

Taking the Initiative

The Relationship Initiative Series, February 10 & 11, 2024 | Matthew 9:9-13

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What's the right speed when approaching relationships?

People approach relationships at different speeds.

Some people come at a relationship full speed ahead.

Other people take more of a "slow and steady" kind of approach to relationships.

Sometimes people come at relationships tapping the brakes or skidding to a halt.

What's YOUR speed when approaching relationships?

According to my wife, I approach relationships quickly.

She shared a video with me contrasting extroverts and introverts at the end of the week.

The extrovert hits the end of the day and week thinking, "I've got to get out of the house and see other people and spend time with people."

The introvert is thinking, "I've exceeded my word count and would like to be home alone."

Apparently, I'm more of the extrovert, and she is more of the introvert.

Somehow in the video, the extrovert ends up meeting total strangers, getting to know them, and planning a vacation with them, and Tammi thinks that is me.

Apparently, I am a "pedal-to-the-metal" kind of person when it comes to relationships.

However, many people find relationships risky.

Meeting someone new and making small talk can feel risky.

Building a friendship, dating, getting married, having children all sound risky.

Trying to reconcile a broken relationship can definitely seem risky.

Relationships always involve risk. What, then, are we to do? Tap the brakes?

Regardless of our risk tolerance, relationships require a second skill: taking the initiative.

In order to relate to another person, we have to take our foot off the relational brakes.

We have to do something. We have to take initiative.

The Bible actually encourages us to take the initiative in relationships.

Let's look closely at an event from the life of Jesus.

We would come to the same place if we looked broadly at the theme of hospitality in the Bible.

However, this passage shows us who Jesus is.

It also shows us what Jesus did and sets a model for us.

Jesus ate with sinners.

Jesus ate with sinners in Matthew 9:9-10:

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus called Matthew to follow him.

Jesus was probably in Capernaum, his adopted home base.

Jesus approached a man here called "Matthew" who was sitting at a tax booth. This is almost certainly the man referred to as Levi elsewhere.

Matthew was likely some kind of tax collector himself. There is some discussion among scholars about whether Matthew was a tax collector on the roads leading through Capernaum or a customs collector on the boats coming into the town's port. Regardless, Matthew worked in a structure that reported to the Romans, the occupying power. He was, then, a collaborator.

Worse, tax collectors were corrupt. They had to buy their franchises and would recoup their fees and make a profit by charging more tax than was due. Tax collectors were not loved.

So, it is a surprise when Jesus, a highly regarded teacher and rabbi, walked up to Matthew's tax booth and called the tax collector to "follow me."

And it's beautiful when Matthew left his livelihood behind and followed Jesus.

Jesus went to a feast Matthew threw for his friends.

We aren't told how much time passed. The narrative gives the sense that Jesus called Matthew and that very night there was a meal.

The text is not 100% clear, but it seems likely that this meal was in Matthew's house.

The text is clear, though, that this meal was a feast. Jesus and the other guests were reclining at the table, likely on couches. This custom was usually reserved for feasts. It tells us that Matthew was joyful at being called and saying "yes" to Jesus. He was celebrating his new life.

It's also clear that Matthew invited his friends—other tax collectors and "sinners." They were all there.

Takeaway #1: Go where people are.

Jesus shows us that the name "Immanuel" is more than just a title for him.

At Christmas we read prophecies that tell us that Jesus is "Immanuel" or "God with us."

When we say that Jesus is "Immanuel" or "God with us," we mean that the Son of God set aside the privileges of heaven, took on human flesh, and came to live among us.

But we find here that Jesus being "Immanuel" or "God with us" is about far more than just his birth. Here we find Jesus going where his people are. He goes to a tax booth and to a dinner filled with the outcasts of society.

Here we find Jesus taking the initiative toward us. We learn something about who Jesus is, we learn something about what Jesus does, and we learn something about what Jesus expects us to do. He expects us to go where people are.

We can go where people are in big and bold ways, like going as a missionary to a foreign land where the people do not have access to the Gospel.

We can go where people are in other big ways by crossing divides that separate groups of people right here at home to build relationships and open doors for the Gospel.

But when it comes to relationships, we can take the initiative to go where people are in small ways, like crossing the room to meet someone we don't know and make them feel welcome.

We can go where people are in small ways, like expressing interest in another person's story when we find ourselves making small talk with someone new.

In big ways and in small ways, Jesus takes the initiative to go where people are, and he wants us to do the same thing. But that raised a question in Capernaum, and it raises a question for us:

Who is worthy of hospitality?

In Matthew 9:11, the Pharisees raise the question of who is worthy of hospitality:

And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

The Pharisees ask Jesus' disciples why their teacher is eating with sinners. What do they mean?

The Pharisees studied the Old Testament Law, the teachings of the rabbis, and the traditions associated with the Law. They worked hard to follow these traditions to the letter of the Law.

The Pharisees also separated themselves from those who didn't know and observe the traditions and customs to the degree that they did.

But that meant separating themselves to some degree from the ordinary, everyday people around them. Regular people did not follow the Law with the strictness of the Pharisees. So, by default, the Pharisees regarded ordinary people as sinners. They wouldn't eat with such everyday sinners.

Jesus was likely going one step further. Tax collectors and people like them were not just everyday sinners. Tax collectors and people who hung around with them were unclean on a much higher level. They were as unclean as a leper, and if a tax collector entered a house, he would make the house itself unclean.¹

The Pharisees thought this was a problem, so they asked Jesus' disciples why he was doing it.

The Pharisees have a point. The Bible warns us about being too close to sinful people.

Look at what **Psalm 1:1** says:

***Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers ...***

Psalm 1:1 is warning us to not make a habit of spending time with sinners.

Why? There is always a risk that sinful people will lead us into temptation. There is always a risk, when we are with sinful people, that their ways will rub off on us, and we don't want that.

However, here we find Jesus, the light of the world, bringing light to dark places.

Jesus wants us to do the same thing. He wants us to take the light of the world to dark places. He wants us to help people who are far from God come closer to God.

¹ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 292.

So, there is another lesson Jesus wants us to learn:

Takeaway #2: Risk something for relationships.

We can always find a reason to avoid taking the initiative with people.

If we think like Pharisees, we will always find reasons to avoid people.

We will say, "I might get embarrassed, I might get hurt, or I might hurt someone."

The alternative is to tap the brakes and not do anything.

That may be the Pharisee's perspective, but that's not Jesus' way. Jesus wants us to take the initiative to build relationships (and to share the Gospel), even though there is risk involved.

Jesus is about to turn that discussion upside down completely.

Jesus calls sinners to the table.

Jesus set the record straight in Matthew 9:12-13:

But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus tells us that he is the Great Physician.

Somehow Jesus heard what the Pharisees asked the disciples and gave a proverb in response.

This proverb involves a physician. It states that a well person has no need (or at least no perceived need) of a doctor. However, a sick person needs the help of a doctor and knows that he/she needs the help of a doctor.

Jesus implicitly presents himself as the doctor. He has spiritual help and medicine available. The person who is spiritually sick obviously needs the help of a spiritual doctor.

In this case, the sinners and tax collectors are those who are spiritually sick. They need the doctor, so Jesus, the Great Physician, goes to them to offer spiritual healing, forgiveness, new life, and eternal life. Why is Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors? Because Jesus, the Great Physician, goes where he is needed, and the sinners and tax collectors need him.

Jesus also points out that the Pharisees are wrong about their own spiritual condition.

In his proverb about physicians Jesus says that the well have no need of a physician.

There's irony involved. The Pharisees think they are well and have no need of a doctor.

Later Jesus says that he comes to call sinners, not the righteous, to himself and salvation.

Again, there is irony involved. The Pharisees think they are righteous!

The Pharisees think they are spiritually well and righteous, but that's not the reality.

The New Testament argues that no one is righteous. Paul writes in **Romans 3:10-12:**

... as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

***no one does good,
not even one."***

True righteousness comes of being filled with the very being of God through faith in Jesus. **Romans 5:19** says:

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

So, the Pharisees are entirely wrong in how they view themselves and everyone around them! They are not righteous; they are sinners too. They are not well; they are as sick as anyone.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees pointedly.

Jesus said in Matthew 13, "Go and learn what this means ..." Then Jesus quotes from the Old Testament. What Jesus tells the Pharisees is to go and do their homework.

He wants them to learn a very basic lesson. Jesus quoted **Hosea 6:6**:

***"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."***

In Hosea 6, God is complaining through the prophets that people's love is fickle and fading.

They keep leaning on rituals, hoping that the rituals will be enough. God wants more.

Jesus is saying that the Pharisees are still doing that same thing in their day.

Instead of empty rituals, God wants (desires) mercy.

Mercy is a basic character trait of God. The word "mercy" frequently translates the Old Testament concept of "chesed" or "steadfast love." The term "chesed" or "steadfast love" is used over and over again to describe God.

Who is God? God is the one who is merciful, gracious, and abounding in steadfast love.

That's why he is taking the initiative in coming to his people, even the sinners.

The Pharisees don't get this. They don't get God.

Jesus tells them to go back and study their Bibles until they do understand God.

Again, this leads to something for us to do:

Takeaway #3: Offer a relationship with yourself and with Jesus.

Jesus said that he—in mercy, chesed, and steadfast love—has come to call sinners.

He came to call sinners to faith, to himself, to relationship with him, to the table with him.

Jesus is offering a relationship to sinners and to all who will come to him.

That's wonderfully Good News because that means that Jesus—in mercy, chesed, and steadfast love—has come to us. He has called us to faith, to himself, to a relationship with him, to the table with him, and it has changed our lives now and forever.

If Jesus has done that for us, then how can we not do the same for others?

How can we not be the hospitality-offering, relationship-building, life-and-Gospel-sharing, initiative-takers that Jesus wants us to be?

Take the initiative.

HOW can you take the initiative in a relationship this week?

Perhaps there is someone you have the opportunity to meet.
There may be a phone call you need to make or plans you need to initiate.
There may be a conversation you need to have and questions you need to ask.
There may be someone who needs to hear the words "I love you" from you.
There may be Gospel you need to share or a relationship you need to try to reconcile.
How can you take the initiative in a relationship this week?

Circumstances and God prompted me to "take the initiative" when I was a student-ministry intern.

I was a junior in college and interned in a large student ministry.
We had weekly events and planned multiple trips during the summer.
When I arrived, there were three new students in the program. They had been part of a gang.
I knew that if I didn't make them my friends, the summer might be difficult.
So, I took the initiative and built a relationship with them.
It turned out that they were great young men with deep thoughts and big hearts.
They had a lot of pain in their lives, too.
As the summer wore on and I got to know them, there was a morning when I was doing my quiet time that, in prayer, I heard God saying to me, "Call the guys in today and ask them if they will accept Jesus." I was shocked. I didn't hear from God very often in that way.
But I just did exactly what God told me to do. I called the guys and asked them to come in and spend some time with me. They did!
I shared my faith story. I shared God's Story. I asked them if they wanted to accept Jesus.
Miraculously, they all three said "yes," then prayed and accepted Christ.
I don't always get this right. I think I probably get it wrong more often than I get it right. But I took the initiative in getting to know them, in building a relationship with them, and in having a conversation with them. God did the rest! And it was beautiful.

Jesus showed us what to do.

Jesus took the initiative and came to us.
He gave us a pattern to follow, and now he wants us to follow it.

More importantly, Jesus showed us who he is.

Jesus is the Great Physician who comes to all who need him.
Jesus is the Faithful One who comes to call sinners home to him.
Jesus takes the initiative with sinners. We praise him because that's who he is.
Jesus takes the initiative with us. And we are so deeply grateful that he does.
Let's imitate our Savior and take the initiative with people around us.