you to notice how the polarization of God's people is described as great polarization. You have the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Some of your translations say scribes. So, you had the religious leaders and then you have the sinners. And then you have the tax collectors. There's a classification. There's a polarization. The religious people, the religious leaders in particular, really didn't want to associate with the sinners. That's going to come back in just a moment. Also notice the contrast in attitude. Notice that the Pharisees, the religious leaders, are actually challenging the public's perception of Jesus. Look at this man. They say he's eating with sinners and tax collectors. But notice also who's actually listening to Jesus. Now you might pause and say, well, they're all listening to Jesus and you would be right. They are all listening. But are they hearing? Are they hearing? Notice who is actually hearing Jesus? Notice also who Jesus intentionally engages. Jesus intentionally engages the disconnected, disenfranchised, marginalized, vilified sinners. Jesus intentionally connects with what the Bible calls the lost. Interesting. Notice also. The accusation that is made by these religious leaders of Jesus. They say this man, what maybe we don't see written in two dimensions of these words. They see that Jesus is a rabbi. He's supposed to be one of the religious people. He's supposed to hang his proverbial hat with those of the religious. But instead, what Jesus does is he connects very emotionally with those who need salvation most.

The word muttered is very interesting in the original language. That word muttered. As a Greek word can also be translated as grumbled. The religious leaders grumbled. There was a grumbling. In fact, the word is one of those unique words that actually sounds like the definition. They were grumbling. Can you picture this? The group of the religious leaders standing near each other because they don't connect with the sinners. And they're standing there and they're going, how do you see this? Do you see what's going on? Do you see what's going on? Do you see him? Do you? Do you look at this, man, do we ever do that? Do we ever grumble? Hold on to that thought. See what we are learning is very specific. It is perhaps the first most important among several most important lessons that we are learning from Luke in this storyline. Namely that whether or not we realize it, we tend to judge others through the lens of our own bias. I know I do this. I'm sure I cannot be alone. We tend to view other people, especially within the framework of their brokenness. We tend to view other people's behavior, other people's life choices and other people's life stories through the lens of what we think is appropriate and right, what we think is biblical and solid Christian behavior. And when they don't conform to what we think is right, we judge to them.

Sorry if I'm getting too close for comfort. I'm preaching to myself as well. We tend to judge others through the lens of our own bias. Keep also in mind from the perspective of these just these two

verses that they also speak into our current socialized societies. I was going to use a different word, but I'll settle with brokenness. And that is that the greater the polarization, the more we tend to defend our own position. The greater the polarization between God's people, the more we tend to defend what we think is right. Why? Because we tend to put all of our identity in being right. And even if there are holes that are drilled within that framework, we'll go on record. Some of us even dying for principles just because we've put our identity into that bucket. The Pharisees and religious leaders were doing that. Why is this important? All throughout the scriptures that were common for those religious leaders, the Hebrew scriptures, especially the voice of the prophets, they tell the story of the character of God wanting to be with the marginalized, the poor, the widows, those who would normally be disenfranchised from society. God cares for them. There is an intentionality to let the mission of bringing the good news of God to these people.

Why did those religious leaders who studied the Scriptures every day, why did they not get it? Why did they not understand? And why, by their behavior, did they exacerbate the polarization? I'm so glad that we in the 21st century have learned so much that we don't do that kind of stuff. Oh, yeah. More sarcasm. But the story goes on. Verse three,

“So he told them this parable: ‘which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?’” [Luke 15:3-4 NRSV]

Got a question for us. If you were one of those shepherds, would you go after one sheep? Many of us would say certainly, especially if that was our livelihood. Okay. Hold on. Verse five.

“When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.” [Luke: 15:5 NRSV]

And *when* does Shepherd finds it? Notice the emphasis on the word when.

“And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found me sheep that was lost.’” [Luke 15:6 NRSV]

And then Jesus hits this crowd with a very important bottom line for seven. I tell you the crowd who's listening? Mostly the religious leaders, because they're the ones who need to hear this the most.

“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous who need no repentance.” [Luke 15:7 NRSV]

What I'm about to say may feel controversial, but I think it's embedded in this passage. Jesus did not eat with sinners because he supported their lifestyle. No, Jesus ate with sinners to show them that behind every invitation to repent is a genuine love for the person behind the sin. That word, repent is a is a unique word. It's a religious word and sometimes we hear that word and we connect it with bad stories in the past, and we want to just ignore it. But it's a very rich word. It's a word that in the original language of the Greek New Testament is the word **metanoo**. Meta means change and noise is a word that means your thoughts are change your mind, change your thinking. And when you combine those two words, it gives you the idea that if you're heading in this direction. You need to turn and face this direction. You need to go in this direction.

There's a wonderful verse in the Old Testament book of some Psalm 119, I think it is verse 59 or 39. I'll clarify that. It's just popping into my head right now. So don't hold me to that but go searching for it.

And it's a wonderful way that David, the writer of this Psalm, says. I'm turning my feet toward God's commandments. And every time I read that verse, I think of this visual image. It's one thing for us to say that we're turning our eyes to Jesus. We could even say we're turning our countenance, our face to Jesus. We can even say, I'm turning my life to Jesus. But what David reminds us in Psalm 119, is that unless we turn our feet and start walking toward Jesus, we're not followers of Jesus. Wow!

So, for us to repent is not only to turn away from our sin, but to turn toward God and start walking to Jesus. Walking towards him. So, Jesus ate with sinners to invite them to a whole new dimension of what life was meant to be. He showed them the heart of God. The heart of a God who pursues. The one. But because he understood the controversial nature of this conversation, Jesus gave those religious leaders one more illustration. First, he or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one? Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me. I have found my lost coin." And to press the lesson even further. Jesus again says, 'And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me. I have found my lost coin,' In the same way. I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God, over one sinner who repents.

So many of us would go after one sheep. Many of us would go after one coin. Would you go after one person? A little later in Luke's Gospel, chapter 19, verse ten, Jesus says,

"For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." [Luke 19:10 NRSV]

To seek and to save the Lost. And then he says to those who would be his followers. I want you to do the same thing. It's hard for us to be intentional neighbors. With those that we intentionally separate ourselves from. Jesus reminds us. That it is the broken. What the New Testament refers to as lost. It is the lost. That need the grace of God that leads to salvation. Scripture reminds us that it is the kindness of God, not the judgment of God. The kindness that leads us to repentance.

Michael Frost, who is a theologian and author and very prolific author, wrote a book called *Surprise the World*, in which he uses the word **BELLS** as an acronym to teach us some principles of how to be. What I'm referring to here in this context, how to be a good neighbor. With each beginning letter the B, the E, the L, the L and the S, he identifies some traits that I think are important for us to adopt as we try to be intentional neighbors as we are followers of Jesus.

The B for Michael Frost refers to **blessing** people. Would it look like if we began our day by asking God to help us to be a blessing to someone else? When we start our day that way it may take us intentionally into relationships with people that maybe we wouldn't normally connect with. But if God truly is going to bless us, to be a blessing to others, we have to engage the others.

For Frost, E stands for **Eat with people** . Now, we got to love that one, right? We love eating in our culture and eating with people actually engages hospitality. So, what would happen if we actually invited people to eat with us who actually may not be Christians? Boy, that's pushing us perhaps out of our comfort zone. It's engaging us to engage our mission. Maybe it's engaging us to be intentional neighbors.

His first L, he uses to identify as, listen here, in his context it's to **listen to the Holy Spirit in the given moment** . If we're followers of Jesus and we've truly given our hearts to the Lord, the Lord gives us the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is in us, guiding us. He's equipping us in any given moment, and that spirit

may give us important information as we connect with those that God places us into relationship with. Do we trust that voice of the spirit enough to go where the Spirit is directing us?

The other L for Frost is to learn, to **learn and live the way of Jesus**, he says. In order for us to be ambassadors of Jesus in our world, we actually have to not just know who Jesus is, but we have to know Jesus. We have to intentionally turn our own feet to follow Jesus. Not just intellectually, because we ourselves, we need to not just put our eyes on Jesus and not turn our face only to Jesus and not even say that we're going to we're going to turn on a life to Jesus until we turn our feet and start walking the way that Jesus walked. We're not following Jesus. What would it look like if we if we learned and lived the way of Jesus? That might mean that we need to connect with people who are not like us. Imagine that.

And then Michael Frost reminds us with the S, that we are a **scents**. People talked a little bit about that last week, but remembering every day that as we get up and we go out into our world, the Lord is actually sending us out into the world to be ambassadors for Jesus, ambassadors for hope and love and forgiveness and new life, reminding us that it is the darkness of our world that needs the light of Christ. We can't be lighting the world too much in a well-lit room. And so being the light of Christ may compel us to go where we're maybe we would not normally want to go because we have a tendency to isolate our view. We tend to join with people who are more like us. This challenges me personally. I'm asking myself; do I have enough good friends who are not church people, who are not even Christian? Hmm.

So, I wonder, in our call to be intentional neighbors, can we connect with what Jesus is teaching those Pharisees and religious leaders? Can we connect to the missional focus, the intentional missional focus of why we're here? And rather than reinforcing the polarization of God's people that exists in our world today. How about if we choose to act differently? How about if we choose to be intentional neighbors? People who are sent to bless. To eat with those who need the good news to listen to the Holy Spirit in any given moment. Because we have learned and have chosen to live as followers of Jesus. Those who are sent. What would it look like for us to be an intentional neighbor? Who's your one that God is asking you to pursue?

Let's pray.

Gracious Lord, we thank you that you are. A God who pursues us. We thank you for seeking US. We who had been lost, who have now been found. Equip us, Lord. As found individuals. To have a passion for reaching the last. In order to build intentional relationships with them. So that they may see you. In us. This Father. I pray in Jesus' name. And now, Lord, we prayed together that the prayer that we have been praying in this series. Would you join me? Lord, who do you need me to see? Who do you need me to hear? Who do you need me to know? And what do you need me to do? I am your servant. In Jesus name. Amen.

