

December 15, 2002 by Steve Brandon



The Mission of Jesus Christ (Part 1)

Matthew 9:9-13

1. A Sinner Who Was Saved (verse 9).
2. A Feast for His Friends (verse 10).
3. A Reaction from the Righteous (verse 11).
4. A Love for the Lost (verses 12-13).

Matthew 9:9-13

(9) And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose, and followed Him. (10) And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. (11) And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?" (12) But when He heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. (13) "But go and learn what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Our outline of this passage this morning will be in the form of a sentence, with four key phrases:

"(1) A **sinner**, who was **saved**, had (2) a **feast** for his **friends**, which caused (3) a **reaction** from the **righteous**, who lacked (4) a **love** for the **lost**."

Let's look at our first point,

1. A Sinner Who Was Saved (verse 9).

In verse 9 we read, "And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose, and followed Him."

This verse introduces us to Matthew. This is the same individual who wrote the gospel of Matthew which we have been studying for the past year. We see Matthew here sitting in the tax office. By profession, Matthew was a tax collector. It was while Matthew was at work, sitting in the tax office that Jesus called him. Tax-gatherers did not have the greatest of reputations when Jesus walked the earth. In fact, we often see in the Bible that they were coupled with "sinners" to represent the down and out of society. For instance, in verse 10 of the passage before us, we see that there were many "tax-gatherers and sinners" reclining together. And in verse 11, we see the Pharisees complaining to Jesus' disciples, alleging that Jesus was eating with the "tax-gatherers and sinners." We see the same reputation of tax-gatherers in other passages as well. Jesus once used a tax-gatherer to depict the wicked man in contrast to a Pharisee, who was regarded as a righteous man. In Luke 18:11, the self-righteous Pharisee in Jesus' parable prayed, "God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus acknowledged the same thing when He asked, "if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same?" (Matt. 5:45).

Tax-gatherers had the reputation of being greedy traitors to the Jewish people. When we think of tax collectors today in America, we think of the Internal Revenue Service, the government agency to whom we mail our annual income tax returns. I would bet that none of us in this room really likes paying taxes. In fact, it did not take me long to find pages and pages and pages of those who have complained about their taxes.

1. People who squawk about their income tax can be divided into two classes: men and women.
2. There will always be death and taxes; however, death doesn't get worse every year.
3. If you don't hear some people murmuring about taxes these days, it's probably because so many others are screaming.
4. Golf is a lot like taxes. You drive hard to get to the green and then wind up in the hole.
5. It is reported that the politicians in Washington are thinking of abolishing the income tax and taking the income.
6. Do you know what the difference is between a taxidermist and a tax collector? The taxidermist takes only your skin.
7. A fool and his money are soon parted. The rest of us wait until income tax time.
8. The average man now lives thirty-one years longer than he did in 1850. He has to in order to get his taxes paid.
9. A lot of people still have the first dollar they ever made; Uncle Sam has all the others.
10. The best things in life are still free, but the tax experts are working overtime on the problem.
11. A good name is to be chosen over great riches. It's tax free ... so far!
12. One man put it in great perspective, "It's awfully difficult to believe that only about two hundred years ago we went to war to avoid taxation."
13. In 1913, Uncle Sam collected only 13 million dollars in income taxes. That's why they were called the "good old days."
14. Don't you long for the good old days when Uncle Sam lived within his income and without most of yours?
15. One of the great blessings about living in a democracy is that we have complete control over how we pay our taxes:

cash, check, or money order.

16. America is the land of opportunity. Everybody can become a taxpayer.

17. We wonder why they call them "tax returns" when so little of it does.

18. Congress has the unsolved problem of how to get the people to pay taxes they can't afford for services they don't need.

19. Why does a slight tax increase cost you two hundred dollars and a substantial tax cut save you thirty cents?

20. No enemy nation could risk invading the United States. It couldn't afford the high taxes.

21. In Russia, the people have only what the government gives them; in America the people have only what the government does not take away from them in taxes.

(source: <http://www.anton.com/humor/speakerhumor/taxes.htm>)

As much as we might hate paying taxes, the first-century Jews hated it **even more** than we do today. There were several occasions in which Jesus answered questions about paying taxes (Matt 17:24-27; 22:15-22).

During the time of Jesus, taxes were collected differently than they are in America today. Today, every business and every household in America takes part in the taxation process. Here are some tasks every business and household must do annually:

1. Account for itself.
2. Report how much revenue it received.
3. Report how much money was lost.
4. Follow a strict tax code and pay the appropriate taxes directly to the government.

If we were living in Jesus' day, the process would work rather differently. We would not pay our taxes directly to the government. Instead, we would pay them to our local tax collector. Our local tax collector would then be responsible for paying a certain sum to the Roman government. It may seem as though the tax collector would be a middle-man who merely transferred our taxes to the government. But that was not the case. On the contrary, the tax collector was like a franchise owner who obtained the right to be able to collect taxes from the people by agreeing to pay the Roman government a set sum of money. The tax collector would then proceed to collect however much or however little he could from the people, knowing how much he ultimately owed the government for the ability to collect these moneys. To see how this works, let us suppose that I was a tax collector for my neighborhood which contains about 400 houses. The government might be satisfied if I collected an average of \$2,000 from each of the homes in taxes. So, for \$800,000 (that is, 400 homes at \$2,000 each), I could purchase the tax rights for my neighborhood. Now, it didn't matter to the government if I collected more or less than \$800,000. The government was going to receive \$800,000 from me each year for the taxes in my neighborhood. My profit would come from whatever I was able to collect beyond the \$800,000. The name of the game, then, became my ability to extract as much money as I could from my neighbors. The more money that I could extract, the more money I could put into my own pocket. As you can imagine, much abuse took place with this type of tax collection process. The tax collectors were usually some of the richest men in town, especially those who were particularly greedy. The more they could get from people, the richer they became. These tax-gatherers, then, had a reputation for being very greedy people. And indeed they were.

To make matters worse, not only were tax collectors regarded as very greedy people, they were also considered to be traitors. After all, the tax collectors were helping the Jewish enemy, the Romans. The Jewish people were not thrilled at the prospect of being ruled by Rome. They were actually being ruled by the Romans against their will. But these tax-gatherers willingly took part in an agreement with the enemy government to take money from their own people. Tax-gatherers were rich because they were greedy; they were regarded as traitors because they helped the enemy. And here Matthew tells us that he was such a sinner; he was a greedy traitor.

Matthew's testimony in this passage, although somewhat short, is straightforward, to the point, and demonstrates his great humility. He speaks of this event in the third person. He does not say, "I was sitting in the tax office." Instead, he says, "a man was sitting in the tax office." Describing his conversion this way eliminates his own personal pride in what took place. Furthermore, when he describes his action of following Christ, Matthew simply writes, "He rose and followed Him." Now we can glean from the gospel of Luke that there is a little bit more to the story than what appears here. Luke tells us that Matthew "left everything behind, and rose and began to follow Him" (Luke 5:28). Matthew omits this description which turns out to be an important piece of information because a tax collector was usually a very rich man. To leave everything behind and follow Jesus would require Matthew to give up much in order to follow Jesus. And that is exactly what he did.

Now, certainly, when Jesus called out to Matthew to "Follow Him," Matthew already knew quite a bit about Jesus. Matthew lived in Capernaum, a border town between the territory of Herod Antipas and Philip the Tetrarch. As we might expect, there was a high military presence in the town, which is why the Centurion (of chapter 8) was there. We would also expect some heavy taxation to take place in that town. As people traveled from one territory to another, it was a great opportunity to tax those coming from one region to another. Perhaps this was the type of tax office where we find Matthew sitting. When I think of this, I am reminded of this past summer when Yvonne and I flew to Vancouver. As we were departing from Vancouver, we were required to pay an "airport improvement tax." Each of us were required to pay \$10 before we could leave!

Since Matthew was a resident of Capernaum, he certainly heard about Jesus and His miracles. Perhaps he even saw the result of the leper that was healed (8:1-4). Perhaps he spoke to the Centurion, who's slave-boy was healed (8:5-13). Perhaps he saw the paralytic walking about (9:1-8) after Jesus had healed him. We do not know exactly what Matthew knew of Jesus, but we do know that "he rose and followed Him" (verse 9). What a great picture of salvation! This is the essence of what it means to be a Christian: following Jesus. Jesus is our head (Col. 1:18). Jesus is our authority (Col. 2:10). As disciples of Jesus, we willingly submit our lives to Him (Eph. 5:24), and we follow Him wherever He leads. This is what Matthew did. He was freed from his sins. He was a **sinner who was saved**.

Matthew's first activity after he was saved was to have a feast for his friends. This brings us to our second point this morning:

2. A Feast for His Friends (verse 10).

We read in verse 10, "And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples."

In his humility, Matthew does not indicate everything that was going on here. Luke writes that "Levi gave a big reception for [Jesus] in his house" (Luke 5:29). Note that the name "Levi" here is another name for Matthew. Matthew had two names, Levi and Matthew, which is similar to the case of Peter who was also called Simon, and Paul who was also called Saul.

So we see from Luke 5:29 that Matthew threw a big party for all of his friends in his house. Jesus was the honored guest at Matthew's feast. Matthew wanted all of his friends to know about Jesus and meet him face to face. Some of us can probably relate to this. When something exciting happens in our life, we usually want to tell others about it. Have you ever read a good book and told others about it, even encouraging them to read it? Have you ever gone someplace that you enjoyed greatly, so that you have told others of your pleasurable time? Have you ever bought something that proved to be such a nice thing to have that you encouraged others to purchase one as well? Have you ever made something of which you are particularly proud? Have you delighted in showing it to others? As I think about this, my father comes to mind. He recently built a woodworking workshop behind his house. Almost every time I visit his home, he says, "Steve, come, I want to show you what's new out back." It used to be that he would show me the progress he was making in building the shop. Now that it is almost complete, he has shown me some of the projects that he has worked on in the shop.

Well, like father, like son: If you visit my home for the first time, I like to show you my office which I think is pretty neat. I am excited to show others some of my handiwork. I did much of the construction, wiring, dry-walling, painting and finishing myself with the help of my father and a few other friends. Now, I do have other purposes in mind when I give you a tour of my office. I want you to picture where I spend many of my hours each week, and I want you to feel free to come and visit me there. But the point is that just as my father likes to show me his woodworking shop, I like to show you my office. And it doesn't stop there. My son would love to show you his own constructions. If you talk with my son for any period of time, you will quickly discover his love for Legos. I am not sure what it is about these little connecting plastic pieces, but they consume his energy and thoughts. He constantly comes to me and asks to show me the neat things that he has made. This desire to tell others about the things that excite us is not a bad thing at all. It is the way that God has made us. The things that most excite us, are the things we are most eager to tell others about. Have you ever been so excited about the gospel that you have told others about it? Do you find yourself saying things like,

"God has radically changed my life and given me new desires of righteousness over sin! I want to tell you about it."

"I have such joy that I have never known before, because my sins are now forgiven. I know the truth and have been set free!" (John 8:32)

"You simply need to believe it too, and then you will be free from your sins as well!"

I believe that this is the primary way that God uses to spread the gospel. He uses those people who are genuinely excited about the grace of God in their lives, which has mercifully come to them, to share it with others. This is exactly what Matthew did! He was so excited about his new found master that he wanted others to meet him too! It is a great opportunity when someone first believes the gospel to immediately invite his friends, most of whom are probably non-Christians, and to communicate to them his new-found faith. Matthew did this. I like to call this a "Levi Party". (Not Levi's Jeans, but a new convert party). Sadly, one of the difficulties many of us eventually face is that when we become Christians, we often lose touch with many of our former, non-Christian friends. What used to attract us in our former life no longer does. But Matthew was excited about his new-found faith.

The early apostles were gripped with the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and its implications for our lives. While they were once timid and afraid, they are now bold and courageous because they were excited about the message of the gospel: **forgiveness of sins is available to those who believe in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead**. Trace this through Acts and you will see it happen over and over again!

I believe that the most effective way for evangelism to take place is for you to comprehend the gospel in all its fullness. It is for you to come to love the truth of God's absolute grace in your life, to open your eyes to see both your sin and the One who can wipe away your sin. It is for you to be excited about the reality of Christ in you. When this is true in your life, no one will be able to keep you from speaking the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Each week as I stand before you, it is my desire and my effort to expound God's word that you might ever be excited about the truths that are in the Word. I do this because I desire that you will go home and read from the Word yourselves. When you prayerfully read and study the Word, God will give you a passion for the message of God's mercy to us in Christ Jesus, which flows from every page of the Bible. And when you have this passion, you will speak it forth with your non-believing friends.

Evangelism best takes place when a heart is willing to share what is bubbling up from within. This past week, our water heater experienced some problems. Yvonne came downstairs one morning to find a portion of our rug drenched with water. Upon investigating the problem, I discovered that the pressure/temperature gauge on the water heater needed to be replaced. This gauge is used to monitor the pressure and the temperature of the air and water in the water heater. If the pressure or temperature exceeds safe limits, the valve opens and the pressure within the water tank will be released, to protect the water heater from exploding. The gauge was broken, because it was letting out water even at low temperatures. What a great picture of evangelism is this gauge. When the pressure inside is too great, it will let the inner contents out. Our inward pressures and temperatures must be kept high to bubble out in speaking the truth.

I'm not against evangelistic training and methodologies for sharing the gospel with non-believers. (In fact, I have thought about doing some of this in Men's Equippers at some point in time.) But I do believe that the primary hurdle in sharing the gospel with others is not lack of training, but lack of genuine joy in the truth of the gospel. If you are genuinely excited about God's grace to you in Christ Jesus, then you will make it known. When you stumble a few times in it, you will seek ways to do it better. The best way to do it better is to know the contents of the Bible better. Let me ask you this, "In your failures in evangelism (and if you are anything like me, you have lots of failures), has the main problem

been your lack of training to know what to do? Or has it been your lack of heart to open your mouth?" I believe that in ninety-nine out of a hundred instances, it is the latter, rather than the former. I believe that the primary reason for our lack of sharing our faith is due to a lack of boldness to speak it forth. A lack of boldness comes from a lack of heart. And a lack of heart comes from a lack of love to Christ for His finished work on the cross.

As we consider the importance of evangelism, let me take a moment to examine how it fits into our daily lives. Let me ask you, when you think about your week, what is it that consumes your time? Are you more consumed with the newspaper than you are with the Bible? Are you more consumed with television than you are with the Bible? Are you more consumed with the Internet than you are with the Bible? Are you more consumed with your work than you are with Jesus? Are you more consumed with your hobbies than you are with Jesus? Are you more consumed with your family than you are with Jesus? Are you more consumed with your spouse than you are with Jesus? If so, then it is no wonder that you struggle with your boldness to speak forth the truth of the gospel of Christ. The gospel of Christ is simply not on your heart. It is not saturating your mind. But this need not be this way, because when your heart is there, you will find little difficulty in letting out the truth.

I am convinced it is not a lack of knowledge or training that shuts the mouth, but rather it is lack of heart to share your encounters with Jesus. Consider the Samaritan woman (in John 4). She did not possess a great deal of spiritual knowledge. She simply told others what she knew. John tells us that "many of the Samaritans believed in [Jesus] because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all the things I have done.'" (John 4:39). Consider also the man who was born blind (John 9). He, too, did not know much. The religious leaders attempted to obtain testimony from him that Jesus was a sinner. The man simply said that he had been healed, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25). The apostles are yet another example of people who were not recognized as possessing a great deal of knowledge. We read in Acts 4:13 that some were described as "uneducated" and "untrained men" who had "been with Jesus." When they were told to stop preaching about Jesus and His resurrection, they replied, "We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

As we look at the text before us this morning, we see a man who was totally untrained in the gospel. We see him figuring out a way for others to know about Jesus. He obviously did not know a great deal about spiritual matters. To be sure, Matthew knew a little bit about Jesus -- His miracles, His power, His loveliness, and His willingness to allow a dirty, rotten scoundrel like Matthew to become His disciple. But despite Matthew's lack of knowledge on spiritual things, he figured out a way to tell his friends about Jesus. Matthew invited them to a feast, and he let Jesus have center stage. In time Matthew would be sent to go out and proclaim, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 10:3, 5). But at this point in time, he did not know much. He invited others to meet Jesus, the man whom he had now committed himself to follow.

I am sure Matthew figured, "If there is hope for me, there is hope for my friends!" And his friends were among the most despicable and despised of that day. They were a sorry lot. As I pointed out earlier, they were the "tax-gatherers and sinners." In fact, these people probably were his only friends. Tax-gatherers were excluded from society. They were rich, but they were excluded from society. As traitors, they were treated as Gentiles and cut off from society. They were excluded from the synagogue; that's why the tax-gatherer stood far off in Jesus' parable with the self-righteous Pharisee (Luke 18:13). Jews were prohibited from entering the homes of tax-gatherers. Jews were even prohibited from simply eating or drinking with them. The Jews believed that "when the king's collectors enter into a house to dwell, all that are in the house are defiled" (Maimon. Mishcab & Moshab, c. 12. sect. 12., quoted by John Gill in his commentary). In that day and time, people simply did not associate with tax-gatherers. We might imagine that it would be quite lonely to be a tax-gatherer, and it was! Their only source of friendship was with others who were excluded from society as well. This included other tax-gatherers, and "sinners." I guess you could say, misery loves company.

We have seen that Matthew was a **sinner who was saved**. His excitement over his conversion prompted him to throw a **feast for his friends**. Now we turn to our third point this morning as we examine how the feast caused a **reaction from the righteous**.

3. A Reaction from the Righteous (verse 11).

We see this reaction from the righteous in verse 11: "And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?'"

When the Pharisees asked this question, it was not because they genuinely lacked information about the ministry of Jesus. Rather, it was because they were against Jesus. It was more like a rhetorical type of question: "Don't you disciples see what your Teacher is doing? Surely, He is in the wrong because it is not lawful to associate with these people. Have you not read the first Psalm? It says, 'How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers' (Ps. 1:1). Your teacher is dwelling with these sinners and tax-gatherers. Don't you see how He is in the wrong? Repent, therefore of your ways and show some common sense. Abandon your teacher!" Perhaps this is why the Pharisees came up to the disciples; they wanted to knock some sense into the heads of the disciples in order to cause the disciples to cease following this Jesus who associates with the riff-raff of society.

This is not the only time we see the Pharisees criticizing Jesus of this type of thing. They did it often. On one occasion, Jesus was invited to eat with one of the Pharisees. An immoral woman heard that Jesus was going to be there, so she came into this man's house and was "[wetting] His feet with her tears and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet, and anointing them with the perfume" (Luke 7:38). The Pharisees thought, "If this man were a prophet, He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). On another occasion, Jesus was simply teaching the tax-gatherers and sinners. Luke tells us how the Pharisees responded: "The Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'" (Luke 15:2). On yet another occasion, Jesus visited Zaccheus' home in Jericho. Zaccheus was a "chief tax-gatherer" who was very rich (Luke 19:2). The people who saw this happen were grumbling saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7).

The comments the Pharisees made, which we read in verse 11, were made directly to Jesus' disciples. Either they asked the question too loudly or they engaged themselves in quite a conversation, because apparently Jesus overheard them. In verse 12 we see that "[Jesus] heard this" concern of theirs. Jesus addressed their concern head-on, and that brings us to our fourth and final point this morning.

4. A Love for the Lost (verses 12-13).

Jesus' response focuses around one major point: a love for the lost. Jesus ate with tax-gatherers and sinners because He had a love for the lost. His message to them was one of repentance and forgiveness. The Pharisees grumbled and complained against Jesus because they did not have this same love for the lost. Listen to what Jesus said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:12-13).

Jesus' response breaks down into three simple arguments. Let us look at the first one. In verse 12, Jesus presents an argument using a **Physical Analogy**. He compares himself with a doctor. He says, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick" (verse 12). Jesus is simply making the point that you do not go to a doctor when you are well. It is when you have heart pain that you go to a cardiologist. It is when you break your arm that you go to an orthopaedic surgeon. It is when you cannot see clearly that you go to an ophthalmologist. It is when your skin breaks out in a rash that you visit a dermatologist. When you are healthy, you do not need to see these doctors (unless, of course, you go for preventative reasons). We understand these things. Jesus simply takes this physical analogy and puts it into the spiritual realm. It is the tax-gatherers and the sinners who need spiritual healing. Jesus said, "I am a spiritual physician. I am going to those who are sick." That is the Physical Analogy.

The next argument in Jesus' response is found in verse 13. Here, Jesus sets forth His argument using **Scriptural Authority**. He quotes from Hosea 6:6, saying "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice.'" He was rebuking these self-righteous Pharisees who prided themselves in knowing the scripture. Jesus told them that they did not understand it yet. He basically said, "You all need to go and learn what God's heart is in this matter, because you have totally missed it." Hosea is a book about God's unrelenting compassion and faithfulness to a wayward nation. Israel had gone off and pursued the sins of other nations to such an extent that God had compared them to a harlot. In the 14 chapters of Hosea, the prophet describes Israel as a harlot 19 times! (Harlot - 2:5; 3:3; 4:10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18; 5:3; 9:1) (Harlotry - 1:2 (3x); 2:2; 2:4; 4:11, 12; 5:4; 6:10). Yet, Hosea speaks about God's continual faithfulness and love for the lost nation. Listen to Hosea, "The LORD loves the sons of Israel, though they turn to other gods" (Hosea 3:1). This demonstration of compassion shows the heart of God. This is what the Pharisees missed! God has a tender heart of compassion toward those who have rebelled against Him, even as Israel rebelled.

Though God is a compassionate God, we must realize that there will reach a day when God will finally give them over to their lusts. God has said, "Because of the wickedness of their deeds, I will drive them out of My house! I will love them no more" (Hos. 9:15). These Pharisees had so cut themselves off in their self-righteousness, that they had no time for the spiritually sick and needy. They were following the ritual, fulfilling their sacrifices, and keeping the commandments. But they had lost sight of the heart of God -- a God who is compassionate to those who are straying from the truth.

Having used (1) Physical Analogy and (2) Scriptural Authority, Jesus presents the third argument, **His Spiritual Priority**. This is found at the end of verse 13. Jesus said, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (verse 13b). This is clear throughout Jesus' ministry. If you consider His disciples, you will see that they were "uneducated" and "untrained" (Acts 4:13). Not one of them was of the religious establishment. A third of them were blue-collar fishermen (Matt. 4:18-22). One of them was a notorious sinner (Matthew). If you consider Jesus' reputation, you will see that Jesus was known as "a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners" (Matt. 11:19). Immoral women knew that they would be received by Jesus (Luke 7:36-39). If you consider Jesus' mission, you will see that the Father sent the Son to die for sinners (John 3:16). Indeed, Christ died for us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8). And so it is that Jesus calls the foolish, the weak, and the despised of this world (1 Cor. 1:27-28)! Aren't you glad that Jesus came to call sinners, rather than the righteous? This is what makes the gospel such good news: You do not need to make yourself better in order to be acceptable before God! On the contrary, you need to admit your sin and plead mercy at the throne of grace, and trust the power of God to overcome your sin.

This concept of unmerited grace is contrary to our usual thoughts. In this life, we think that we need to earn everything. But this isn't how God's compassion works. I spoke with a man this week, who was describing his nephew, who had been all but accepted into the air-force academy. But at the last minute some physical problem such as an irregular heartbeat kept him out. John Piper once said, "The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won't enlist you in his service unless you are healthy and Jesus won't enlist you unless you are sick" (John Piper, *Brothers, We are NOT Professionals*, p. 41).

I conclude the message this morning with this question: Are you a friend of sinners? When you interact with those who do not know and love Jesus Christ, do you despise them? Or do you have compassion for them? When you are in line at a store and the people in front of you are unkempt, have tattoos all over their arms, are purchasing a 24 pack of beer, and a couple of cartons of cigarettes, what comes into your mind? Do you thank God that you are not like them? Do you pray for God to open their eyes to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ! Do you really believe that if such a one repents there is more joy in heaven than when ninety-nine church kids believe in Jesus and have no need for repentance (Luke 15:7)?

How about this: Are there non-Christians in your life with whom you have relationships? Are they hearing the gospel? One of the difficulties in the Christian world is the fact that it is a world. You can become so involved in church and Christian life that you are totally alienated from the non-Christian world. The church can become a fortress, into which the world will never be able to enter until they conform to our standards of righteousness. Often, these walls that are erected to keep people out actually keep people in! Perhaps you have seen the great wall of China. Over Thanksgiving, when we had a foreign exchange student from China in our home, we asked him about it. His perspective was interesting. He said that it was originally built as a defensive measure. It divided between the Chinese people and the enemies in the north. However, now that the Chinese borders have been enlarged to include some of the territory to the north of the wall, the wall has become a problem in establishing unity among the Chinese people. Some live to the north of the wall and some live to the south of the wall. It has hindered the unity of China. In the church, we can often have these walls which prevent us from getting to the other side.

I have thought about the "typical" church arrangement: On Sunday morning the church gathers for Sunday School and for worship. On Sunday evening, the church comes back for another worship service. On Wednesday evenings there are prayer meetings, choir practices,

and AWANA programs. There are Bible studies and discipleship meetings. You throw a few other meetings into the mix for special occasions. All of a sudden what do you have? You have church members, who are so busy with their church activities that they have no time for befriending unbelievers. Their only friends are those in the church. I remember speaking with an older of a church, who look at his calendar for the upcoming month. He counted more than twenty of the thirty evenings in the month to be reserved for church-related activities. I know why these things happen. These activities are for the encouragement of the people through the Word and fellowship and prayer. I'm all for this.

For some, it is good to be in this environment. Yvonne and I were recently talking about our college experience. She became a Christian during her freshman year at UCLA. As a freshman, she was involved with the marching band. She recognized was that it would be best for her spiritual growth to quit that organization because of the sinful influences which accompanied it. Perhaps when she grew more mature, it would become a beneficial thing for the gospel if she were to join again. I believe that it is good to be out with the world seeking to be salt and light. However, we need to keep a proper perspective when we are with those in the world. If we ever love the world and what the world does (1 John 2:15), then we certainly need to beware of its dangers upon our lives. We need to keep Prov. 4:14-15 in mind, "Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not proceed in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not pass by it; Turn away from it and pass on." The burden of my message this morning is in line with Matthew's purpose of demonstrating the heart of Jesus for those who are spiritually sick.

Last Sunday morning, I know one family in our midst that was missing from our fellowship because they chose to attend their company's holiday party instead. They have demonstrated their faithfulness to this flock. They have demonstrated their love for this flock. They really would have desired to be here instead. Yet, the husband told me that at work he is viewed as strange enough already. Not to go to this party would put further distance between him and those at his workplace. So he went. And I want you all to know that I am deeply in favor of such a decision. Evangelistic motives are **always** legitimate reasons to miss church services. Don't ever let the church hinder your outreach to non-believers. For instance, suppose your unbelieving family is gathering for a holiday celebration at a local restaurant at 11:00 some Sunday morning. If you prayerfully determine that your outreach to your family would be aided by skipping church and joining them, then I encourage you to do just that. Join them, and reach out to them with the love of Christ.

Do you have relationships with non-Christians? My family is working on this. Yvonne is involved in a community orchestra. This fall, Elroy and I coached a soccer team together, through which I had an opportunity to tell several people about Christ and our church. I have recently begun playing soccer with some people in the community. I am just now learning all of their names. I have talked with a few of these people about what I do and what this church is about. I trust that God will give me more opportunities in the future. In my neighborhood, we have met a few non-Christian neighbors. It is a difficult thing to do -- to reach out to those who need Jesus Christ the most. But it is our mission! As Jesus came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance, so likewise are we called to "Go into the world and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). The nation we are called to reach is the United States of America. People are all around you who need the forgiveness that is found only in believing on Jesus Christ.

If you send your children to public schools, consider your interaction with the parents and teachers of the school as an outreach ministry of Rock Valley Bible Church. If your children are involved in "Cub-Scouts," consider it an outreach ministry of Rock Valley Bible Church. If you get together with non-Christians for other reasons, consider it to be your outreach from this church. In whatever way you interact with non-believers in this world, consider it an opportunity to reach out to those who don't know Jesus Christ.

Do not underestimate your efforts! Each Christmas season my family, like many families, enjoys sending out Christmas cards to friends and family. For those who live in other states, or those who we rarely see, we often include a letter, which updates people on what we have been doing each year. Over the years, people have commented (even non-Christians) on how they enjoy the cards that Yvonne makes and the letter that we include. It is an opportunity for them to see God working in our lives. This past week, we were finalizing our address list. There were a few addresses that we did not have, so we tried to look them up on the Internet. We found all we needed except one. I said to Yvonne, "Why don't you check to see if you could find our name?" Sure enough, she typed in "Steve Brandon" and "Rockford, Illinois." Two Steve Brandons showed up. I found out that the other Steve Brandon in Rockford lives about a mile from our house. I said to Yvonne, "Maybe I should go up and knock on his door and say, 'Hello, my name is Steve Brandon. You do not know me, but I would like to meet Steve Brandon.'" We were joking about this, thinking how this would be a good way to meet somebody. Perhaps this would even be an opportunity to share the love of Christ with this man.

Just two days ago, on Friday night, I went to play soccer with my team. I was talking with the guy in charge of our team, who was talking with his friend. I was telling him how I would not be able to be there next Friday, due to other commitments. He said, "That's fine." Then he gestured to another man nearby and said, "Here's an easy introduction: Steve Brandon, meet Steve Brandon." At this point, I was pretty excited! I thought that this was the guy that I had just discovered on the Internet only a few days before. I was thinking, "I'd like to get to know this guy!" The first thing he said to me was, "You're a minister right?" I replied, "Yes. I am a pastor." Then he said bluntly, "Well, I guess I'm your evil twin, then." I don't know what that means, but he did not want to have any part of me. I tried to have a conversation with him. I asked him where he lives, but he refused to tell me. Then, I described to him where this Steve Brandon lived that I had found on the Internet lives. When I described the neighborhood, he admitted that was him, and that was where he lived. Perhaps I will see him in the future.

But here is the thing that really stood out to me: The word has gotten around on our soccer team about who I am and what I do. All eyes are on me. I have an opportunity to be salt and light. So, don't under-estimate your outreach efforts! My desire is to be salt and light to a dying world. Will you join me in that effort? Will you be like Jesus and have a love for the lost?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 15, 2002 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.