

**Outrageous**  
***Stunning Invitation***

**April 19, 2015**

**8:15 / 9:33 / 11:03**

**PRELUDE – I Will Follow**

**Songs – Immortal, Invisible  
Called Me Higher**

**Drama – “By the Book”**

Well there you have it...the stunning invitation. Who wants to go to the cookout on Friday?

Seriously though, this big giant “good book”...it’s what a lot of people think of when they think of Christianity and Jesus. So often what Christianity (and therefore Jesus) gets associated with is rules. Don’t drink, don’t chew, don’t run with women who do. Do this don’t do that. Play by the rules is what many people think of when they think of following Jesus but we’ll come back to that in just a bit.

Good morning everyone, my name is Shannon Horn and I’m one of the Associate Pastors here at North Heartland. And today we are continuing in our series “Outrageous.” We’ve been taking a closer look at Jesus, not the cultural icon one. Far too often we have settled for caricatures of him.

Glimpses that have some truth but are not the whole truth of who He was and what He said and did here on earth.

We can read about Jesus, who he was, what he did and said in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament of the Bible.

In reading these four accounts of Jesus' life here on earth, we see that there are many things people believe or think is true of Jesus that simply are not. And that's the purpose of this series, taking a look at the places where the cultural icons and caricatures of Jesus don't match up with his actual words and deeds. And specifically how some of his words and deeds were considered outrageous, especially to the "good" religious people of the day.

For instance, in week one message of this series we took a look at the extraordinary claims Jesus made. He didn't claim to just be a good, moral teacher. He himself claimed to be God in the flesh. He claimed to be the way, the truth and the life. These statements and many others like them were considered offensive and blasphemous by the religious leaders of the day.

And as we looked at his claims, we determined, as CS Lewis puts it, Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic or he was exactly

who he said he was, Lord. The Messiah, the promised Savior, God in the flesh.

Then last week, we took a look at the shocking exclusion Jesus made. Early on, Jesus offended all the “good” people around him.

Rick shared with us this event in a day of the life of Jesus as recorded in the book of Luke.

*After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.*

*Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”*

*Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”*

*Luke 5:27-32 NIV*

So Jesus, a holy man, a teacher of the Law, a Rabbi, one of the really “good” guys, walks up to a spiritual and social

outcast, a tax collector, speaks with him (which was bad enough but then went and had dinner with him).

Tax collectors were considered traitors of their people, the Jews. They were making money off of their own people and had sold themselves out to the Romans, the enemy who was ruling over them.

In listening to a message by Andy Stanley, a world renowned pastor and teacher at Northpoint Church in Atlanta, he equates tax collectors with the 22 year old guy standing behind the gas station selling drugs to middle schoolers or even worse.

Tax collectors were considered bottom of the barrel, even below sinners. If you were a good person, if you were even marginally good or religious you would not be caught talking with Matthew let alone having dinner with him and his friends. But that's exactly what Jesus does. And when the "good" people question him, question why he would do such a thing and hang out with "those" people, he responds,

*"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*

*Luke 5: 31-32 (NIV)*

What Jesus said and did was outrageous and it outraged the Jewish leaders and the “good” people. Jesus made it clear in that instance and in many, many others that if you thought you were good, if you thought you were righteous, then he had nothing to offer you. His exclusion of the “good” people was shocking.

Now if you missed these last two messages, then I want to encourage you to watch, listen or read on-line. Previous messages can be found in the media section of our website OR on our brand new, super fantastic NHCC app. I used the app several times this week and it was awesome! If you need help installing it or using it, as Ladell said stop by the app table in the commons and they will help you.

So let’s get back to that drama. Many people, actually a lot of people, assume that Jesus and Christianity are all about rules. That the invitation issued is that if you want to be a follower of Jesus you have to believe the right things and behave the right way but as we are going to see this morning that’s not exactly the case.

So, to discover this stunning invitation we are going to look once again at this interaction with Levi (also known as Matthew) and Jesus. This interaction between the two is actually recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke and if you

compare the three accounts, except for a few words here and there they are all pretty much the same.

So let's read all three versions of this interaction:

First let's look back one more time at the passage Rick read last week from Luke Chapter 5:

*After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.*

*Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. Luke 5:27-29 (NIV)*

And here's the same interaction as recorded in Mark Chapter 2:

*As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.*

*While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.*

And finally here's the same event recorded in the book of Matthew, Chapter 9:

*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. Matthew 9:9-10 (NIV)*

So in each of these accounts Jesus offers a stunning invitation to a man named Matthew, who was also known as Levi. Do you see it? It happens in the first few lines of each account.

(WHAT IT DOESN'T SAY)

Let's look at the account in Matthew one more time:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. He said,

“Matthew you wicked and evil man. How dare you steal from your own people and give it to these despicable heathens. You have committed the unforgiveable sin and you will be forever outside of God’s love.”

Oh wait it doesn’t say that...it says:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. He said,

“Matthew you have done terrible and horrible things, you must first learn to believe the right things and behave the right ways and then you can follow me.”

Oh wait, that’s not right either. When you read all three accounts you see the Stunning Invitation...two words he says to Matthew:

Follow Me. Follow Me. And after giving this invitation, in all three accounts Jesus goes to have dinner with Matthew and his terrible, horrible, no good very bad friends.

He goes and spends intimate time with the sick. His invitation issued to Matthew and to many others recorded in the Gospels, shows that Jesus’ Stunning Invitation was to a relationship with him, not an invitation to follow a bunch of



rules, which is what the Pharisees and other “good” people expected.

And let’s be honest, far too often that’s what we think and believe. We believe that the mantra of Christianity and following Jesus is this

Change and then you can join us.

Clean up your act and THEN you can be one of us. Stop doing all that bad stuff... cussing and drinking and smoking and all those other things that churchy people frown on... and then you can be one of us. Change and then you can join us.

But instead Jesus’ invitation is to a relationship with him and if we join him, if we chose to follow, if we chose to be in relationship we will change. Jesus says,

Join us, and you will change.

See what Jesus says to Matthew and sinners throughout his time on earth, is simply this invitation: Follow Me. To follow him, to spend time with him. To eat with him, to listen to him, to watch him work and teach and heal. As you read the accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John it becomes abundantly clear that Jesus was interested in relationship.

He was and still is interested in a relationship with people but far too often we hear, we see and we even say things that sound like Jesus is inviting us in to religion, in to following a set of rules.

Now don't hear what I'm not saying, I'm not saying Jesus doesn't have rules he does. He has a specific way of living in mind for those who follow him, a way that sets them free. But it's not about checking off a list of rules but about being in relationship with Him where he leads and guides us on what needs to change in us and when.

See the Pharisees (and honestly far too often most Christians including us, including me) get sucked in to believing that it's all about the rules, it's all about the religion, it's all about believing the right things and behaving the right ways. And that way of thinking, well, it leads toward religion and away from a relationship with God. We begin to look a lot like the Pharisees. Listen to what Jesus says to the Pharisees, the highly religious "good" people of the day.

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.*

*In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Matthew 23:27-28 (NIV)*

So how do you know if you are getting sucked in to religion? If you are settling for that way of life and missing the stunning invitation to relationship with Jesus?

Well, let's take a look at the religious mindset because as we just read the difference is often under the surface, sometimes difficult to discern. See Jesus says that the religious, the good, they look beautiful and righteous on the outside, it's the inside that is rotten and full of wickedness and hypocrisy.

So if we are sucked in to the Religious mindset

1. Our focus is first and foremost on the rules. There is a reason that drama strikes a chord. Have you ever felt like that or know someone who has? We become so critical and judgmental about areas that are gray in the scriptures. Whether or not good Christians should see R movies, drink, be stay at home moms, send their kids to public schools, and on and on.

Rick has spoken about these gray issues before specifically in his message series Hot Topics for a Hot Summer from two years ago. In that series, we learned that there are clear guidelines in the Bible, matters that are black and white and then there are issues that are gray, matters of conscience. When we attempt to make those gray issues black or white, we are being sucked in to a religious mindset. We are focusing on the rules.

But let's leave those gray issues for another day. Let's talk instead about the black and white issues. The ones that are outlined in the Bible as sin.

See on those issues, the ones that have been laid out as sin, well, far too often if we are stuck in a religious mindset we try to put them on a scale. Sadly we begin to create a system that says this sin is ok and this sin is not. You can do this but you can't do that.

You've seen this, right? You may have even done this, I know I have. Sometimes that religious mindset just sneaks in and unless I'm paying attention, unless we are paying attention, we miss it.

As it sneaks in, in our minds we begin to determine what rules are acceptable within the walls of the church and what sins are not. We start ranking them and frankly whether we say it or not, we may find ourselves thinking Jesus loves sinners so sinners are welcome in our churches unless of course your sin is...

“\_\_\_\_\_insert here whatever sin you think is beyond grace.”

Like the Pharisees, we begin to rank sin. Gossip ok, forgivable. Little white lies ok, forgivable. Tax collectors not ok, unforgivable. If you had to write a check to the U.S. Treasury last week, you might also think... Our modern day tax collectors, not ok, unforgivable.

Prior to coming on staff at North Heartland, I worked in the university setting, I was a Residence Hall Director (a dorm mom so to speak). And in my work, I interacted with a large variety of people. People who were atheists, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Wiccans, Gay, Lesbian, Bi, Transgender, women who had had abortions, girls who were prostituting themselves for heroine, guys who were hooked on porn, a variety of people with a variety of backgrounds, lifestyles, hurts, habits and hangups.

When I came on staff here at NHCC, one day at lunch I told Rick that I was very frustrated with Christians in general. I was frustrated that far too many of my students, my friends would never even darken the door of a church because it had already been made clear to them that they were outside of grace. The message they were hearing over and over was change and you can hang out with us. Change and we will let you get close to Jesus. Change your ways and then we will let you in.

I couldn't understand why some people were given a pass. Why was it ok to be a gossip, a liar, a cheat, a glutton but others had to first totally change before it was ok for them to ever even show up.

See, when we are sucked in to religion, we focus on the rules. Following the rules is what matters most, never mind that we ourselves aren't even following all of them. The real truth is we are all hypocrites at some point, to some extent. We have rules and we don't follow them. Or we only follow the ones we want and ignore the rest.

We don't cheat or steal but we are mastered by food or money especially when we are having an emotional day. We

don't murder but we gossip and slander others when they make us mad.

When we focus solely on rules we end up washing the outside and letting the inside rot. We miss that the outside of us might look good but the inside is rotten.

A second indication that we are getting sucked in to Religion is

2. We focus on making sure our good outweighs our bad. If we do break a rule, we try to make sure we do enough good to outweigh the bad. We try to make sure the scales are even or tipped in our favor. If we tell a lie or eat too much, then we will go serve those in need so that when God looks at us he will see a "good" person. But as we learned last week, God isn't interested in people who think they are righteous, people who are focused on what they do right or good.

And truthfully, that game gets exhausting after a while and we can't seem to do enough good to be sure we are ok...you know just in case. So then we have to

3. Become obsessed with other people's sins. We start thinking sure we break some rules, sure we do some things we know aren't right but at least we aren't one of "those" people. I mean we're not murderers or terrorists but after a while, we realize we need to be even better...better than you or you or you or well all of you. I mean if there's a judgement and God is judging, we better make sure we're above the curve. Being better than a tax collector doesn't take much. Better make sure you're better than most.

So we find ourselves looking out the proverbial window a lot. We focus on what other people are doing. We think sure I yelled at my kids on the way to church but at least I'm going to church unlike "some" people. Sure I nag and disrespect my husband but I'm faithful to him not like "some" people. Sure I get self-absorbed but I give a lot of my time away as a volunteer unlike "some" people. We all have those people. You know the ones we need to be better than.

So there you have it, if you are buying in to the lie that following Jesus is all about religion then you are focused first and foremost on following the rules, you are careful to make sure your good outweighs your bad and you are overly concerned with others and their sin.



Your insides will look a lot like the Pharisees: critical, judgmental, defensive, hard-hearted, lacking compassion and prideful.

You will be so focused on your religion that you will miss the invitation that Jesus is issuing. You will be excluded because you will miss that you are sick.

So I just want to pause here and ask... Do you find a little bit of Pharisee in you? Are you a little sucked in to religion?

Do you find yourself keeping score of all the times you follow the rules and others don't?

Do you find yourself smug, critical and condescending?

If Jesus is issuing an invitation to "those" people and he isn't requiring them to change before they start following him does that tweak you?

Do you think Jesus expects you to change before you starting following him?

The religious mindset can so easily creep in and we can so easily exchange following Jesus for following the "rules" but when following the rules becomes the most important thing

we lose sight of the invitation that was given. The stunning invitation to relationship.

See relationship looks a lot different. Imagine for a moment if you will that my husband and I believed all the right things and behaved all the right ways in our marriage. We didn't divorce, we never cheated or strayed. We kept all the rules of marriage. Does that mean we have a good marriage?

No...you can't just check off a check list. I gave her flowers on our anniversary. Check. I was intimate with him two times this week. Check. Obviously these things are good things, but just doing them because they are part of believing the right things and behaving the right ways with no relationship will not help us have a healthy growing marriage. If we focus only on the rules of marriage, we will look around and find that our marriage is empty and hollow because we have neglected the relationship piece of our marriage.

When we are engaged in the relationship, we change. We learn what is interesting to the other person. We take time to learn about them. We make time to engage with them.

Because of my relationship with Price, I have changed. Over 21 years, I've learned quite a bit about Star Trek, comic books and trying new things. I'm quite well versed now on

Star Trek, DC and Marvel universes and actually really enjoy watching superhero and sci-fi films and tv. I was the girl who only ever liked standard meat, potatoes and sweets and now I've tried a variety of ethnic foods as well as some crazy stuff like duck tongue tacos.

Who I am now is different than who I was 21 years ago. I've changed because I have engaged in a relationship with Price.

That's what relationship is like. It's not focused on the rules, it's focused on engaging with the other person.

And when you are following Jesus instead of rules, your primary focus is on him. A friend asked me this week...but what does that look like?

I said well reading your Bible is important, memorizing verses is so helpful, going to church to be around others who are trying to follow Jesus is a good thing but if you aren't engaging with Jesus in those things, if they aren't changing you and growing your relationship with him then something is out of whack. Sometimes one of the most spiritual activities I can do to strengthen my relationship with Jesus is to pray before I go in to a certain large discount chain store... I won't say the name, but it rhymes with "Paul Blart."

Dear Jesus-give me patience as I go in here. Help me not to see people as objects, help me to see them the way you see them. Give me your eyes.

And you know what, a trip inside that place is way way different when I go in focused on my relationship with Jesus. I find myself less irritable, more gracious, slower to condemn others and assume I know their life.

See, that's what relationship with Jesus looks like. Instead of focusing on rules we focus on following him. Instead of staring out the proverbial window focusing on all the things others do wrong, I spend a lot more time looking in the mirror and becoming aware of all the ways I'm not doing right either. And just like in my relationship with Price, I have to choose to engage with Jesus. Day by day, moment by moment.

And as we read the story about Matthew and then look at Jesus' interactions throughout the four gospels, we see that's exactly what he was inviting people in to... a relationship. A life giving relationship where his stunning invitation was so simple, Follow Me. Get in relationship with me. Spend time with me. See if I am who I say I am. And you know what's stunning about the invitation?

Being an unbeliever does not disqualify you. Jesus doesn't say to Matthew if you believe the claims about me and who I say I am you can follow me. In fact, overwhelmingly, the early followers of Jesus didn't believe his claims until after he rose from the dead and walked among them.

And that's a stunning invitation! Jesus is issuing an invitation to follow him before you even believe in who he says he is. So if you aren't quite sure about Jesus. If you are intrigued by this invitation, you can begin to follow him. Try to erase everything you think you know about Jesus and just read the four accounts of his life in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But you say, well I don't know if I even think that is true...I think about how it is when you meet someone new...you don't know if they are who they say they are either. You take time to get to know them, to see if what they do and say stacks up with what you believe to be true. So I want to invite you to read about Jesus and see what the real Jesus was like. Spend time getting to know him.

Two weeks ago, Rick invited us to take The Jesus Film 24 day challenge. Each day you read an excerpt from Jesus' life.

You can find this challenge on the YouVersion Bible app which can be loaded on to your phone or other device or you can find it online at Bible.com. Each reading takes less than 10 minutes a day.

I invite you to try it.

The other stunning thing about this invitation is that not only are sinners welcome...only sinners are welcome. As we learned last week, Jesus' shocking exclusion cuts out all those who think they have it figured out on their own; who are willing to believe they are "good" and righteous.

Remember in the story of Matthew, right in front of Matthew and all his tax collecting and other sinner friends Jesus says to tell the "good" religious people that he is hanging out with them because it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.

Think about that...that's offensive if you are unwilling to recognize your sin and sickness. If you can't acknowledge that, if Matthew and his friends couldn't have acknowledged that they would have told Jesus to get out. But clearly there is something about Jesus, something that allows them to come to grips with their sickness. They are willing to continue following him, to engage in relationship with him.

So friends it doesn't matter whether you have a strep version of sin or an ebola virus of sin in your life. Jesus' invitation is extended to you to Follow Him. You don't have to change first. You don't have to start believing all the right things or behaving the right ways.

Right where you are he is inviting you with a stunning invitation....Follow Me.

I want to pray for you and then I'm going to ask that our band sing for you a song that gives such a great picture of what this invitation looks like.

Let's pray.

### **Feature – “What Love Really Means”**

And friends THAT is what Jesus' stunning invitation is. To follow Him, to accept that He wants to hang out with us, that He wants to be in relationship with us. He loves us not for what we have done or not done, he loves us just where we are and He invites us to follow and to let Him love us for who we are just as we are...not as we should be because in this life we are never going to be as we should be. He invites us not to a religion that focuses solely on believing the right things and behaving the right ways but rather on a

relationship with Him. A relationship that will change us and our lives from the inside out.

So if you have never said yes to this invitation to follow him, I hope you will consider it today.

To each of you Jesus says simply Follow Me.

And for those of us who have said yes to the invitation whether one week ago or 90 years ago, our challenge is to continue to stay engaged in that relationship to never forget that our invitation was not to get religious but to remain in a relationship with Jesus.

I have to remind myself on a regular and consistent basis  
John 15:5

*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.  
John15:5 (NIV)*

We are called to an ongoing relationship with Jesus.

To those of us who said yes to that invitation before, Jesus says simply remember Follow ME.



So that's the stunning invitation, an invitation not to rules but to a relationship. Jesus says Follow Me. I want to invite you now to stand as we prepare to sing this last song.

Are you willing to follow Him? Do you want to get back to following Him? Then I want to invite you to sing this next song as a declaration to that end.

### **Song – “I Will Follow”**

Closing comments:

-Offering at the door

-Parking Lot will be closed at least M-W for resurfacing. Park on street....all lots will be closed.

Endnotes