

A FRIEND OF SINNERS

We're going to begin with a clip that sets up
what we're going to talk about this morning.
It's two scenes from Seinfeld
when Elaine begins to suspect that her boyfriend
is a Christian.

Clip Seinfeld

Here's the question I hope that raises for you:
How much do you care about nonbelievers?

Some of us believe in hell;
I do because Jesus did.
Some of us may not.

But most of us believe that a life without a relationship with God
is missing something important,
something essential for a truly fulfilling life.

And the question is:
How much do you care about nonbelievers in your life?

I look at Christians and how they see nonbelievers and
they fall into three categories.

Some are judgmental and condemning.
Some are unconcerned – like Elaine's boyfriend Puddy –
he's like Elaine and he's not judgmental, but
he doesn't care enough to talk to her about spiritual matters
or share his faith with her;
his life is fine and his salvation is secure – that's all that matters.
Then there are some are committed to helping others come to faith.

And I want you to ask yourself,

which one am I?
 Condemning.
 Unconcerned.
 Committed to helping your friends come to know Christ.

Why did Jesus change the world?
 This sounds too easy.
 But it's because he loved people.

There was more to it than that, of course.
 But without that,
 nothing much would have changed.

That's why I showed the Seinfeld clip.
 Jesus loved people.
 And for him love meant
 caring about their well-being including their spiritual well-being.

As we'll see
 that doesn't mean beating people over the head with what we think they need to
 do.
 But it does mean being intentional, even sacrificial,
 in caring for them and their relationship with God.

There's a verse I have always loved.
 It describes how people reacted to Jesus
 when they listened to him speak.

Mark 12.37b: And the common people heard him gladly.

When the light of Christ came into the darkness of this world,
 what happened?
 The common people couldn't wait to be in his presence
 and hear what he was going to say next.

Can you imagine anyone saying,
 "That Christian in my office,
 I can't wait to get back to work after the weekend
 just to hear what that guy has to say."
 "My uncle Ralph, man,
 he's really big in his church,

and when we get together at Thanksgiving,
it's a real blast hearing his take on what's going on in the world.”

“My sister,
now that she's got religion and become born again,
she is such a joy to be around
and it's so much fun listening to her go on and on about God.”

Often, it's the opposite, isn't it?
The more some people get into their faith,
the more unpleasant it is to be around them.

But Jesus,
think about it –
he was more committed,
more zealous,
more holy,
more righteous, and
more intent on converting others than anyone you and I will ever know.

And, yet, what?
The common people heard him gladly.

If you've read the Gospels,
you know who was most attracted to Jesus.
Not the religious leaders or the folks who hung out in the temple all day,
but mixed-up, messed-up sinners.

Don't you think that's incredible?
One of the primary themes that characterized the message Jesus preached was,

Mark 1.15: The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News.

But there was something about how he said what he said,
that the people who had the most to feel bad about,
felt the best about being with Jesus.

And if you've read the Gospels,
you'll find that the ones that good people looked down upon and called
“sinners” felt so comfortable around Jesus

that they were always inviting him to their parties.
And he went.

Jesus who
never lowered his standards,
never winked at sin,
never changed his message –
still ordinary folks and sinners,
wanted him to be in their lives.
How do you make sense of that?

Here's how.

Jesus loved people.
Jesus liked people.
Jesus enjoyed people.

“Good, salt of the earth, Temple-going” folks.
“I ain't got no time for religion” folks.
“Mixed-up, messed up, sinning” folks.

Jesus loved them.
He loved
talking with them,
listening to them,
learning their stories,
being in their homes,
going to their parties.

And people felt it.
And over time they came to trust it.
And when he talked to them about
God and their lives and how they needed to change,
they heard him – how?
Gladly.

I go to Villa Sport
and I know a lot of people there.
Lots of our church folks go there.
And I've tried to get to know other people as well.

One woman I met started coming to The Loft.
I got to know her by mistake.
I went up to her and said,
 “Hey, how ya doing?
 You here by yourself?”

She looked at me strange
and said, “Uh, yeah.”

Then it struck me.
I had her confused with one of our church members
 who is usually there with her husband and her son.
And the first thing I ever say to her is,
 “Hey girl, you here by yourself?”

I explained that I had her confused with someone.
I apologized.
And I promised never to bother her again.

Someone told her I was a pastor.
Turns out she was looking for a church
 and she started coming to The Loft.

Next time I saw her, she said,
 “So that’s why so many people talk to you –
 because you’re a pastor.”
But then she went on.
 “I had a pastor in Fort Worth;
 he worked out at the same gym I did,
 but no one talked to him.
He was pretty up front in letting evrybody know
 that he doesn’t really like people.”

What?
Who knew that was an option for pastors?
 Not to like people.
Well – it’s not an option.

It’s not an option for pastors
And it’s not an option for you
 if you want to follow Jesus and

become more like him.
 You don't have to be an extrovert.
 You don't have to go around glad-handing folks.

But you do have to care about people.
 You have to love people.

And if you want to be like Jesus
 and you don't like people –
 well, you need to work on that.

Because that's how people change.
 That's how people usually get born into the kingdom.
 Somebody who knows Jesus
 loves them a little like the way Jesus loved people.
 Somebody who knows Jesus
 cares enough to get to
 know them,
 understand them and
 like them enough
 that they're willing to listen to what he or she has to say.

Let's look at what

LOVING PEOPLE LIKE JESUS

means:

1. BEING A FRIEND TO PEOPLE WHO NEED GOD.

Secular people don't wake up one morning and say,
 I think I'll go sit in a room of strangers,
 sing a bunch of songs I don't know,
 change my worldview, and
 ask a Savior I don't believe in
 to forgive sins I don't feel guilty about
 so I can go to a heaven I don't think exists.

If they come to church usually it's because

(1) they feel an emotional need

or

(2) they have a relational problem.

But even people who have emotional needs or relational problems often will not seek out a church because they think the people there are unreal or judgmental.

So instead, they're likely to go to a counselor, or to some community social group, or to AA, or to a bar.

That's an interesting choice.

I can either go to a bar where people are drinking and having fun or I can go to a meeting where people talk about how bad it is to drink and cry about how bad their lives have turned out.

Hmm.

Actually, just this week a guy, tough, strong man told me how much better his life is and how happy he now is that he has finally stopped drinking and drugging.

There is another reason people start going to a church.

It's even more effective than having emotional or relational issues.

Someone they know and like invites them to go.

That's the number one reason someone goes to a church for the first time.

Someone they have a relationship with extends an invitation.

Now for someone to spend time with you when they don't have to,

they have to like you.
And usually for people to like you,
they have to believe you like them.

One of my favorite titles that's given to Jesus in the New Testament
was given to him by his critics.

Matthew 11, Jesus is speaking.

Matthew 11.18-19: John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

There's no pleasing some folks.
John the Baptist lived a strict life
and they criticized him for not being human.
Jesus enjoyed being with people,
and they called him a glutton and a drunkard –
and a friend of sinners.

His critics said:

You spend time with sinners.
In fact, you're a friend of sinner.
They don't bother you or offend you or repel you.
They do their sinful stuff right in front of you,
and you enjoy spending time with them;
in fact, you enjoy **them**.

And Jesus says, "Guilty as charged."

If we are going to help people come into a relationship with God,

1. We must understand the way they think.
2. We must like them.

We must be their friend.
Because that's what a friend is –
someone who "gets" you and someone who enjoys you.

Question: Are you a friend of sinners?

Are you a friend to people who are lost from God?

Are you a friend to people who don't
believe what you believe,
act how you think they should act,
vote like you think they should vote?

I'm not asking:

Do you try to bring up Jesus in your conversations with them?
Do you try get them to see that they're unhappy because they're living wrong?
Do you try to convince them that they should believe what you believe?

You can do those things
and not be anything but a religious jerk.

I'm asking you a very simple question.

Are you a friend,
a real friend to people who don't know Jesus,
not SO you can bring them to Jesus,
but just because Jesus lives in you and he was a friend of sinners.

Here's a clip from a movie called the Big Kahuna.
It's about three men who sell industrial lubricants
who are at a trade show trying to make a big sale.

One, a younger man, is a Christian.
A real-life Bible-believing, not embarrassed to admit it Christian
who when he gets the chance to talk to the Big Kahuna with the big account,
instead of talking to him about their industrial lubricants,
talks to him about Jesus.

To the movie's credit,
it doesn't make the young Christian look judgmental or stupid,
just young and naive.
And, that's fair
because he is young and he does have a lot to learn.

We're picking up this scene in the middle of a conversation
that I don't have time to set up.
But you'll get the point.

I hope.

Clip: The Big Kahuna

To me this scene makes a really great point.
We're not called to be a marketing rep for Jesus.
We're called to be a friend to sinners.

Someone who cares about them and their dreams and their kids
and whatever they care about.
Because that's what friends do.
That's what Jesus did.
That's who he was.

And if we're a friend,
there will come a time when the person we care about
will want to know more about who we are and what we believe.

Two – LOVING PEOPLE LIKE JESUS MEANS

2. ACCEPTING PEOPLE BEFORE YOU APPROVE OF THEIR BEHAVIOR.

For some reason, many Christians find it very difficult to make the distinction between acceptance and approval.

Look with me at

Luke 15.1-2: Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him.
But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

As you probably know,
sharing a meal in the culture of Jesus was an act
that created and indicated a bond of friendship and acceptance.

And the Pharisees were scandalized
because Jesus, this supposed holy man,

was welcoming sinners BEFORE they repented of their sins.

He was accepting them just as they were –
before they changed,
even while there were many unacceptable things still in their lives.

David Seamands, now deceased,
was a pastor and a counselor,
who wrote in one of his books about a man who came to see him about a
personal matter.

The man's brother had walked out on his wife and children
after 20 years of marriage.

The two men had not spoken in a year,
but now his brother had written and asked if he might come for a visit.

Here was the man's question for Dr. Seamands.

“What if by being friendly to my brother,
I give him the idea that I approve of what he did?
I'm sorry but I can't do that.
I simply cannot lower my moral standards for anyone –
not even my brother.”

What this man and the Pharisees failed to grasp
is that you can hold the highest moral standards
and at the same time accept and love persons who have broken those
standards.

I'm sure the man's actions were devastating to his wife and his children.
And if the brother's version of the story is anywhere near correct,
the man needs to
repent before God,
ask for his wife's and his children's forgiveness, and
make some kind of amends.

But here's the point.

Do you think there was anyone in that group of sinners that Jesus ate with
who had done their wives and children wrong?
I'm sure there were.

We know for a fact there were tax collectors
 who made a living cheating the working class and the poor.

Who else?

Thieves? Probably.

Prostitutes? Probably.

Drunkards, liars and cheats?

Of course there were.

Here's what Jesus knew.

People don't change when you tell them how bad they are.

People change when you help them feel they can be better.

People don't change when you tell them that they're worthless.

People change when they're told that they're worth a second chance.

Remember the story of Zacchaeus.

Probably the most hated man in Jericho.

A tax collector who had become wealthy by cheating
 common people out of their money.

Hearing that Jesus was passing through town,

he climbed a tree so he could see over the crowd as Jesus went by.

Luke 19.5-7: When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' "

You gotta love it.

The Pharisees didn't like Jesus hanging out with all the common people.

And, here, the common folk didn't like Jesus hanging out with people they
 considered lower and worse than themselves.

What did Jesus say to Zacchaeus?

Come down, I must – what?

Not, "I must tell you how much I disapprove of you."

Not, "Before I enter your house,

I must make certain you know that I have my standards."

Not anything but,
“Yo, Zach, come on down, man.
I want to hang out with you some.”

I want to
get to know you,
share some time with you, and
see if we can become friends.

The Pharisees thought,
the people thought,
sometimes we think,
“First, make him change,
then have a relationship with him.”

But Jesus said,
“First, I’ll create a relationship with him.
Then, he’ll change.”

We think the first thing God wants sinners to do is stop sinning.
But we’re wrong.

The first thing Jesus wanted sinners to do was experience his love,
and out of that grace,
find the power to say no to sin and yes to a life of righteousness.

When does God and when should we open our hearts to people?
When they measure up,
when they repent,
when God can approve of their lives?

Jesus says there is only one time when God can accept people.
And that’s right now.

How does Zacchaeus respond?

Luke 19.8-10: But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

LOVING PEOPLE LIKE JESUS MEANS

3. LOOKING FOR THE GOOD IN THEIR LIVES.

William James is the father of American psychology and philosophy.

He came to this conclusion.

William James: The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.

Every person you meet wants to be liked.
Every person you meet wants to be appreciated.

Every person I meet
I believe wears a sign on his or her forehead that says:
"Make me feel important."

Victor Hugo who wrote *Les Misérables* said

Victor Hugo: We live more by affirmation than we live by bread.

Well, isn't it wrong somehow to try to make people feel important
just because they want to feel that way?
Or because it will make them like you back?

I'm don't try to make people feel important
because they want to feel that way
or because it will get me what I want.

I try to make people feel important
because people are important.

We live in a world that thrives on degrading and diminishing people
so that their spirits are crying out for appreciation.

And until the world quits telling people that they are nobody
 I'm not going to quit telling people that they're somebody.
 They're somebody to me and they're somebody to God.

And if you and I can't find something to appreciate, affirm and compliment
 in every person we meet,
 then it's we who have the problem.

One day a man named Philip told his friend Nathanael about Jesus.

John 1.45-46: “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip.

John tells us that Jesus knew what Nathanael had said.
 Look what Jesus does.

John 1.47: When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said, “Here is a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false.”

“Nathanael, you've got a smart mouth.”
 That's what Jesus could have said.
 “Nathanael, you've got a lot to learn.”
 That's what Jesus could have said.
 “You have such a negative, arrogant spirit,
 how do people put up with you?
 how do you put up with yourself?”
 That's what Jesus could have said.

But he didn't.
 Instead, he says,
 “Nate, you speak your mind, don't you?
 I like that.
 You don't pretend to think one thing and say something else, do you?
 I'll always know where I stand with you.
 I like that.
 I could use a man like you.”

Jesus could have condemned the negative side of Nathanael's personality.

Instead he appreciated and affirmed the good that he could find.
 And eventually, Nathanael became one of Jesus' disciples
 and carried on his message after Jesus was gone.

Peter –
 dude was all over the place.
 Up and down.
 Promising and not delivering.

Jesus told him.
 You're going to be a rock.
 I see strength in you that others don't see.
 When I'm gone, I'm counting on you to strengthen your brothers.

Zacchaeus – hated tax collector.

What did Jesus say about him?
 "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of
 Abraham."

"Zacchaeus, you forgot who you are.
 You forgot – you're one of us.
 You are a son of Abraham.
 You are a child of God.
 That's where your worth comes from,
 not from your power or your wealth.
 I see you,
 the real you.
 And it's something good."

You want to be used by God to help people change?

Then do it the way Jesus did.

Don't tell them all they're doing wrong.
 Don't tell them what they should want.
 Don't tell them how they should change.

Not at first.

Tell them who they are.
 You are made in the image of God.
 You are loved for who you are.
 You are a person with great strengths and incredible possibilities.

I see you.
 I see the real you.
 I see the good in you.

Tell them with your actions, with your time and with your words.

Mark Twain wrote

Mark Twain: Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.

Here's what people learned about God from the way Jesus
 interacted with them.

God is for people.
 God is pulling for us.
 His will for everyone is a life that is good and full.

That's what people came to believe
 when they encountered Jesus.
 They experienced his love –
 love and acceptance from the purest soul that ever lived,
 the only one who had a right to judge them.
 And then they came to believe that God loved them.

People are supposed to get from us
 that's there's somebody in this world who is
 for them,
 pulling for them,
 loving them.
 We get to do that.
 We get to be that person
 in someone else's life.
 That's what it means to be like Jesus
 and be the man we were meant to be.

Ok, I have two more points of talking,
 but I think you have one more point of listening,
 if I'm lucky.

If I had two points
 I would tell you that one of the ways Jesus loved people is
 he told them the truth they needed to hear
 even if it wasn't what they wanted to hear.
 We'll do that in another session.

But here's the last point for today.

Loving people like Jesus means

4. SUFFERING FOR OTHER PEOPLE.

Real love means sacrifice.
 At some point real love means
 giving up some part of your life so someone else can have real life.

Jesus knew this.

He wore himself out ministering to people.
 He often retreated to a quiet place,
 the Gospels tell us,
 because he was drained and he needed to recharge.

And people would find out where he was
 and chase him down
 and ask him to meet their needs.

Heal me.
 Deliver my daughter.
 Teach us,
 feed us,
 miracle us.

Mark 10.43-45: Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your

servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

That’s what real ministry is, right there.
 That’s what love is.
 You serve.
 And you give your life.
 You pour it out
 when it’s convenient and easy and
 when it’s not.

Real ministry is
 loving people when they’re hard to love,
 sticking with them when they don’t seem to make any progress, and
 not getting defensive when your motives are misunderstood.

It’s laying down your life
 and going to a cross.

But that’s what it takes
 to love and minister the way Jesus did.
 That’s what it takes to be his body in a broken world.

It takes me and you,
 being willing to suffer
 and bear burdens that are not our own
 and dying to ourselves.
 That’s what is required if we are going to become like our Master Teacher Jesus
 and become the men we were created to be.

I have a confession to make.
 A while back,
 it was the end of a long week.
 I’ve been running as fast as I could for several months
 and getting further behind.

I was at a church event one night,

and I was so looking forward to going home.

But people came up to me,
and one after another they told me about their problems
and their brilliant ideas
and their questions which seemed pretty trivial to me.
I told you this is a confession, right?

I faked it real well.
I can do that.
And sometimes that's the right thing to do.

You can't look at someone and say,
My God, man, why are you complaining about that little thing?
I have people right now who have children that are dying,
and who's spouse has been unfaithful,
and who have been out of work and are about to lose their houses.
And what you're saying is so minor,
you should be down on your knees thanking God
instead of down in the dumps,
telling me how bad you have it.

Sometimes,
you listen the best you can
and say the right word
even if it's not what you want to do
or feel like doing.

I did tell you this was a confessional,
didn't I?

As I was leaving that night,
walking right down that hall,
I heard myself say inside,
"Jesus, people can be so insufferable."

I don't know why I used that word.
But I did.
Jesus, people can be so insufferable.

But then I heard another voice.
And it was the voice of Jesus saying,
No, actually you can suffer for them.
You can listen,
 and you can love,
 and you can bear their burdens, large or small,
and you can suffer for them.

That's how
 broken people become whole and
 unloved people find grace and
 lost people come home to the Father who is waiting for them.

I did tell you this is a confessional, right?

I needed that reminder.
I don't always get it right,
 not even close.
But that's how Jesus changed the world.

He loved people.
He liked people,
He poured his life out for people.

That's what I am called to do.
And that's what you are called to do.