

Text: Matt.9:9-13  
Intended audience: Christians  
Topic: Evangelism  
Theme: Making friends with unbelievers.  
My purpose for this message: To encourage believers to spend time with unbelievers.  
Delivered: August 29, 2004 @ KEFC

## RSVP: “Yes!”

The only thing worse than not being invited to a party, is to *have* one hardly anyone attends. When I was 16 or 17 I threw a party, made all the preparations, sent out about 30 invitations, and helped my mom prepare food. I was hoping for 20-25 people: 8 showed up. A blow to my ego: 34 years later, I still remember how many people didn’t come.

The invitations say, “RSVP.” “Répondez s’il vous plaît” (French for “Please respond”). If an RSVP comes back “No,” the hostess may wonder if the other person doesn’t like her, doesn’t like being around her, has no time for her, thinks she’s too good for her. Usually untrue, but it *seems* true.

I wonder if unbelievers feel like that about us. Whether we realize it or not, there are some unbelievers in our orbit that have either silently or verbally sent us an invitation to the party of their life. How have we RSVPed?

Within 3 years of our conversion, most of us have abandoned all of our nonChristian friends. Because during those initial years of faith, by the influence of the *Spirit* of God, the *Word* of God, and the *people* of God, we are becoming more and more become like Jesus, which makes us less and less like *them*. Our old friends are too vulgar, racist, drink too much, politically immoral, and make fun of people who go to church. So we drift away to *get* away from our discomfort—or fears.

Yet, what does it say to an unbelieving acquaintance, unsaved relative, lost neighbor when the only people we’ll hang around with, are fellow saints? Is it possible that God is opening a door for you with an unbeliever that you’d just as soon stay closed?

This is my 4<sup>th</sup> of what will be five messages on evangelism. This series began planned for 3 but has been having multiple births! (Lot of that going around at Keystone lately!) READ Matt.9:9-13. PRAY.

I want to make 3 observations about Jesus from this passage:

### 1. Noticed Sinners

A tax collector. Matthew (AKA Levi in Luke) was not your typical *IRS* professional. His ilk were little more than official thieves. These “tax farmers,” acted as speculators, bidding with the Roman government for the rights to collect tolls along a particular road or seaport, or in a certain district. The high bidder got the contract and then could extort as much *above* that as he wanted; that was his. If his bid was 4,000 dinarii but he collected 10,000 dinarii, he pocketed 6000. Tax farmers had to be rich to bid. Rome required them to actually front the bid, pay *before* taxes were collected.

Jews hated their people who served Rome this way:

- They served the occupying power
- They exploited people, growing rich and fat off others’ hardships.
- Because they routinely worked with Gentiles, they were ritually unclean.

So when they thought of sinners, the average Jew thought of people like Matthew. Even in the gospels, 8 times the writers link “tax collectors and sinners.”

But Jesus was not so prejudiced. During his ministry, He paid attention even to those others considered the worst. So, he asked Matthew to follow him. I'm certain the poor man's mouth dropped, accustomed to being ignored, or spit on by fellow Jews.

Now, *think* about this for a minute: whom do you notice, to whom do you pay attention at a concert at Long's Park, when you're shopping at Park City, in your Trigonometry class, at a family gathering, at lunch break in the office? Whom do you seek out, whom do you talk to: fellow believers, or unbelievers? People *like* you, or different? People who share your values, convictions, standards of speech and conduct, or those who may not? Jesus noticed sinners. And schmoozed with them.

## 2. Schmoozed with Sinners

Having been noticed, Matthew threw a party. With a big house, limitless grocery budget, he could entertain a lot of people. He invited his cronies (v.10; **...many tax collectors and 'sinners'**), *and* sent Jesus an invitation: RSVP." Remember, the tax collector typified "sinner" to the average Jew and you just don't associate with sinners. Even the Bible says that..., doesn't it?

Since some Christians would point to 1 Cor.6:14 ff., let's look at that. READ. The key word is "yoked." We usually mention marriage here but it can be any relationship between a believer and unbeliever, that puts the believer's faithfulness to Christ, at risk: potentially a business partnership.

This in no way says we must keep distance between ourselves and unbelievers. READ 1 Cor.5:9-11. It's the phony Christian we're to avoid, not unbelievers.

Let's say an unbeliever invites you to his house; a sinner. What goes through your mind: fear, anxiety, discomfort? We'd think about questions like:

- What might he do?
- What activities will take place?
- Who will the other party guests be?
- What might he ask me to do?
- What might I be forced to hear?
- What if he learns I'm a Christian and opposes me?
- What if someone makes fun of a stand I take?
- What if I'm uncomfortable?

Then we conclude it's not a fun way to spend an evening. (By the way, have you bought the lie that unbelievers don't want to hang out with you? *Some* don't. But I believe many do. They are intrigued by your good marriage, the way your children conduct themselves, the kindness they've witnessed in you, the unusual joy they've rarely seen. You're a curiosity to them but a cause for fear too: maybe you won't like *them*. They may be afraid to take the first step, fearing rejection.)

None of these anxieties deterred Jesus from saying "yes" in his RSVP. To Him "schmoozing" was the perfect way to prepare people for the gospel. In Yiddish, *schmoozers* are people who spend a lot of informal time with other people. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam explains that these people do things like "...give dinner parties, hang out with friends, play cards, frequent bars and night spots, hold barbecues, visit relatives, and send greeting cards." Schmoozers aren't the folks who hold all the positions in clubs, church, aren't the movers and shakers in the community, they connect with people in flexible and spontaneous ways.

In the eyes of his critics, Jesus' problem though was not that he was a schmoozer, but that he schmoozed with the wrong people. Which brings me to my 3<sup>rd</sup> observation.

### 3. Called to Sinners

Imagine the scene: Jesus and his disciples were enjoying a good meal—where perhaps too much wine flowed, where the stories were occasionally bawdy, where there may have been some ladies of the street looking for business. The assortment of sin and sinners, noise and commotion, attracted unwanted attention. Street informers for the Pharisees passed along word of Jesus' "inappropriate conduct."

They saw an opportunity to strike a blow against the man who was becoming the public's darling.

"How can you claim to be a godly man yet eat and laugh with all this riff-raff? Don't you know righteous hang out with righteous; unrighteous hang out with the unrighteous."

Before we're too hard on these squinty-eyed separatists, imagine if word got out that one of your elders or a CONNECTION shepherd was spotted in a seedy Kinzers' bar. What would *you* conclude?

You know, I wonder if decisions about the kingdom of God would have been *our* call instead of *God's*, would we have established the goal God did to continually *expand* the kingdom, or concluded that's just too risky. I wonder if we would have set some modest goals, and upon *reaching* them, stopped. Let's maintain. Circle the wagons and hold on to what we got, protect it.

There is a lot of Christian history to support that assessment. Over the centuries, we've fled to monasteries, to convents, to a six-story pole in the desert, to insulated communities like New Harmony in Ohio, self-contained environments that limit—or eliminate—contact with outsiders. Why is it that we rigidly control our encounters with certain people? FEAR. Fear *can* be an ally and serve wisdom. But if it locks us away in a holy prison where we hardly encounter the outside world Jesus came to save, then perhaps we should ask which master we serve: the one who died for us, or anxiety?

Jesus snapped at his detractors, "I'm not here to rescue good people. If I was, I'd spend all my time at the synagogues, at the temple, in the homes of good people like Mary and Martha. But I came to rescue the bad people; sinners. So, I eat with sinners like Matthew and the rest."

Would Jesus conclude that about His followers today? That we are here to rescue sinners? Or does he wonder if we have exchanged his vision for ours: We'll stick with the folks like us, and the rest can just go to hell?

### **Concl:**

Research explains that to cope with our stress-filled obligations crushing our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives we keep to ourselves more and more. Careers, schooling, our children's activities, club meetings and house maintenance, make us more likely to spend any nonscheduled time regrouping in front of the TV, in the hot tub, or with a good book, and less likely to be with *any* kind of people, let alone unbelievers. "Cocooning" was the 90's term for holing up in our houses.

How are you to navigate this life and add one more thing? Let me suggest you add **nothing**, instead do some assessment about your current life like Betty and I did 10 years ago. Go through 3 steps...

- Ask yourself, “In what setting do I routinely run into unbelievers?”
- Ask yourself, “Am I willing to be God’s ambassador in my schedule?”
- Begin to pray that God would help you notice unbelievers, be willing to schmooze with them, and gladly assume Jesus’ mission: to rescue sinners.