

Card Declined

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Date: 31 May 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, right here, I have a credit card, right? You recognize that? It's a credit card. It's got a chip as well. It's one of the new ones. It's quite fancy. Anybody use a credit card? Put up your hand.

If you use a credit card for shopping, okay, or another type of card, a debit card, okay? Everybody's like, mm-hmm, okay? All right. Well, you'll know what it's like if you use one of these cards for shopping, especially a credit card, when you pay for your shopping and the checkout lady asks for your pin, right?

You put it in the machine and she asks, you put your pin in it. And there's this slightly anxious moment, isn't there, between you putting your pin in and this little word approved coming up. You know what I'm talking about? And, I mean, what if it isn't approved? You always think that. You always just wait. You know, you can't really not look at the screen. You wait for it to be approved. But what if it isn't?

What if the dreaded word declined comes up instead? What do you do? It's an awkward moment, isn't it? Typically, you know, when that happens, the checkout lady will look at you with kind of a stern look on her face and you'll kind of scramble in your bag to see if you've got some cash and the people in the queue behind you will be shaking their heads in pity at you because you thought you had enough credit when suddenly you realize that you don't.

[1 : 19] I wonder if you've been in that situation. I have, and it's quite awkward, especially when it's busy and there's a long queue behind you. Well, the Bible says that that is the situation lots of people will be in when Jesus comes back to establish his kingdom on earth in that there'll be loads of people who think they've got enough credit with God and then all of a sudden they'll find themselves declined when they least expect it.

Jesus says these words in Matthew 7, He says, These are sobering words because these are religious people who live their entire lives thinking they were right with God when in fact their credit was no good.

You see, I don't want anybody in this church to be in that situation one day. And that's why I want you to pay attention to this story this morning in Acts chapter 8 because this is a story about a man who discovered for the first time what being right with God is really all about.

And so let's join him. Acts chapter 8 from verse 27. We meet the Ethiopian eunuch. We're told he's an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake, which means queen of the Ethiopians.

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. Okay, so here we have someone. Let's introduce you to this man, this Ethiopian eunuch, an African like us.

[3 : 07] And he's someone who is trying very hard to be approved by God. He was from Ethiopia, which is not modern-day Ethiopia, by the way. It's the much larger ancient African kingdom.

And he had traveled all the way to Jerusalem, which you must understand was a huge journey. It would have taken weeks, just one way, to get from the kingdom of Nubia or Ethiopia to Jerusalem. And he did that journey and all the costs involved in that journey just to try and be close to God. Because he knew the only place of having any chance to draw close to the true God was in the temple in Jerusalem.

And so he invested a lot of time and effort in trying to draw close to God. And yet, he especially would have found that very difficult because of who he was.

You see, Luke tells us not only was he a foreigner, but he was also a eunuch. Which means, for those of you who don't know, that he's had his male organs cut off, removed.

[4 : 11] And eunuchs were specifically forbidden from entering into Jewish worship. We see that specification in Deuteronomy. And so, despite all his efforts, you see, this man, all his traveling, his devotion, all his religion, he knew he still wasn't acceptable.

He didn't qualify to approach God through the Jewish temple system. The best he could have done when he got to Jerusalem was stand outside the temple courts in what was called the Court of the Gentiles and just look on from a distance at the worship going on inside the temple.

He was declined and he knew it. He could only get so far. And we need to understand that about this man to unlock the story, to understand the significance of the story. We need to understand what status an Ethiopian eunuch would have been in.

Because the amazing thing about this encounter is that while he couldn't come close to God because of who he was, it was God in the story who came close to him.

Do you see that? You see, when we read the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, what we notice is that the entire encounter, if you just scan your eye down the story, this entire encounter was orchestrated by God, wasn't it?

[5 : 33] Philip really had very little to do with it. He just followed instructions. God told him to go to this desert road. The Spirit of God prompted him to walk over to this particular chariot and God also caused the conversation between him and this Ethiopian to be initiated.

This encounter, you see, wasn't actually an encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian, but God and the Ethiopian. Philip was a necessary part of that, but in the end, he was just the messenger. You see, this story is really about God drawing close to a man who couldn't draw close to him, a man whose credit was declined. And right away, that teaches us something about the heart of God, doesn't it?

It teaches us that he is a God for outcasts. He's not a God who waits in heaven for those who manage to find approval, but he's a God who comes down to earth to pursue those who can't find approval.

That's in his heart. He chases after people. He pursues people who can't come to him. That's who our God is. And that should be amazing news for you if you know that, like the eunuch, you don't qualify for God's kingdom.

[6 : 49] Not because of some spiritual defect, but much more critically because of a spiritual defect that we all have called sin that stops you from being able to draw close to God.

What a relief that he is a God who instead draws close to you. But now what's really important is for us to see just how he does that this morning.

How God draws close to you, how God draws close to people in our world. Because we see that in the story as well. And what we see firstly is that he does it through other people. You notice that? This eunuch would never have found God had it not been for Philip. And Philip's availability and his willingness to follow the direction of the Holy Spirit. And that is how God has chosen to reveal himself to people in the world today.

It's through other people in whom his spirit dwells. That's how he approaches people. That's how he makes contact. It's like those spy movies.

[7 : 58] Do you like spy movies? Anyone like spy movies? I love spy movies. I really enjoy that genre. And if you watch a few spy movies, you get to figure out how spies work.

And these spy agencies that work for governments, they work by recruiting assets in other countries that they're spying on. Recruiting these secret assets who work in various jobs, whatever they do, who have access to the information they need.

But anyway, to recruit these assets, they don't put up posters on street poles, you know, saying assets needed for secret spying. No. That would give them away, obviously.

What they do to recruit these assets is that they use field agents to make contact. They'll set up a meet. And so, the asset will be sitting on a bench in a park and there's this random stranger eating a sandwich next to him.

And suddenly, the stranger, without looking over to him, says, the flowers are in bloom this season. Or something cryptic like that. And the asset suddenly realizes that this is the agency contacting me.

[8 : 56] This is the code phrase. You see, and in a way, it's kind of the same with God and how he reaches people. And how he sets up appointments with people. He does it through his field agents on earth.

And he directs those agents where to go and what to do by his Holy Spirit. And that means that if you are a Christian, if you have God's Spirit in you, the way God chooses to reach people in your life who don't know him is not through some writing in the sky or some mystical experience, but it's through you as one of his field agents and your words and your conversations as you, like Philip, follow the promptings of the Spirit.

And so don't pray to God to draw close to people, to save people that you know without being willing to be the means by which he'll do that. So that's the first thing we see here.

God uses other people to draw close to people. He uses his field agents. The people in whom his Spirit dwells. But that's not the only means he uses. The other equally important means that he makes himself known to this Ethiopian is through his Word.

You see that? In conjunction with his field agent, Philip. Through his Word. So even before Philip comes on the scene, what we see is this eunuch reading God's Word.

[10:20] He happens to be reading from Isaiah in the Old Testament, but the thing is he didn't understand what he was reading. But he's still very interested in this passage and this character that this passage talks about, that Isaiah talks about.

This man who was rejected. No doubt because he could relate with this man in Isaiah. He knew a lot about being rejected himself. But the passage, you see, didn't make sense to the eunuch until Philip came along and gave him the key to understanding it by telling him about Jesus, who Isaiah was in fact talking about.

You see, the Old Testament only really makes sense in light of Jesus. And so Philip came along and gave him the key to understanding, to unlocking what he was reading when he told him about what Jesus did on the cross, how he was rejected so that he could die in place of humans for human sins so that we could be in a relationship with God.

He explained that to this Ethiopian and then suddenly it clicks for him. It all makes sense and the eunuch realizes that Jesus was this rejected man so that he doesn't have to be rejected.

He realizes that Jesus was the one becoming an outcast in order for outcasts to come to God. In other words, in terms of our credit card analogy earlier, he realizes that even though his card is declined, it doesn't matter because Jesus has come to give him a whole new card, Jesus' own card, essentially, which is always in credit.

[11:57] See, Jesus came to give this man God's approval that he could never earn by himself. And that is the message that God directed Philip to tell this Ethiopian that Jesus has come to give you his credit when he took your debt.

That is the message that this man needed to hear and he heard it through Philip and God's word and that is the same message that he sends out his field agents in the world today to tell others. Jesus has taken your debt and given you his credit. That's why we're here. But I want to ask you now, this morning, which one of these two characters are you?

Which one do you fit into more? Philip or the Ethiopian? Because really, everybody on earth is either one of these two characters. You're either the person who's far from God who needs to hear the message or you're one of God's field agents that are here to tell the message.

Which one are you? Well, if you're the first, if you're like that Ethiopian, if you can relate more to him and God is distant from you, no matter what you try to do to get close, he's still distant, well then I want you to know from this passage that no matter how much of an outcast you feel, God wants to draw close to you.

[13:22] But he'll do that through his people and through his word. That's where you will experience God. That's where you will come into contact with the living Lord Jesus Christ in reality as you fellowship with Christians around God's word.

And even as you read Christian books written to help you understand the Bible. Because the Ethiopian said, how can I understand this unless someone explains it? And you also need help understanding God's word and so do I.

And so, join a Bible study if you're not part of one yet. Or visit the library and have a look and get some good books that will help you engage with God's word. Or if you're a woman, join the ladies book club where you get around and read Christian books so you can fellowship with other Christians and engage with God's word.

That's how he interacts with you. That's how he speaks to you. And so, if you are like the Ethiopian, then know this morning that's what you need to do.

But maybe you're more like Philip. Maybe you know Christ and maybe you have a relationship with him already. Well then, like Philip, you need to be ready and willing to help others to find him. [14:39] Well, how are you going to do that? Well, to help you, for the rest of our time this morning, I just want us to see three lessons from this passage about how we can be effective in showing others to Christ in our own lives.

Three lessons we learn about the task of evangelism. And so, the first lesson is that God sets up the opportunities and does the work.

See, if nothing else, what stands out about this story is how God arranged the whole thing and how he was working throughout the whole thing. That just, you know, hits you as you read the story. God arranged for Philip to be in this exact spot at the exact same time the Ethiopian was here and he was reading the Bible. It's like, it's like the best evangelism opportunity handed on a plate for Philip.

And then when Philip does tell him about Jesus, God works in the man's heart to understand and respond and he wants to be baptized all of a sudden. Philip really didn't have to do much at all, did he?

[15:42] He just had to be available. And it's the same with the people that God wants to reach through us. He doesn't need us to force Jesus into conversations unnaturally.

And it's not us and our clever arguments and our convincing that will save people. No, it's God who sets up the opportunities and it's God who does the work inside people.

We've often just got to be there ready to play our role but it's God who's doing the directing. It's like a movie. You know, when you see the credits at the end of a movie where all the people involved in the movie their names are up so you can, you know, they can get there a few seconds of glory. but you see this list of actors, all the actors in the movie, you see their names and the characters they played. But the most important name in the credits actually isn't any of the actors. It's the director. And often people pay no attention to the director. I mean, when last did you wait at the end of a movie to see the name of the director in the credits? And yet without him, without the director, the actors wouldn't know what to say and when to say it.

[16:49] There'd be no movie at all. And you see, when we look at the book of Acts, what we're seeing is the actors. We read all about what they say and do. But actually, behind the scenes, what makes it all possible is God, the Holy Spirit, directing everything, telling people what to do and what to say and empowering them to do that.

And it's the same today. The Holy Spirit is actively directing situations and events and conversations to bring people to hear and believe the gospel.

And we're just the actors in that production, in his production, that he's directing. Which should give us huge confidence, shouldn't it? That sharing the gospel is really not up to us.

He's in control. He's doing the work. But our job, if we have the Holy Spirit in us, our job is then to be willing to play that role, to do what he tells us.

And that's the next major lesson we see in this passage. God doesn't want special people, but he wants willing people. Now, the thing about Philip that strikes me is that there was nothing really that special about Philip.

[18:00] He was just, in some ways, an ordinary guy. But God did extraordinary things through him. But he himself, there was nothing special about him. We're introduced to him back in Acts chapter 6.

He's not, in fact, Philip the Apostle, as some people think. It's a different Philip. And this Philip was just a deacon in the Jerusalem church. He helped distribute food to widows. That was his job.

And yet, the thing about Philip that stands out in this story and why I think God chose to use him in this way was that he was willing and he was available. You see? And he was ready to go where God wanted him to go rather than where he thought was best.

And that's how and why God used him so incredibly. You know, it's interesting if you read earlier in Acts chapter 8, you see that Philip was already involved in quite a successful ministry in Samaria. The desert road in the middle of nowhere was the last place that he would have chosen by himself for a new ministry. He wouldn't have gone there on his own accord.

[19:05] And yet, that's where God wanted him to go because God wanted to do business with this Ethiopian and God did business with the Ethiopian because Philip was just available and willing to follow the Spirit's direction.

Are you? Are you available for God to use to do business with other people? Or are you too busy doing your own things?

Are you looking out for opportunities every day for God's Spirit to work through you in other people's lives? are you praying that God would lead you and direct you to be involved in what he's doing in the world around you?

You see, the Christian life is not meant to be a dull grind, just trudging along, surviving life like everyone else. No, a Christian has been called to get involved in God's invisible work in our world so that every day is packed with spiritual action and divine activity that we can be part of.

And you don't have to be anyone special to be involved in that. You just have to be willing and ready to be used by God in the lives of other people and open to the Holy Spirit working in you.

[20 : 26] Are you? Because God doesn't want special people, he wants willing people, available people. And then one final lesson we see in this passage is that God reaches people through his word.

We saw that earlier. But that means that if you want to be used by God as a means of him reaching out to other people, if you want lives of people around you to be touched and changed, then you must realize that happens as you bring them to God's words, not your own.

And that's what Philip knew. Look how he brought this man to Christ in verse 35. Then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

You see, in other words, he showed this man who Jesus was not with his own words but with God's words in the Bible. And if you want your friends and family to discover Jesus like that Ethiopian did, to discover that he came to make them acceptable to God, to clear their debt, to give them his credit and to give them eternal life, if you want them to discover that, then the way that you show them that is by showing them what God's word says.

Because it's God's word that convinced this Ethiopian in the end. God's word has the power to change people, not our words. And so how do we do that?

[21 : 55] How do we bring God's word into people's lives? Well, first, we must know God's word for ourselves, mustn't we? We must read books, we must go on courses that help us to understand more about God's word and the big story of the Bible and how it all fits together.

And then, another way is that we've got to know particular verses that we can tell people or take people to in the Bible. You know, God told the Israelites to fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds, tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them onto your foreheads.

And taking that verse quite literally, even to this day, Jews have boxes strapped to their heads with tiny pieces of scripture in them. But that's taking the verse a little bit too literally, I think.

What God meant is that his word should be in our minds and available and ready to use in any situation. Which means, of course, memorizing scripture like we're doing in our Bible studies this term.

And lots of people say, oh, I can't memorize scripture. But, I mean, think about the things that you do know in your memory. I mean, your phone number you've memorized, your address, your ID number probably, the words of your favorite song you've probably got memorized.

[23 : 18] If you can memorize those things, you can memorize a few Bible verses. It just takes some work. Colossians 3.16 says, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

You see, God's word is the currency that he uses in the spiritual economy. It's the currency that he uses in people's lives. And so, be rich in it so that you can share it richly with others.

Well, to close, this story is a story of a God who draws close to people who have no way of drawing close to him, which is really all of us.

So, let's praise God for taking the initiative to reach out to us through Jesus Christ and make a way for us to come to him and have our sins forgiven and washed clean that we can be in a relationship with our creator, the holy God.

And if you haven't done that yet, if you are not in a relationship with him, then don't waste any time. Life is only so short and it's uncertain. You don't know that you'll wake up tomorrow morning.

[24 : 21] Don't waste any time. God has done everything for you to come to him. And so, like the Ethiopian asked, what stops you from being baptized and coming to Christ? What is it that's stopping you?

And is it worth it? Is it worth sacrificing eternal life and relationship with God for whatever that is that's stopping you? The Ethiopian asked, what's stopping me from being baptized?

He knew everything had been done for him and he was desperate to come to his creator, aren't you? But if you have, if you are in relationship with God through Jesus Christ, then what this story is clearly telling us is that we've got to make ourselves available for God to use to reach out to others in our lives.

So let's pray that he'll help us to do that. Yes, Father God, we thank you that you are a God for outcasts, that you came to this Ethiopian eunuch who could not come to you no matter how hard he tried.

Lord, help us always to remember that you are ready and willing to draw near to us. But Lord, we know that it's our sin that separates us from you.

[25 : 41] And so we pray that you would help us to look to Christ, help us to take the righteousness that he offers out to us and to trust in him every day. And as we do that, Lord, fill us with your spirit so much so that we would be sensitive and willing to follow the direction of the spirit in our lives every day.

Help us to get involved in the work you are doing in the lives of the people around us. In Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.