

Making Room for People far from God

Matthew 9:9-13

As most of you know, we're in the midst of a building expansion project that we're calling "Making Room." The idea is that we need to make room in our facilities for people far from God, for children and youth, and for worship/prayer. But we also need to make room in our lives for the same.

A little historical perspective . . . We moved into this building in 1997. In 2000 we completed the south end of the building - which is now used for children and youth ministries. Over the past year we've been making plans for renovating our current facilities and a significant expansion. Here's what we're thinking:

FLOOR PLANS - showing phase 1 and phase 2.

In October we're going to ask you as a congregation to consider giving above and beyond your regular giving toward this building expansion. The first phase will cost around 2 million dollars. We expect that the second phase (3 to 5 years from now) will cost around 3 million dollars. We're talking about significant amounts of money. (As a point of reference, our annual budget is around \$750,000.)

It's a very serious thing to ask a congregation to give sacrificially for an effort like this. Everybody I know works hard for the money they earn. Some of you will consider giving out of savings/assets you've accumulated over the years; others of you will have to figure out how you can alter your spending if you're going to give; others of you are barely meeting your expenses now - and you have a hard time seeing how you'll be able to give anything more than you're already giving. My point is that whatever your financial situation, it is a serious thing for the church to ask you to give sacrificially to make room in our facilities.

It's an equally serious thing for a church to ask you to make sacrifices in order to make room in your lives for people far from God, for children and youth, for prayer and worship. If we're not actually expecting you to live differently, it's not that big a deal; but if we're actually asking you clear out some things in your life so that you can make room for other things, that huge.

And so we're talking about some serious things in this *Making Room* series. But it's also exciting because we're talking about things that are near to God's heart - things God wants us to be about at Faith. The next three weeks we are going to lay out the vision for this Making Room effort; then we'll spend three weeks talking about the generosity necessary to see this happen. Hopefully it will be clear why we believe that God wants us to sacrifice in order to "make room" - both in our facility and in our lives.

Today we are going to talk about ***Making Room for people Far from God***. We'll consider Matthew 9:9-13, a passage that describes how Jesus entered into the lives of people far from God. This passage illustrates that when Jesus calls us to follow Him,

He also calls us to follow Him in His mission. He doesn't merely call us to go to heaven after we die; He calls us to follow Him in His mission of helping people who are far from God enter into a relationship with Him.

Verse 9 tells very simply how Jesus "called" Matthew to follow Him as a disciple.

9 As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

It's important to point out that Matthew wouldn't have been desirable as a disciple for a Jewish rabbi in Jesus' day. Tax collectors such as Matthew worked for the Roman empire, the world power that basically enslaved the nation of Israel. As such tax collectors were considered traitors. They were commonly lumped in with prostitutes and other notorious sinners in Jesus' day. Needless to say, Matthew wasn't anybody's five-star recruit.

But Jesus had a radically different mindset than the average rabbi/teacher. A person's past didn't disqualify him/her for discipleship. He'll explain all of this a bit later in the passage, but notice for now that when Jesus made an unqualified call to Matthew, "Follow Me!" that Matthew "got up and followed Him." Luke's account mentions that Matthew "left everything behind, and got up and began to follow" Jesus (Luke 5:28). Of course following Jesus meant literally, physically following Jesus around and learning how to live like Him. Eventually "following Christ" took on the metaphorical meaning of learning to live as He lived.

Very significantly, the next event recorded in Matthew 9 involves Jesus sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and "sinners" in Matthew's house.

10 Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus pointed out that there's nothing particularly virtuous about being nice to your friends. He said that "even tax collectors" love those who love them. Jesus got Himself an invitation to have dinner with Matthew and his friends - who, of course, were tax collectors and sinners. In that day (as in ours), table fellowship meant acceptance and friendship; you have relaxed, unhurried time with friends, you hang out with your friends. "Reclining at the table" with **many** tax collectors and sinners was simply scandalous.

11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?"

The Pharisees had learned that you're taking a risk by asking a question directly to Jesus; He might embarrass you by His answer. So they asked His *disciples*, "Why is

your Teacher eating with tax collectors and sinners?” As D.A. Carson points out, the Pharisees’ question wasn’t really a request for information; it was really an accusation (*Matthew*, p. 225). Over in chapter 11 Jesus acknowledged that people had accused Him of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (11:19). To the Pharisees, those were the people who didn’t have a chance with God, therefore they were the people to avoid at all costs. They would ruin your reputation; worse yet, you might catch what they’ve got!

I love David Hanson’s comment: “By cavorting with deviants, Jesus fuzzied up the boundaries” (*A Little Handbook on Having a Soul*, p. 144). Pharisees in every generation and every culture feel safe when there is a clear boundary that marks those who are “in” and those who are “out.” By sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, was Jesus saying that He approved of their lifestyle? Was He saying that nothing needed to change in their lives? What if the average person started hanging out with that type of people?

Jesus eventually found out about the Pharisees’ question:

12 But when Jesus heard this, He said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.

Everybody would have agreed with that statement. But the application was difficult to hear:

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.”

Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, a Scripture that would have been very familiar to the Pharisees. They would have said, “We’ve known that Scripture since we were children.” But the expression “go and learn what this means” is a way of indicating that needed to do more studying; the Pharisees may be experts in the Hebrew Scriptures, but they completely missed the heart of God. God doesn’t care so much that they paid careful attention to every detail of the old covenant sacrificial system if they lacked compassion. If you have to choose between the two, God says, “I desire compassion, and not sacrifice.”

Just like a physician who says, “I am called to help sick people get well,” Jesus said, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Jesus is apparently accepting people’s self-evaluation here. Jesus doesn’t have anything to offer those who say, “I’m already righteous.” But Jesus has everything to offer those who come to him and say, “I’m sick. . . I need healing and wholeness.” Those are the people who are poised to experience life. Those are the people to whom Jesus says, “Come and follow Me!” Jesus would eventually go to the cross to pay for the sins of such people. He would bear their sin on the cross. Their healing and wholeness would come through His sacrifice.

That's why Jesus had called Matthew, and that's why He befriended Matthew friends (who happened to be tax collectors and sinners). This wasn't some rare anomaly in Jesus' life; this is what Jesus always did because the whole reason He came was to call sinners into a relationship with the one, true living God.

Implications:

For Faith E Free:

If Jesus' mission was to call sinners to Himself, that must be **our** mission as well. If Jesus really wants to befriend people far from God so that they will receive what He's offering, we as a church **have** to be committed to the same. And this commitment will be reflected in our ministry structures, in our facilities, and in the very culture of the church.

Our vision isn't merely to take care of everybody who is already at Faith. Our vision is to see God use us to befriend many people who are currently far from God: people we already know as well as people we've never met. A Scripture that has captured my imagination for several years is Isaiah 49:6. God is speaking to the Messiah about His mission and about Israel's calling.

6 He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

God wanted Israel to know that it was "too small a thing" for the Messiah to come only for them. God wanted to reach the "nations." And it is too small a thing for us to have a church that exists only for us. God wants us to be a light to people who are living in darkness.

This vision is the driving force behind this *Making Room* effort. We want our facility to be a place that is not only welcoming to those of us who are already here, but also to people we might befriend. For example, we run the Alpha course here at the church building twice a year. This room works great for the meal and the video, but we're thinking about the types of rooms that would work best for the small-group discussions after the teaching. We plan to have some rooms in the north end of the building that have inviting, comfortable seating. We plan to have some seating areas in the foyer that would work well for such groups. We want to optimize our spaces for hospitality - welcoming people into the facility and show them the love of Christ. Many times "people belong before they believe."

As a very practical matter, we need to make room in this worship center so that we have the freedom to invite friends to join us on Sunday mornings. At various times of the year, this room is past capacity. We feel strongly that if someone shows up here on a Sunday morning, we need to have a place for them to sit. Just like if someone showed

up at my house for a meal, I'd have a place for them at the table, we need to have a place for people who show up here. This building expansion isn't merely for us. It's not that we need a bigger or nicer building for us. It's a matter of having a facility that will best allow us to welcome people that Jesus wants to befriend.

There are also implications ***For each of us:***

Matthew was probably surprised that Jesus wanted to be a friend to His friends. He was probably used to be despised and insulted and excluded from people's friendship. But Jesus actually came to his house and befriended His friends.

Think very carefully with me about this . . . Jesus is willing to do the same thing for you that He did for Matthew. If Jesus has called you to follow Him, Jesus is willing to befriend your friends - especially those who might be classified as "tax collectors and sinners."

Most commonly Jesus befriends people through ***your*** friendship. Following Jesus' pattern, we should pursue honest friendships with people who are far from God. As you know, there's a huge difference between befriending people and merely "being friendly." The check-out girl at Target is friendly, but she's not a friend. Friends are people you include in your life, people you trust, people who trust you, people with whom you share your joys, frustrations, fears, failures, etc.

Some of you grew up in Christian homes and came to faith in Christ early in life; that's what we all want for our children. But some of you are here today because a follower of Christ befriended you when you were "far from God." I know many of your stories. Some of you were once very hostile to Christians and Christianity, but now you love God and you love serving Him. Some of you were invited to church for years (in one case 9 years) before you came and entered into the body of Christ. Some of you showed up at K-State with all sorts of stereotypes about Christians and the Bible; but you met some other students whose lives you couldn't ignore. Through their friendship, you entered into a relationship with Jesus that you'll enjoy for eternity.

I certainly wouldn't be here today if a couple of guys hadn't befriended me when I was a sophomore in college. They invited me to play basketball on Friday afternoon, then to a Bible study. Eventually I fell in love with Jesus because I loved them and their lifestyle. It was far superior to anything I'd seen to date!

This morning I'm asking you, "Do you have room in your life for friendships with people who are far from God?" I'm not asking if you have an awesome strategy for reaching your friends for Christ. You don't have to figure out what's going to happen. I'm really asking you to make room in your life to befriend people. This is every bit as serious as asking you to give to the building fund. We're asking you to change your lifestyle (if necessary) and the way you interact with people - which is a huge thing.

But befriending people begins with a conviction that Jesus wants to befriend your friends through you. . . and a vision for how you interact with people. Someone was telling me that a few weeks ago she was leaving her office and saw a woman in the waiting room who seemed upset. After leaving the building, she sensed God's prompting to go back in and talk with the woman. After awkwardly making eye contact a couple of times, she simply entered into a compassionate conversation with her. It wasn't a conversation about Jesus; it was simply showing compassion to someone who needed it.

Two weeks ago we prayed for Russ Wolters, the young man who's going to China Russ is on the plane to China as we meet for worship. As his sending church, we have said, "We believe that it's worth it for you to leave everything in order to befriend people in China. We believe that Jesus wants to befriend people there who are far from God." As a basic matter of integrity, how dare we say to Russ, "It's great that you're willing to sacrifice in order to befriend people far from God, but us, we're a little busy for that!" We need to be the type of people here at home that we send others to be in other parts of the world.

Believing that Jesus actually calls us into this work can reintroduce a sense of adventure into the Christian life - which is sorely needed in many of our lives. Mark Batterson describes the time he went to the National Zoo in Washington, DC. The problem was that a few weeks earlier he had been in the Galapagos Islands and seen wild animals in their natural habitat. As he looked at a four-hundred-pound gorilla through a thick plexiglass window, the thought crossed his mind: *I wonder if churches do to people what zoos do to animals.*

If you feel like a caged animal - unnaturally tame and docile, befriending people far from God can reintroduce a sense of adventure into our lives. Befriending people far from God releases us back into our natural habitat where we might just be a little bit wild and/or dangerous.

As we make room in our facilities, we need to make room in our lives for people far from God.