

Us Is Them”

Matthew 9:9-13

Series: *DIFFERENT Week 6. Don't Curse, Bless*

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The Woodside Church

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Okay, I need to confess. This time last year, I, your pastor, committed heresy. I agreed to pray for the Dallas Cowboys. Now before you cover me with tar and Eagle feathers, you need to know I never pray for any sports teams – even my team Michigan – and I did it for a worthy cause. I asked one of our members to make a video for the Church Has Left the Building. To protect his anonymity we'll call him Jimmy Bomber. He agreed to make the video on the condition I pray for his beloved team, the Cowboys, in the upcoming game against the Eagles on November 19, 2017. Jimmy and his fellow Cowboys pal, we'll call him Brian Bozo, were texting me during the Sunday night game to make sure I kept my promise.

Jimmy: “Right about now you should be on bended knees, bowing repeatedly in a SW direction towards Texas, praying for God’s Team. Make it happen Doug ☺”

Doug: “Our father who art in Dallas. Cowboys be thy name...”

The first quarter was close. When I stopped praying to get a soda, the Eagles scored a touchdown. But the Cowboys kept up with two field goals

Doug: “How am I doing so far?”

Jimmy: “Not too bad. We think you can do a tad better though. We have faith in you. But you know you have to watch the entire game.”

Doug: “Can I watch with my eyes closed? After all that’s the way I pray.”

By half-time the Cowboys were up 9 to 7. I thought my work was done but Jimmy texted,

Jimmy: “Put the coffee on. You’re not going to bed.”

In the third quarter the Eagles started pulling ahead 23 to 9.

Jimmy: “You’re losing it Doug. Step up like the man of God I know you are!”
Early in the fourth quarter the Eagles scored another touchdown.

Doug: “Maybe it’s time to release me from my contract.”

Jimmy: “Don’t give up. You’re better than that Doug.”

Doug: “It’s your funeral man.”

Brian: “Doug should have prayed more, texted less.”

Doug: “What’s that? I was deep in prayer.”

In the end the Eagles beat the Cowboys 37 to 9. In the post-game debate Jimmy texted:

Jimmy: “Should we pray for Michigan Brian and just hope we’re better at it than Doug?”

Brian: “Pray to win or lose?”

Doug: “Pray whatever you like. Any time I can get you guys to pray it’s a win.”

Brian: “Hope Linda Marr doesn’t find out you prayed for Dallas.”

Doug: “I told you guys I’d pray for Dallas. I didn’t tell you I was praying for their salvation.”

Rivalries. They can be fun. They can also turn fierce. Teasing turns to trash talking and threats. Curses fly. Tempers flare. Conflict is part of life. You almost can’t go through a day without a disagreement. Some are small like which way to carve a pumpkin and some are big like who gets custody of the kids, why is your supervisor so demanding, why are your friends not talking to you, why do you get into so many arguments with a member of your family?

Rivalries are all around you. I’m sure the teasing and trash talk will escalate in anticipation of the Eagles-Dallas game next Sunday. We’ve been enduring a tsunami of negative ads between Democrats and Republicans as we approach this Tuesday’s election. Worst of all, we were horrified last weekend when a White supremacist entered the Tree of Life synagogue, called for the death of all Jews and then fired four weapons killing eleven worshipers and wounding seven. It’s the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the United States. This in a week when fifteen pipe bombs were mailed to prominent politicians and an armed man killed two people after failing to enter an African-American church in Kentucky.

These conflicts are all built on one of the most basic human divisions: Us and Them. We put people in groups and label them so we can separate from them and prove we are superior to them. We dis them, dismiss them. Sometimes we try to destroy them. There are powerful forces all around us who encourage this thinking. Just look at the negative TV ads, mailings, lawn signs, robocalls, and internet postings which are trying to get you to vote for their candidate. Each party proclaims their person fights for “us” against “them.”

You may even think this message series, DIFFERENT, is another attempt to divide us from them. If followers of Jesus are different than the world, one might conclude we are wiser, holier, better than them. We are not. That’s not the way we are different. God calls us to be different by not creating divisions. Our theme for this week is “Don’t Curse. Bless.” Paul tells us,

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. (Romans 12:14)
As we’ve seen from the very beginning of this series, there are two extremes to avoid – to be the same as the world or to separate from the world. God calls us to do a third option: Bless the world – even those who persecute you. According to Jesus there is no Us and Them. **Us is**

Them. There is no division, no separation. We are all humans in need of healing. We are all sinners in need of a Savior. Jesus drives this point home in His favorite way: by eating dinner.

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," He told him, and Matthew got up and followed Him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (Matthew 9:9-11)

Matthew is working in his toll booth when Jesus walks by and says two life-changing words: "Follow Me." Tax collectors in Jesus' day are the scum of the earth. These Jews paid their Roman overlords for the right to collect taxes from fellow Jews and to keep whatever extra they can gouge from their neighbors. What's more the taxes do not pay for schools or public works. They fuel Roman persecution. Please don't think tax collectors are misunderstood victims of prejudice. Their wealth and power come from serving as a crucial cog in a repressive system. No wonder fellow Jews label them as collaborators and traitors. They sold out their own people.

You need to understand this to see what a shocker it is for Jesus to invite Matthew, a hated tax collector, to be his disciple. Then Jesus makes it worse by going to Matthew's house to eat. Who is on the guest list with Jesus? More tax collectors and a group called "sinners" – people who continually break God's Law. This includes murders, adulterers, unbelievers and thieves. Last week I walked down our Preschool hallway and saw this on the wall: "I'm going to be a bank robber." I thought this was the child's dream career. It was actually a Halloween costume. Stop for a moment and picture this dinner party: Jesus, the pure sinless Son of God, is eating with the most despised, hated, heretical people in Palestine.

What's wrong with eating? Today, we scarf down fast food while driving at 65 mph. Family dinners are disappearing. Few people have someone over for dinner. Eating in the Middle East is a sacred ritual. When Lisa and I were in the country of Jordan, we had lunch at a restaurant with a magnificent view of 1st century Roman ruins. We Americans were so anxious to start the tour several of our group didn't stay for the last course. Suddenly there was loud shouting in Arabic from the waiters. They wanted to know why we were leaving before the meal was over. We were ruining their sacred ritual just to see some ruins. Why is eating sacred? A meal is a sign of acceptance. By eating, you affirm the person's worth, you demonstrate your love. Jesus shows his acceptance of Matthew and his despised friends by eating with them.

The other group in this story is the Pharisees. And just as we may be too easy on the tax collectors, we are often too hard on the Pharisees. After all, they are highly devoted to God, deeply immersed in God's Word, faithfully obedient to God's Law. They pray, worship, fast and tithe. They walk their talk. So why are they offended by Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners? In their view, believers must avoid sinners or they will be infected by sin and become unclean. To be holy, one must separate from sinners. In fact the name Pharisee means "separate." To eat with them is to agree with them, to be one of them. So they ask Jesus' disciples, "Why does your rabbi eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matthew 9:12-13)

Don't misunderstand what Jesus means. He is not saying the Pharisees are healthy and righteous and the tax collectors are sick sinners. We are all sinners and we all need God's grace to be righteous. I think Jesus is using a little sarcasm here. We should put the word righteous in quotes. In other words, Jesus did not come to call the "self-righteous" but the sinners. Self-righteous people, think they can be perfect on their own power. They can do it themselves. Sinners know they need God just as a sick person needs a doctor. That's why they are open to Jesus and invite him to dinner. Yet there's a deeper point here. When Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6), he means the Pharisees have missed the whole point of following God. The Lord doesn't care about legalistic religion. He wants loving relationships. God doesn't care about correct sacrifices. He wants compassionate sharing. The Lord doesn't want us to always hang out in the holy huddle at church. He sends us out to love people who are different than us, people who are hurting, people who are hungry for God. Sharing a meal is one of the best ways to do this.

Eating is a crucial way Jesus blesses people. To live like Jesus and bless the world, we need to eat with people where we live and work. A meal levels the playing field. We are all the same around a table. A meal shows acceptance. A meal helps us build friendships. A meal removes our judgments and prejudices. A meal proves Us is Them. Imagine what might happen if every follower of Jesus at Woodside started regularly eating with neighbors, co-workers, friends who don't know Jesus? If we want to bless the world, we need to eat with the world.

It doesn't have to be a meal. Have coffee with someone. I am enjoying my Monday mornings in the coffee shop. The day after I mentioned this in a sermon someone texted me:

Good morning, Doug. I'm looking for you at Starbucks this morning and I don't see you. I suppose it's your day off.

I seem to get a lot of abuse from texts. I wasn't slacking. I was at Java Jim's. And God has arranged some wonderful divine appointments for me. Another Woodsider sent me this note:

I think the Starbucks café ministry is a great idea. Just last week I met with an old church friend for lunch and we were talking about passages in the Bible and a man at the next table started up a conversation with us. He asked to visit my old church!!

So invite someone for coffee, a donut, lunch or dinner. Here are few tips from Jesus.

Eat With Someone Different Than You. The tax collectors and sinners couldn't have been more different than Jesus. Yet He enjoyed eating and getting to know them. Everyone else shunned them. Not Jesus. Invite someone from a different background than you, a different religion, a different political party, a different lifestyle. The more time you spend with them, the more the prejudices and labels will disappear. You don't have to agree with people to be friends.

Go On Their Turf. Jesus didn't invite Matthew to a synagogue meeting. He accepted Matthew's invitation to his house. Spend time in their world, where they are comfortable.

Get to Know Your Neighbors. One of the greatest obstacles is we don't really know our neighbors. In some cases we don't even know their names. A few years ago I gave out this

practical little exercise. On the back of your bulletin I want you to draw 9 boxes. Put your name in the center box. Do you know the names of people in the houses across the street, on either side of you and on the other side of your backyard fence? You can use this for your apartment building, your condo, your cubicle at work or desk at school. If you don't know their names, start by finding this out. Now don't be a stalker. If you see a neighbor raking leaves or walking the dog, take a moment to introduce yourself and find out his or her name. Then, try to invite each family over for a meal, a cookout, or have them all over at a block party. Why? Jesus said the second greatest commandment is "Love your neighbor as yourself." How can we love our neighbors if we don't spend time with them, eat with them, talk to them, or even know their names? Let me add there is no agenda to these meals. You are just getting together to get to know each other. You are simply making friends by offering the gift of a meal.

Ask the Help of a Fellow Believer. Jesus ate with Matthew's friends. What if your Growth Group had a BBQ or party or dinner and everyone invited neighbors, co-workers, and friends? No Bible study, just hanging out, eating and talking? That could be someone's first taste of your group, of this church, of God! I know this may feel difficult and uncomfortable. But I believe it's worth pushing through our excuses, getting out of our comfort zones, and discovering how God wants to bless others. Please, don't forget what's at stake here: Helping people receive the love and grace of God. You'll be able to touch more lives by having folks at your table.

Start With Small Steps. You can bless people every moment of every day. Bless the person who cuts you off in traffic. Bless a person by letting them go in front of you in line at the grocery store. Bless your server at a restaurant with a bigger tip. Then go up a step by eating a meal with someone, doing a favor for someone, lending a hand to someone. Next step: Listen to someone who is lonely. Bless someone who is difficult to work with. Forgive someone, ask forgiveness and restore a relationship. With enough practice and the power of the Holy Spirit, you will eventually be able to bless those who persecute you.

That's what they did. It was a Wednesday night. Twelve church members gathered for a Bible study. They welcomed a thirteenth, a newcomer. He listened for about an hour to the discussion. They politely welcomed his disagreements. When they bowed their heads to pray, Dylan Roof pulled from his fanny pack a gun. The 21-year-old white supremacist killed nine members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church including the pastor Clementa Pinckney. The horrific shooting ignited a debate across the South about the display of the Confederate flag. What did not receive as much news attention were the statements made by the grieving family members at the bond hearing for Roof. Peggy Noonan writes

They spoke of mercy. They offered forgiveness. They invited the suspect, who was linked in by video from jail, to please look for God. There was no rage, no accusation—just broken hearts undefended and presented for the world to see. They sobbed as they spoke.

"I just wanted everybody to know I forgive you," said the daughter of Ethel Lance, killed in the shooting. "You took something very precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you." She asked that

God have mercy on the shooter's soul. "You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. May God forgive you. And I forgive you."

A family member of Anthony Thompson said he forgave the shooter. "I forgive you and my family forgives you, but we would like you to take this opportunity to repent . . . confess, give your life to the one who matters the most, Christ, so that He can change it—can change your ways no matter what happens to you, and you will be OK. Do that and you will be better."

The mother of Tywanza Sanders, also killed, told the shooter: "We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms," she said. "Every fiber in my body hurts, and I will never be the same. . . . Tywanza was my hero. May God have mercy on you."

The granddaughter of Daniel Simmons Sr., also killed Wednesday, said, "Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof—everyone's plea for your soul is proof that they lived in love and their legacies will live in love. So, hate won't win."¹

They endured the greatest sacrifice. And they gave mercy.

¹ Peggy Noonan, *A Bow to Charleston*, Jun 19, 2015