



Friend of Sinners
Part 4 – If God So Loved the World...So Will I
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My assignment is to finish this series called *Friend of Sinners*. It's a great title and it's kind of intriguing. Adam pointed out on Week One... Which he did a great job. He pointed out on Week One that we all tend to think, when we see that title, that we are the friend to the sinners, when the truth of the matter is that we are the sinner and Jesus is the friend. And he has befriended us. He is the friend of sinners. He was attacked for that all the time. Then he wants to befriend other sinners through us.

There's a story that Jesus told called *The Parable of Good Samaritan*. You know that story. Jesus tells this story about this man who was on his way, from Jerusalem to Jericho, down this road that goes through The Valley of the Shadow of Death. Thieves are there and they attack and rob and steal. This guy was beaten and robbed and left for dead. In this story of Jesus, the priest goes to the other side of the road. The problem with our context is we envision an eight-lane highway. That road was about as wide as this little stairwell. So, when Jesus said the priest went to the other side, he was making a joke. It was humor in the day.

Basically, what he was saying is this priest stepped over this guy who was left to die. And then here comes the Levite and basically what the religious people could not deliver, the friend delivered, the neighbor in Jesus' story. Remember the context of this whole story was the question, "What do you say is the greatest commandment?" Some of the Rabbis in that day would say "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and cleanliness." "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and the temple." "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor." There were all kinds of debates about it and Jesus was taking a stand that neighbor is the second. And what the "religious" people could not deliver to this one who was beaten, robbed, and left, one did deliver.

You think the point of the story is that we're supposed to be good neighbors. No, the point of the story is that Jesus is the neighbor. It says he healed all of his wounds. Who is it that does that? Jesus. It says that he made a deposit and said this deposit is going to be taken care of. Jesus left the Holy Spirit as a deposit for his church, the bride of Christ. He said, "I will come back again and if there is anything else to take care of, I will take care of it." The whole point is that Jesus is the one who neighbors and he wants to neighbor through you and me.

The title of my message today is *If God so Loved the World... So will I*. What's interesting is that when Jesus began his ministry and the gospels and he started calling and picking teams... He's picking players to be on his team and the 12 that were going to be in his tribe. He says to the first four of those guys,

"I'm going to do something with you. I'm going to make you something." If I were to quiz you today and say, "Hey, fill in the blank... If Jesus were going to say to you, I will make you _____, what would he say? *From the congregation:* "Fishers of men." Yeah, that's exactly right. You kind of cheated and you know the story. But if you weren't around church at all, you probably wouldn't guess that one. I don't think they would have guessed that one. What they probably would have guessed is "more disciplined," "more pure," "He's going to help me get my act together." "I'm not going to lose my temper as much because he's around," etc., etc. But exactly what Jesus said is, "I'm going to make you fisher of men." To which I think they thought, *I didn't sign up for that! I just want to follow a Rabbi. I just want to be picked on somebody's team. We've been overlooked; nobody picked us. We're kind of ageing out of this whole picking thing. I just wanted to be on somebody's team.*

At the end of the story, you get through Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts and, sure enough, these guys became fishers of men. That is, they went out and told others about Jesus. And 2,000 years later we're all gathered, grateful that they decided that Jesus is not something that you keep quiet about, but Jesus is something you go public with and that we are supposed to talk about our faith. And they believed Jesus was something you talk about and we have to talk about it. Why? Because Christianity is not intuitive. Christianity is not based on some sort of an intellectual arrival. Christianity is based on an historical figure and an historical event: The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The only way for someone to know what happened in history is for us to talk about it.

Before I launch into this today, if you are gathered here today or you're in the chapel or you're watching online, we're so glad that you're with us today. If you're here and you're not a believer and you don't believe yet, you wouldn't consider yourself a Christian yet, you would consider yourself an observer or maybe you're kicking the tires or your checking this whole thing out, we're so thrilled that you're here; we built the church for you.

But the second thing that I want you to understand is what's incredibly important about why we talk about Jesus and there are two reasons. 1) Our master told us to because he's the friend of sinners. He was a friend to us as sinners and then he wants to be a friend to other sinners through us. He told us to do it. 2) What happened to us on the inside is so extraordinary. We're thrilled with what has happened on the inside and the only way for you to know about it is for us to talk about it.

The reason we freeze up sometimes when we're talking to you about it... I'll just let you in on our little huddle over here for minute. The reason we get so awkward with it at times, the reason we stumble over our words at times has nothing to do with the fact that we're not excited about it. It has nothing to do with the fact that we don't believe it. We believe it and we're excited about it. The truth is that some of us in this tribe are just coming around to the fact that this is something that's not private, but is actually very public, and we're nervous about it because Jesus loves you and we don't want to screw it up and we don't want to lose you as a friend; we want to love you through the process. And if we don't talk about it, you'll never know. And if we don't talk about it, you won't know what happened.

Turn in your Bibles, if you brought one today, over to 2 Kings which is a way Old Testament book. I call this passage in 2 Kings... I found it this week when Ted gave me the assignment for this. It's a message we did a long time ago, based on a book by a preacher in Atlanta. I call the story *The Great Commission*

of the Old Testament. The Great Commission, as you know, is the marching orders from Jesus before he left. You find The Great Commission in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. The first five books of the New Testament contained The Great Commission, but The Great Commission predates the New Testament. It goes all the way back into the Old Testament as you'll see today.

I want to warn you that parts of this story are a little bit gross or grotesque. It takes place around 850 BC. This context is about 50 years earlier in 900 BC. The king was so bad... Most of the kings were really bad in that day. But the king of that day was the son of King Ahab and Jezebel. You've heard those names before. They're not great to be in your genealogy. This king was not a good king; he was a bad king and he was such a bad king that the kingdom split into two underneath his reign and his leadership.

The northern kingdom became known as Israel and the capitol was Samaria. The southern kingdom became known as Judah and the capitol was Jerusalem. This is the context in where this is playing out. Most of the kings were really bad kings. They worshipped idols and they encouraged other people to worship idols. The story I'm going to read today takes place during the reign of one of those kings named Jehoram. Jehoram was the king of the northern kingdom, Israel.

Jehoram was such a bad king that God told the man of God, the Prophet Elijah, to go prophecy to him, "You are so bad and you are so wicked that I am going to bring your enemies and they are going to destroy your city." The king heard that and said, "I don't believe that; I don't think that's going to happen." Sure enough, that's exactly what happened. The Aramean army, the enemy army comes, surrounds the capital city of Samaria and starts attacking the city. They put up siege walls around it and wouldn't let anybody in or anybody out. It's part of the warfare tactics of the day. You built a wall around the city and you didn't let anybody come or go.

When you don't let anybody come or go, there's no food and there's no water and eventually you run out of food and you run out of water. Things get so bad on the inside you have to come out and they take you out when you come out. They would taunt them with food and water on the outside and have parties, trying to lure them out of the city. That's what's going on.

Now, when you don't let anybody go in or out, when you run out of food, eventually, the situation gets very, very desperate. In that day, according to this book of the Bible, donkey heads were the best thing to eat. I don't know if you've ever eaten a donkey head. Y'all are a little redneck here in Branson; I don't know if you've eaten a donkey head or not, but if you couldn't afford donkey head, you went with dove dung. The truth is if you couldn't afford either of those, you ate people, dead people. You've heard the phrase "I see dead people." They ate dead people, and it was bad, and it was getting really, really bad. Cannibalism is playing out; they're eating people.

And you're worried what's in the meat of a McRib. They're back by the way. I don't know if you saw the commercial, but they're back. I can't figure out how they keep coming back. Actually, I googled it and on Google... I don't know if this is true or not, but on Google, I pulled it up and it said they found, in the McRib, trace elements, the very same trace elements that are found in an exercise mat. To which those of you who eat McRibs are like what??? is an exercise mat.

If you think the Bible is not interesting, you should read it. But the focus of our story is right outside of the city gate; it's not even in the city. There are four lepers. And these four lepers are banned from the city; they're not allowed to come in. They are kind of hung between the enemy and the ones that are being attacked. You can just imagine that if there is so little food in the city, how little, little, little food there is for the lepers who have been kicked outside the city. So, they're looking at their options, these four lepers. That's where we pick up in the story.

3 Now there were four men with leprosy at the entrance of the city gate. They said to each other, "Why stay here until we die? 4 If we say, 'We'll go into the city'—the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let's go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die."

This is a bad scenario, right? They've got three really bad options. The first option is we stay here; there's no food, we'll starve and we'll die. Or we can try to get in to our group and our tribe, but there's no food in there, we'll die. Or we can go over to the enemy, they'll probably kill us, and we'll die, but maybe not. So, they are weighing their options, right? They're flipping a coin or drawing straws or do paper, rock, leprosy. They're doing something to try to figure this whole thing out and they decide what they're going to do is take the best of the three really bad options. They're going to go over to the camp of their enemy and surrender.

5 At dusk they got up and went to the camp of the Arameans. When they reached the edge of the camp, no one was there, 6 for the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army, so that they said to one another, "Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite and Egyptian kings to attack us!" 7 So they got up and fled in the dusk and abandoned their tents and their horses and donkeys. They left the camp as it was and ran for their lives.

Here's what's going on. God is trying to get the king's attention. He does not want to kill the king and he does not want to destroy the city; he just wants shake things up a bit so they will turn back to him and his ways. And when he had sufficiently shaken them up enough, he sent a wind or a storm or a youth group or something to the opposing army and they heard all this noise and they thought something was happening. They thought God had intervened, and the king had hired the Egyptians to come and destroy them and they dropped everything. So, there are fires left with stew on them and horses are tethered up and donkeys are tethered up and camel are tethered up and they've just run away. They panicked and they left everything. That's the context to which these four lepers walk into the enemy camp.

They're walking in with their hands up, "We surrender; don't shoot." Then they look around at all the food and the stuff that's left. They're like, "This is amazing; we're actually going to eat. We should go tell all the people. Nah... They've got donkey head and dove dung." They're just having a party. They are wreaking havoc all night long. The next several verses make it sound like a freshman frat party.

8 The men who had leprosy reached the edge of the camp, entered one of the tents and ate and drank. Then they took silver, gold and clothes, and went off and hid them. They returned and entered another tent and took some things from it and hid them also.

It was just crazy. They went from famine to feast. I don't know if you've ever been to Alaska when the salmon are going, and the bears are sitting on the side of the river. The bears just grab a big fish, take one bite and throw it back. Why? Because there are 10 million fish in the river. This is the way this is playing out. They're just grabbing stuff, taking a bite of this and a bite of that. "Hey, look what I found!" Then they would take it out and dig a hole in the desert and bury it so they could come back and get it later. Then they would go to another tent and "Look what I found." And this is just going on all night long. They are partying, and eventually all the alcohol wears off. They are bloated and they can't eat another thing. In that moment, it occurs to them. We've hidden more treasure than we could possibly spend in our lifetimes. We're eating and we're drinking and we're being merry. But the people... The people; yeah, they weren't kind to us and yes, they kicked us out and the banned us from the city, but they're dying, and this isn't the right thing to do. So, finally, they come to their senses.

9 Then they said to each other, "What we're doing is not right." Here's what's interesting. Even before I read it, you thought it, didn't you? You thought if this story ends with these four guys partying and living it up, and all the other boys and girls and men and women are dying, this is not a good story and it is not a good ending.

"This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight..." The sun is about to come up; they've been doing this all night long. ***"...punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace."*** They had just made the trek out there a few hours before, spent all evening and most of the night partying and now they are on their way back to their city and to their people filled with disaster and devastation and donkey head and dove dung. They are going back to the people that left them outside of the city to starve. The Bible says they get to the city gates, which are locked up and shut. It's probably 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning and the sun is about to come up.

10 So they went and called out to the city gatekeepers and told them, "We went into the Aramean camp and no one was there—not a sound of anyone—only tethered horses and donkeys, and the tents left just as they were." ***11 The gatekeepers shouted the news, and it was reported within the palace.***

12 The king got up in the night and said to his officers, "I will tell you what the Arameans have done to us. They know we are starving; so they have left the camp to hide in the countryside, thinking, 'They will surely come out, and then we will take them alive and get into the city.'" So, the king is not your average bear; he's smart. He thinks this is a trick. "Don't listen to these guys."

13 One of his officers answered, "Have some men take five of the horses that are left in the city. Their plight will be like that of all the Israelites left here—yes, they will only be like all these Israelites who are doomed. So let us send them to find out what happened." So, one of the smart guys, one of the officers says, "Sir, humbly, can I object to your plan? Is your suggestion that we stay here where there is no food and there is no water. If we stay here, we're all going to die. So, let's take five horses that are left, that we haven't eaten yet, and five soldiers, and let's send them out to find out if this is the truth. If they are killed, they die. They were going to die anyway, but if it is true then they can come back and tell us that it is truth. We're all doomed to die anyway. They king said okay go.

14 So they selected two chariots with their horses, and the king sent them after the Aramean army. He commanded the drivers, "Go and find out what has happened." 15 They followed them as far as the Jordan, and they found the whole road strewn with the clothing and equipment the Arameans had thrown away in their headlong flight. So the messengers returned and reported to the king. 16 Then the people went out and plundered the camp of the Arameans. So a seah of the finest flour sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley sold for a shekel, as the Lord had said.

In other words, God had prophesied. You have to back up in the story to before where I started reading. Elijah the Prophet had been told by God. "You tell the people by this time tomorrow they whole economy is going to change." Where you would pay two years wages for a donkey head today, tomorrow you will pay pennies for a bag of flour. They didn't believe that. They thought there was no way that would happen. But God said it, and sure enough, that's what's playing out. And it's such an interesting story, isn't it?

The parallel is almost so obvious that I don't even need to point it out, but I will. To us, the audience, three thousand years later, what they should do, the right thing to do is so obvious to us. We see it like we're reading a children's book, right? We know exactly what they should do and what the right thing is in that situation. I wonder if all of the glory of heaven is watching us in 2019 and to them it is so obvious what the right thing for us to do is with the riches we've been given in the gospel of Jesus.

You remember, we're a lot like those lepers. You remember what it was like before you came to know Jesus. There was a hunger and there was a thirst and there was purposelessness and an emptiness and there was a longing that needed to be filled. You were weighing your options. *Do I talk to this Jesus guy at work? Maybe I go try church. Maybe a buy a ticket to Sight and Sound Theater and see if there is something. My desperation is greater than all of my fear of embarrassment. I need help.*

Through the process, you met Jesus, and you found a Savior. And you found grace and not just grace, but amazing grace. And you found a relationship with him. And slowly – not instantly, but slowly – things began to change and the whole direction of your life began to change, and you were watching something play out that is incredible in your life. You remember that? It was more than just a religious decision. Your whole life has taken on a new direction now and the temptation... Church, hear me. The temptation is always to bask in the goodness of God, in the amazing grace, and the reality of who God is, and to give very little thought, if any, to the rest of the world.

After all, I didn't know it could be this good. And now I have friends who have the same convictions and want to do right. I found biblical community and there are new things taking up all of my discretionary time, like church and small groups and serving. But if we're not careful, the tendency will be for us... It was the very same tendency for these four lepers. By the way, this will never change. It will always be the tendency to allow all of our time and all of our lives and all of our affection to be so absorbed with what God is doing in us and with what God is doing for us that we forget our responsibility to go back. It's not that we don't care and it's certainly not that we're not compassionate people, but as you look around at the treasures and the wealth and the goodness that comes from being in Christ, you just don't go back. And the longer you're a Christian, the more prone to this you are.

Some of you are brand new to Christ and you're looking around and you're going, "My perspective is already changing. My focus is already changing. I have a new set of friends and better set of friends." And of course you need that, but the temptation, the longer you are a Christian, is to think *this is just so wonderful*, and never pay any attention or any effort or any affection or any prayers, quite honestly, to the people that we left behind who God loved and Jesus died for. If God so the whole world... So will I. That's the command on the life of the child of God.

Listen, I get this completely. I am a professional Christian. I get paid to be a Christian. I stand on stages like this a couple of hundred times a year and thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people come hear me preach. And they log in from other countries and they watch and I write books and they buy them. It's always a good idea, right? But I'm a professional Christian. And I could be the worst hypocrite in here if I'm not careful. I spend 30 hours a week getting ready for messages for people and 10 hours a week with some staff teams and a few hours a week with my family and at some events that my children are involved in and never give any time, any energy, any money, any prayers to those that don't know yet. And I could be the worst among us today.

What the lepers discovered is **with their great discovery came a great responsibility**. With this great truth comes tremendous responsibility and the fact that they knew how it could be and how it should be meant that they were responsible for sharing with those who had not yet discovered. So, you and I have a dilemma, the same dilemma the Lepers had, and that was will we take to others what has so graciously been given to us.

Go back to Verse 9, if you would. **9 Then they said to each other, "What we're doing is not right. This is a day of good news..."** Have you heard that phrase before? **"...and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace."**

Here's the question for you and for me if you are a Christian. What are you doing with the good news? I know you believe it. And I know you love and feel it, but are you keeping it to yourself? Are you hoarding it? What are you hoarding relationally and what are you hoarding emotionally? What would it look like if you embraced this simple truth: God loves the whole world... So will I. With this great discovery comes great responsibility. Maybe you should ask yourself a whole series of questions. "What kind of seed do I need to sow relationally? Who do I need to build a bridge with? Who do I need to invite to lunch?"

I'm just like you. With any discretionary lunch, I think about... Every time I have a cancellation, every time I finish an assignment and I've got time and bandwidth, I'll walk around the office with 100 staff members, trying to find one that wants to go to lunch. People that I know and people that I pay and people that I'm in a relationship with, or I think about people I'm already friends with. Any discretionary moment, I automatically think about people I already know. But maybe I should start building a bridge to that person I know that doesn't know Christ. Maybe there should be an invitation to lunch at some time. "I'd love to talk to you. I'd love to get to know you."

What would you do differently with gift giving? We all love to give gifts, don't we? One of my favorite parts of Ted's personality is he loves it. He gets so excited to give a gift, to buy a gift. We love that, but maybe we should give a gift to somebody that doesn't believe like we believe in order to build a bridge to carry the truth across. Maybe you should change where you work out because you're surrounded by Christians. Not those of you who eat McRib's; there's no hope for you. Or maybe you should change the league your kids play sports in. You've got them playing with all Christian kids. Just as a suggestion, you should probably put them in a league where they actually know how to play sports and keep score. But put them with kids that don't believe what you believe.

And quit doing it so pointlessly and aimlessly like you're chasing your tail. But when you sit on that soccer field next to that mom for six or eight games in a row all of the sudden, she shares with you that she's dealing with anxiety. A light goes off and you say, "Could I pray for you?" A few weeks later, send a text and say, "Hey, I'm praying for you today. Here's a link to Pastor Ted's message on Anxiety. I would love for you to watch this. I found it very helpful." And you begin to build a bridge with people who don't know Jesus yet. And all of our time and all of our energy and all of our affection is not given to our little family and tribe but to those who God actually loves and wants a relationship with. Listen, I hope that we grow in all kinds of ways. I hope we grow in worship and I hope we grow in children's ministry and I hope we grow in discipleship and I hope we grow in community, but I really hope that we grow in this thought that if God loves the whole world, so will I. And do this intentionality.

Look at this verse of scripture. Maybe you, by the way, should go to the Middle East with us. I think Ted is going to go with me next month. I can't wait to watch that payout. Maybe you should go to a land where there are hundreds of millions of people who are so glad you came, but don't know anything about this Jesus that you and I love, and are waiting on somebody to tell them, somebody to build a relationship with them. God began to pen this scripture and give this scripture out. Obviously, it's eternal. So, he probably was discussing it with the angles long before it ever played out.

And this is going to be the Word of God. **1 John 4 - 9 *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*** I think the angles had to think, *The world!! Not the world!! You're not sending Jesus into world, into that screwed up place. You're going to send the Son of God off the throne of all thrones down there?! Surely, God, that's not your intention, but if you're going to do it, wait until penicillin is on the scene; it could be a lot less painful. Let's not go when crucifixion is the preferred form of punishment. Let's wait until 2019; the medical conditions will be much better then.*

10 *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us...* He's the friend of sinners. ...***and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*** What are you going to do with the good news, church? If God so loved the world, so will I.

Let's stand for prayers as I pray over you, both here and in the chapel. As you bow your heads and close your eyes, could I just ask this question before I pray? If you are here today and you've never trusted Jesus to be your Lord and Savior... Somebody brought you, somebody invited you or maybe you're visiting or on vacation. You've slipped in here and today you realize you don't have that relationship with Jesus. I would love to pray for you. I don't want to embarrass you and I don't want to point you

out, but we're so glad you came today. I would love for you to take one tiny, baby step. With every head bowed and every eye closed, just lift your hand saying, "That's me; would you pray for me." I don't think there is anything powerful in that act in itself, physically, but I do think there is power in the confession. Just confessing and saying, "Hey, Pastor, pray for me. I don't have a relationship with Jesus. If I died today, I don't know for sure I'd go to heaven. If Jesus is coming back tomorrow, I don't know if he's coming for me or not, but would you pray for me?" If that's you, I would like to know that. Would you just raise your hand all across the sanctuary this morning? If you say, "That's me pastor; I don't know," just slip your hand up high.

Father, I pray right now for those who said they don't know that today could be the day of salvation. And right where you're standing, I would just love to lead you in a prayer. Just under your breath, would you say, "Dear God, I know I'm a sinner and today I ask you to forgive me for all of my sin. Jesus, would you come into my life to be my Lord, my Savior, and my Forgiver." Church, would you just pray on your own and in your own words a prayer of saying, "God, if you'll use me, I'm willing. Help me to get the salt out of the shaker and the light out of the light (inaudible) and take it into the dark where it is needed. Would you put men and women and boys and girls in my path that need Jesus and use me to help them? If you love the whole world, so will I."

In Jesus name we pray and together we all say... Amen.