

### **A REPUTATION FOR DISCARDING HIS REPUTATION**

Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 14:15-24; 19:1-10

Frank was a friend of mine, and an associate pastor at a large church in the city where I ministered. Frank grew up in (or near) that city. Me, I was the new guy. During my first week at my new church, while eating lunch at McDonalds with the pastoral staff of my church, I walked a man dressed like a woman. I could tell he was a man, because if he wasn't, he was the ugliest woman I had ever seen. Those eating lunch with me told me his name was Tim. Tim was the town's cross-dresser, and it was a small town in the buckle of the bible belt.

(Year's earlier, at another church I pastored, a woman visited, or at least I thought she was a woman. After the service I shook her hand and spoke to her for a little while. When I shook her hand, I remember thinking, “she's got man hands.”<sup>1</sup> As she spoke, I kept thinking to myself, *this woman looks a lot like a man*, but I thought I was being crude, so I tried to stay focused on what she was saying, looking her in the eyes without staring at her incredibly hairy arms. As soon as she left, my wife came to me and said, “Who was that man dressed like a woman.” As you can see, Tim was not my first encounter with a cross-dresser.)

In a small town, Tim was highly visible. Everyone knew about him, but very few people knew his name. Tim walked everywhere he went, and so, almost daily, I would see him. He always dressed like a lady, always carried a purse and he always wore make-up.

One Sunday Tim visited Frank's church. Frank admitted to me that when he saw Tim in the hallway, his first thought was, “What is he doing here? I hope he doesn't disrupt things?”

Frank walked past Tim without saying a word, hardly making eye contact. A few steps past Tim, according to Frank, God spoke directly to him, saying in an almost audible voice, “You hypocrite! How can you say you love Me, and walk right past Tim?”

Frank, ashamed and embarrassed, turned around, walked up to Tim, introduced himself, and told him to let him know if he needed anything.

Tim kept attending church, and over time, started dropping in on Frank at his office. Frank and Tim became friends. Sometimes they would eat lunch together at McDonalds. Frank's church, instead of judging Tim, embraced him and loved him. As Frank gained Tim's trust, Tim shared his story.

Tim's mother wanted a baby girl. When Tim was born, his mom immediately started dressing him in girl's clothes, and for all practical purposes, raised him as a daughter. Tim was smart. He had a master's degree in U.S. history and was certified to teach high school, but he could never hold a job. At a young age, to deal with the emotional confusion about his sexuality, Tim developed a split personality. Tim was his guy's name; Susan was his girl's name, and he had been Susan for years. In fact, on the Sunday Frank introduced himself to Tim, Tim referred to himself as Susan and wanted to be called Susan. However, in love, Frank told Tim he would never refer to him as Susan. Months into their relationship, Tim placed his faith in Jesus Christ, and vowed to never wear women's clothes again. (Before I knew the whole story, I remember noticing when I saw Tim around town that he had started wearing men's clothes.) Frank baptized Tim, while the church gave him a standing ovation.

Frank and I were part of a group of pastors that met weekly for coffee and conversation. One week, we talked in detail about Tim, and how Frank and his church had reached out to him. I wondered, as well as the other pastors, if my church would have embraced Tim as openly. I had my doubts. I also wondered if I would have risked my reputation to befriend Tim. I had my doubts. We asked Frank if at any time he was worried about what others around town would think if they saw he and Tim together. He admitted that the concern had crossed his mind, but God had spoken to him so clearly, he knew he had no choice but to obey.

Don't you wish God would speak to you that clearly?

He has!

Jesus said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone."<sup>2</sup>

Don't you think that's pretty clear?

## **Reputation and Riff-Raff**

If there was anyone who could have thrown stones, it was Jesus. After all, He was without sin. Yet He did not! Instead, He reached out to those no one else would.

What does it mean to “reach out”? That's a church phrase, but I don't think churches really understand what it means. Typically, in church, the phrase “reach out” is used to discuss some type of event the church is going to sponsor in an attempt to get “new” people to attend. And so we “reach out”...usually to people just like us.

Every once in a while, feeling a little brave, we reach out to people who are different from us. Different socially, racially, economically, spiritually, etc. Thus, “outreach” events usually a one time event, at Christmas, Easter, or a block-party in the summer, and then we are back to our regular schedule, hanging around people just like us. We reach out and then keep people at arms' length.

I am not really sure you have “reached out” unless you have put your reputation on the line. That's what Jesus did.

One of the criticisms Jesus received from the religious leaders of His day was that He hung around the wrong crowd. He hung around people who could damage His reputation. In other words, Jesus wasn't a *separatist*. He wasn't afraid to hang out with the local riff-raff.

Matthew (or Levi) was such a person.

Matthew was a Galilean born near the city of Capernaum. His parents, Aphaeus and Mary, were devout Jews. Matthew was brought up in a religious home. It must have broken his parent's heart when he decided to be a tax collector.

In the New Testament world being a tax collector was the lowest of the low. The Jews considered the profession to be on the same level as prostitutes. Any Jew who became a tax collector (like Matthew) was considered a traitor. As a tax collector Matthew was a religious

outcast, forbidden to enter the synagogue. The Jewish Talmud taught that it was righteous to lie and deceive a tax collector, because that was what a professional extortioner deserved. Tax collectors back then were far worse than IRS agents today.

Roman taxation was handled by wealthy businessmen who paid a set fee for a contract to collect taxes in a specific area. Matthew must have been rich in order to buy his contract; and the only reason anyone would want such a contract was to become even wealthier. The tax collecting system was ripe for abuse. Every tax collector was assigned a certain amount of money to collect. Any overage was his to keep, and there was no oversight to protect the populace from whatever tax the tax collector wanted to charge. Tax collectors strong-armed money out of people with the use of thugs. A tax collector could make as much money as he could extract from the people, completely protected by the government.

Such was the profession of Matthew; a strong-armed, Mafia type of person. A type of individual no God-fearing person would associate with.

Jesus, not only associated with Matthew, He called him to be one of His closest followers, and He hung out with Matthew's friends. Here's how the story goes: "As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus had been in His hometown. While He was there He healed a paralytic and had a brief confrontation with "some of the teachers of the law."<sup>4</sup> After leaving, Jesus finds Matthew at his "tax collector's booth." Matthew's tollbooth was located on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, near the Syrian border, strategically located on a heavily traveled trade route from Damascus. One of the things Matthew would tax would be fish caught in the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus saw Matthew He said, "Follow me." Immediately "Matthew got up and followed Him."<sup>5</sup>

Growing up in a devout Jewish home, Matthew learned the prophecies of the Old Testament. From his tax booth he heard the stories about Jesus and possibly witnessed a few of His miracles. Jesus knew Mathew was asking questions, seeking meaning and purpose in life. He knew

Matthew was ready, and so when He challenged Matthew he accepted without hesitation. Once Matthew “got up” he never again returned to his former profession.

What Matthew did was host a banquet for his friends, with Jesus as the guest of honor.<sup>6</sup> Since he was an outcast from the Jewish community the only friends Matthew had were other “tax collectors and sinners.”<sup>7</sup> The word “sinners” could refer to anything from non-Jews, non-Pharisaical Jews, drunks, prostitutes, or people who are far from God. Chances are, at Matthew’s party, all of the above were present.

Matthew described this event by saying, “many...came and ate with him and his disciples.”<sup>8</sup> How many is “many?” No one knows for sure, but archaeologists have discovered homes from the New Testament world that could easily seat up to 500 people, just in the garden room. It is possible that hundreds attended this banquet. And all of them were seen as “riff-raff” by the religious community.

Jesus, eating with tax collectors and sinners, infuriated the Pharisees. Just eating with them indicated that He included them in His fellowship, He considered them friends, and He approved of their lifestyles. Jesus responded, saying, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”<sup>9</sup>

Considering that Jesus was talking to people who thought they were experts on Scripture, the phrase “go and learn” was a stinging indictment. Jesus was telling them that they needed to go back and read their Bibles. In essence He was saying they did not know what they were talking about. What Jesus wanted them to relearn were the words spoken by God to the prophet Hosea, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”<sup>10</sup>

Offering sacrifices was fundamental to the Jewish faith in the Old Testament. Without sacrifices there was no forgiveness of sins. Jesus, being criticized for hanging around the wrong people, reminds the religious authorities that God prefers that we show mercy to people over making sacrifices to Him. If Jesus were speaking today He might would say, “I require mercy, not church attendance.” “I require that you show people compassion, not giving your money.” The

heart of what Jesus was saying is that outward religious rituals mean nothing if you are more concerned with your reputation than you are the needs of those around you.

Jesus' mission (and our mission as well) was not to stay in little clusters where we fill comfortable. After all, healthy people don't need a doctor. Jesus' mission (and our mission as well) is not to sit in our churches and say, "Come here if you need us," but to go to where "sinners" are, calling them to a relationship with God. Jesus was criticized for hanging around the wrong people, but He criticized the religious for hanging around the right people all the time. Outreach is not a program where you periodically invite people to a religious service. Outreach ("reaching out") is making a decision to live your life, building relationships with people far from God. And so I repeat, I am not really sure you have "reached out" unless you have put your reputation on the line.

### **Building Relationships**

How do I build relationships with people far from God? First and foremost you have to go where they are! You have to get out of your comfort zone, walk across your backyard, or across your office building lunchroom, and befriend someone who may not be like you. In order to gain the courage to do that you have to get over yourself and quit worrying about what other people are going to think. Yes, you will be criticized, but is that really enough to keep you from following God?

I have been involved with a group of men in Franklin, Tennessee for several years now. The primary purpose of this group is racial and denominational reconciliation. I have learned a lot from building relationships with people from all walks of life, different religions, and different races, and I have received criticisms from some religious leaders for being a part of this group. One of the key things I have learned is the idea of *intentionality*. In other words, reaching out beyond your comfort zone does not, and will not, happen automatically. You have to be intentional about it. You have to want to. You have to put yourself in a position to interact with

other people. You have to do it on purpose. Intentionality takes time, and it requires sacrifice; and one of the things you have to be willing to sacrifice is the reputation you have built with people who will not agree with what you are doing.

In order to reach out you have to get beyond relationships of convenience-- *transactional relationships*, to relationships on purpose—*transformational relationships*. Relationships of convenience are easy and practical and comfortable. Convenient relationships are with people who are just like you—socially, racially, politically, economically, religiously, etc. You build these types of relationships for what you can give, and get, out of them. There’s an exchange that takes place. You put something into them and expect something out of them. Relationships of convenience are not bad. In fact, we need these in our life. We just need more.

God has called us to something more. Something deeper. Something life-changing. Something transformational. Transformational relationships mean that people are different—for the good—because of your interactions with them. Building these types of relationships means that in the process I change, and the other person changes, and the changes make us both better people. These types of relationships are inconvenient and difficult; but they are priceless. I am to reach out to others, not to meet a need, and not to get something in return (that’s *transactional*). I am to reach out because God wants to transform me into the image of Christ, and He wants to use me as an instrument of transformation in other people’s lives. What are we changing, and who are we changing, if we only reach out to people who are already like us?

### **Throw a Party**

Once Jesus was invited to dinner in the home of a prominent Pharisee.<sup>11</sup> He knew, that while He was at this house He would be carefully watched. At the dinner, He noticed how people tried to choose “places of honor” around the table. Who was going to sit at the head of the table? How can I get a seat close to the front?

Isn't it interesting how people always try to network and position themselves in order to better themselves? What was taking place at the dinner was a bunch of people building *transactional relationships*.

Jesus said that instead of fighting to be the top dog, we should be willing to be the runt of the pack. Jesus said it wasn't about networking and net worth, but about humility and service. He says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."<sup>12</sup>—

And then Jesus says something totally contrary to human nature. He says, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid."<sup>13</sup>—

In other words, don't just build transactional, convenient, relationships!

Instead, when throwing a party, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."<sup>14</sup>—

In other words, build transformational, inconvenient, purposeful, relationships!

Those at the dinner missed Jesus' point and so He told a story. In the story a man throws a lavish party. He sent invitations to all his friends, neighbors, co-workers, and family. He then followed the invitations up by sending his personal servants to pick up the guests and bring them to the banquet.

Surprisingly, all the invited guest made excuses for why they could not attend. "I just bought a field, and I must go and see it...I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out...I just got married."<sup>15</sup>—

When the servants reported what had happened, the host was furious! How could they do this to me? I have prepared all this food and everyone is standing me up?

Undeterred, the man ordered his servants to go into the "streets and alleys...and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."<sup>16</sup>—

(Remember, Jesus was telling this story with two things in mind: First, at the dinner He was invited to, people were vying for places of honor. Second, one of the dinner guest mentioned something about the kingdom of God – “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God”<sup>17</sup>—that showed he had misunderstood what the kingdom of God was all about.)

After the servants had done what the host told them, they came back and reported, “Sir, what you have ordered has been done, but there is still room.”<sup>18</sup> And so the man said, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.”<sup>19</sup> And so the servants went out and gathered the homeless and brought them in.

In reference to the kingdom of God, Jesus was saying that God is getting ready to throw a party. In Jesus Christ the invitations have gone out, but those who you think would come—the religious—have all made excuses, and so they will miss the party completely.<sup>20</sup>

Instead of being rejected, God’s invitation goes out to those who most need it—those who are hurting physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Likewise, you and I gain nothing if we keep trying to reach out to people who are comfortable, or who continually make excuses...people like ourselves. Our mission is to invite the poor, the hurting, the homeless, those everyone else has rejected, and invite them to the greatest party ever thrown. We will not, and cannot, fulfill our mission if all we are interested in is people who act like us, dress like us, smell like us, and look like us.

Now, before you think that Jesus only meant those who were physically poor and disabled and disenfranchised, or before you think that all He is talking about is the poor, consider the story of Zacchaeus.<sup>21</sup>

Like Matthew, Zacchaeus was a tax collector, so he had more enemies than friends. But he wasn’t just any run of the mill tax collector, “he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.”<sup>22</sup> He wasn’t just a crook, he was the leader in a gang of crooks. Socially speaking, Zacchaeus was the worst of the worst.

Being the “height-challenged” man that he was, Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see over the crowds to get a glimpse of Jesus. As surprising that it was that a man like him would be looking for Jesus is that Jesus was looking for a man like him. In a very bold move, when Jesus saw Zacchaeus, He invited Himself to his house.

The people could not believe Jesus was going to socialize with such a person. You can tell the people’s frustration because they “muttered” (or “grumbled) to themselves, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”<sup>23</sup>—

Once again, there goes Jesus’ reputation.

But Jesus was about *transformation* not *transaction*, and so He saw something in Zacchaeus that no one else saw. Zacchaeus had been changed. Jesus said, “Today, salvation has come to this house, because of this man.”<sup>24</sup>— And then, using Zacchaeus as an example, Jesus told us His mission statement. He said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”<sup>25</sup>— Jesus gave His life for the down and out, the despised and rejected, and the disenfranchised of society...just like you and I were...and He has called us to do the same.

On the one hand, “bad company corrupts good character.” But on the other hand, the only way that those who truly need Jesus are ever going to hear about Jesus is if those of us who know Jesus build intentional, transformational, purposeful relationships with them. There really is no other way. Someone, maybe you and maybe me, must be willing to put our reputations on the line in order to reach out to those who need it most.

Are you willing?

Am I willing?

What will others think?

What will this do to my reputation?

<sup>1</sup> I know this is a reference that some may not recognize. It is from the greatest television sit-com known to man, *Seinfeld*.

<sup>2</sup> John 8:7.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 9:9.

- [4](#) Matthew 9:1-8.
- [5](#) Matthew 9:9.
- [6](#) Matthew 9:10-13.
- [7](#) Matthew 9:10.
- [8](#) Matthew 9:10.
- [9](#) Matthew 9:12-13.
- [10](#) Matthew 9:13; from Hosea 6:6.
- [11](#) The story is found in Luke 14:1-24.
- [12](#) Luke 14:11.
- [13](#) Luke 14:12.
- [14](#) Luke 14:13-14.
- [15](#) Luke 14:18, 19, 20.
- [16](#) Luke 14:21.
- [17](#) Luke 14:15.
- [18](#) Luke 14:22.
- [19](#) Luke 14:23.
- [20](#) Luke 14:24.
- [21](#) Luke 19:1-10.
- [22](#) Luke 19:2.
- [23](#) Luke 19:7.
- [24](#) Luke 19:9.
- [25](#) Luke 19:10.