

I ended last week's message with a few thoughts about Chaz Bono's appearance on *Dancing with the Stars*, which premieres this Monday night. If you missed the message, check it out online at lingletownlife.org and click on the Communications Tab.

One of the things I mentioned with regard to Chaz was that I think Jesus would enjoy sitting down and having a meal with Chaz. This wouldn't be a "come to Jesus" type of meeting; you know the kind where you lay the law down; but a get to know you, 'find out more about you' encounter where Jesus does a lot of listening and absolutely no judging.

Sadly, that image of Jesus doesn't fit the cultural stereotype that many have today of the church and in particular of Christians. The reason that image of Jesus sitting with Chaz, enjoying a meal together and not judging him is so hard for some to accept is simply because that's not the image of God they've created in their own minds. But Jesus sitting with Chaz is the image of Jesus that we see so often in the Gospels. More on that in a minute.

You remember last week I spoke about how easily we create false and misleading images of God. Well one of the false images we create about God is something I mentioned during the first sermon in this series and that is that right behavior equals acceptance by God; while wrong behavior equals God withholding his love and acceptance. In other words God's love is conditioned by our behavior.

The outcome of that way of viewing God has left many Christians in a place where we find ourselves judging others and withholding love and acceptance until the person changes. And if that is the case; no wonder so few people today are drawn to the church! What we've been offering for so long is a 'grace-less' religion. But that is not the image of God that we see in our scripture lessons this morning. Instead of a grace-less religion we need to see how God by grace values relationship before rules.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning from the book of Genesis we see God's value of relationship over rules. Listen to how Andy Stanley describes it in his book, *The Grace of God*:

"When God initiated his relationship with Abram God began with a promise- a promise Abram did not deserve or ask for. This was all God's idea. The Lord didn't issue Abram a set of behaviors to adhere to. The Ten Commandments wouldn't appear for several generations. God simply asked Abram to receive God's promises and trust God.

God's relationship with humanity begins with trust, not with a list of rules; just a simple invitation: will you trust me? In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve broke that trust and plunged the world into a problem called sin. But rather than abandon all humanity to the ill effects of sin; God made a way to restore the relationship sin had broken. And the

solution God offers, what we glimpse here in God's relationship with Abram is not a list of rules but an invitation to trust God.

Trust is the building block of every relationship we have in life. With trust we can build a solid, healthy relationship. Without trust, our relationships will flounder. We'll flesh that out a little more next week.

Our other scripture lesson from this morning also involves an invitation to trust. When Jesus said to Matthew, 'Follow me;' it was an invitation to a relationship; an invitation for Matthew to trust Jesus.

Now to understand the impact of this invitation upon Matthew we need to understand that for the most part Matthew was an outcast from society; and as a Jew Matthew was despised for his work with the Romans.

So when Jesus crossed paths with Matthew and invited Matthew to follow him, it would have been something of a shock to everyone around- especially to the rule-keeping Pharisees.

Now here's an important point when it comes to how we look at other people. Jesus was willing to see Matthew first and foremost as an individual made in the image of God and worthy of love. As such Jesus was willing to get close enough to Matthew so that Matthew could experience first-hand the grace of God.

Notice something else that Jesus did. When Jesus invited Matthew to follow him; Jesus led Matthew back to Matthew's house. Jesus didn't invite him to the Temple; Jesus invited himself into Matthew's house.

What we can learn from Jesus at this point is very simple. Our first step in a relationship with someone far from God is not to invite them to church; but to live in their world so that we understand them and they understand us.

Matthew must have Tweeted that he was eating with Jesus because suddenly all the other tax-collectors and sinners began showing up. You see grace attracts people! It even attracted the rule-keeping Pharisees who must have been 'following' Matthew.

Let me stop here and ask you a question:

Do you ever come into contact with people who need to know the grace of God? People who think that God could never love them; people who think that they could never be good enough; or people who think that someday they will be good enough to earn God's love?

Of course you do, and you might even be one of them! Here's why I ask, if you rub shoulders with people who need to see and experience the love of God then you need

to be willing to become an extension of God's grace into their life. That's what Jesus did with Matthew. Jesus brought God's grace to Matthew.

And as a result of Jesus extending God's grace and love to Matthew; Matthew followed Jesus. So who is following you as you follow Jesus?

Let me tell you what I mean by that. A while back I heard someone say that everyone is being disciplined. If you think about it this way; every one of us is being influenced by or encouraged to follow someone/thing. That's all it means to be a disciple.

Right now you're being disciplined to be a follower of Jesus. But when you go home the culture will take over the role of discipler. Everything in our culture will be seeking your time, your attention, your values, and your character. (Sound like that commandment about having idols.)

So the question I asked was: who is following you as you follow Jesus? You see every one of us is called to make disciples for Jesus. So believe it or not, every relationship you have with a person is an opportunity to disciple them. (And if that is the case then you better be asking yourself; 'What am I teaching them about trusting and following Jesus?')

Now notice something important here: I didn't say it was your responsibility to convert them to Jesus, but to disciple them. Conversion is the business of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our job, if you remember what Jesus said in Matthew 28, is to go and make disciples!

This is why relationship always comes before rules in the Kingdom of God! How is anyone ever going to experience the grace of God unless they see that grace coming from those who have experienced the grace of God?

So what can you do? Well you can start by looking at whether you let rules get in the way of relationships that God wants you to use as a means for extending God's grace into people's lives. Ask yourself if there is a Chaz Bono situation that makes you avoid someone God may be placing in your life so that they can experience God's grace. If there is, confess it and ask God to remind you of the grace God has shown you!

You can also start asking yourself how you are doing at discipling others in your sphere of influence. And remember this. You are going to influence others whether you like it or not. What you say, what you do, how you act will be noticed by others. One of the greatest opportunities that any of us have to influence the life of another person on the path to faith in God begins with our own willingness to trust God. And that means being willing to live according to God's command to love God and love others. As a matter of

fact that is what we'll talk about next week- how the Ten Commandments really lead us to love God and love others.

rethinking the Ten Commandments

Week 3

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 12:1-3; Matthew 9:9-13

Dinner and Conversation

Who would you like to sit and eat dinner with? Why

Who would make an interesting dinner guest for Jesus? Why?

Grace-less Religion or Grace-filled Relationship?

How does our attitude that "right behavior equals acceptance by God; while wrong behavior equals God withholding love and acceptance," cause us to look at our relationships with other people?

How does that attitude cause people to miss the grace and love of God?

Abram and God

"Will you trust me?"

How hard is it for you to trust other people? Why?

How hard is it for you to trust God? Why?

Matthew and Jesus

"Follow me"

Do you see everyone as made in the image of God and worthy of love?

See Genesis 1:27

How does seeing someone as being made in the image of God change your ability to get close to them or love them?

How does 'grace' attract people to Jesus?

Who do you know that needs to experience the grace of God?

Who Is Following You?

“Everyone is being disciplined.”

What does that statement mean to you?

What are some of the influences on how you spend your time, what you give your attention to, what you value and how you develop your character?

Who is following you as you follow Jesus?

How good a job are you doing of trusting God and displaying grace?

Putting It Into Practice

Do I let rules get in the way of my relationships?

How am I doing at discipling others?

See Matthew 28:18-20

Next Week: What You Value You Protect

Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 5:21-22