

Jesus Calls Sinners

Matthew 9:9-13

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector's booth. He said to him, "Follow me." Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰ As Jesus was reclining at the table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners were actually there too, eating with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. ¹³ Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Bad company corrupts good character. We would generally agree with that statement. We want our children to believe it when they choose their friends and their spouse. It's a statement worth believing because it is found on the pages of Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit had the apostle Paul use this quote from a familiar Greek play while writing to Christians in Corinth. He wanted them to be on their guard against false teachers who corrupted the truth found in God's Word. It's a good policy. So why doesn't Jesus seem to remember that bad company corrupts good character when he chose his followers? In the Scripture before us, we see him choosing a questionable character named Matthew to be one of his closest followers. He dined with people that were considered by many to be the scum of Jewish society. Why those people? Our Lord explains why in our text: *"I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* As we spend some time in God's word today, we will better understand how Jesus calls sinners. He calls them to eternal life. He calls them to work in his kingdom.

Our Lord's association with social outcasts was questioned by a group of men known as Pharisees. Pharisees were model citizens in Jesus' day. Outwardly they seemed to provide the blueprints for a truly religious life. As far as showing piety, they were the elite. And when they witnessed Jesus associating with those kinds of people, they just had to ask his disciples, *"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

Tax collectors were always looked upon in a negative way. Remember that Palestine was under the control of the Roman Empire. In order to govern an empire well it required some funding. That meant tax money coming in from each region. Rome didn't run its own tax booths. Instead, they hired people from each region to collect the taxes and send it off to Rome. In the case of Palestine, Jews were hired to collect taxes from fellow Jews. This system of taxation turned out to be very corrupt. It was very common for tax collectors to charge more tax than Rome required. Once Rome got their share, the rest was gravy for the tax collector. You can imagine how the people felt about these corrupt tax collectors. They were traitors and liars to God's people. They were actually kicked out of Jewish synagogues and marked as social outcasts. The other group Jesus associated are simply referred to as sinners. Certainly, all people are sinners. But these sinners went to the extreme as far as public offense goes. They were the prostitutes and those thieving tax collectors—basically anyone expelled from their houses of worship.

Our text tells us that Jesus and his disciples enjoyed a meal with them. Our Lord was not there to give approval to sinful lifestyles or to tolerate sin. Jesus said, *“The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do.”* Our Lord was there to call tax collectors and sinners to repent of their sinful lives. And Jesus was in that house to bring those sin-sick souls the only healing that he could provide. He had their cure for sin. The great physician had a perfect antidote—God’s forgiveness. Jesus could offer them God’s forgiveness because he would take the guilt of all sin and suffer the consequences for every sinner. It meant painful separation from God and death on a cursed cross. But he was willing to do that for everyone.

There was another group of sinners that Jesus was calling to repent as well. To the Pharisees, Jesus said, *“The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”* Jesus calls Pharisees to repent by telling them to learn what was said 750 years earlier by the prophet Hosea. Those words were first spoken to call Old Testament Israel to repent. By outwards standards the Israelites appeared religious. They continued to bring the sacrifices God had required. But God told them through his prophet, *“I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings”* (Hosea 6:6). The word translated mercy means faithful love. The Lord had shown his own faithful love to people by making solemn promises to them. He’d prove true to all his promises and even send his Son as Savior for all nations. God wanted faithful love from his people in return. But the people in Hosea’s day didn’t offer that kind of love. Neither did the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. When our Lord tells them, *“I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners,”* he wasn’t saying that the Pharisees were righteous though they thought they were. Our Lord could see their hearts. He knew they were nothing but whitewashed tombs—clean on the outside, full of death inside. But those sinners inside Matthew’s house who did repent were healed of sin. Those self-righteous Pharisees failed to see their sickly condition. They refuse the healing that only Jesus could bring.

Our Lord once told a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector. Both men came to the temple to pray. The Pharisee talked to God about his sacrifices: *“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get”* (Luke 18:12). But the tax collector made no mention about anything he did for his Lord. He simply prayed, *“God have mercy on me a sinner”* (Luke 18:13). Jesus explained that the man who repented and not the man who sacrificed, went away righteous before God. When we enter this house of worship, we dare not come as Pharisees. When we speak to our Lord in prayer there should not be an ounce of self-righteousness in any of us. The only reason we can enter this house and turn to our Lord in prayer is because of Jesus. His perfect life, his innocent suffering and death, his glorious return to life is the reason we can stand before God. When we bring our sacrifices to God, whether it’s the time of service we put in or the money that fills the offering plate, it must come from a heart that has realized its sickly condition and clings wholeheartedly to Christ Jesus for healing. With our hearts washed clean of sin in the blood of our Savior, we gladly look out for the needs of others. We show them mercy the way God has shown us mercy.

One man in our text was overjoyed when Jesus came to his tollbooth and invited him to follow. This was not a call from a scandalous life. His was a call to eternal life. And our Lord would even use this sinner, this social outcast, to do important work for him. That leads us to see how our Lord further calls sinners. He calls sinners to even work in his kingdom.

Of all of Jesus' 12 disciples, Matthew seems a most unlikely candidate. Peter and Andrew, James and John were all fishermen. They made an honest living before Jesus called them to follow him. But Matthew's job was controversial. The Bible doesn't tell us what kind of tax collector he was. It doesn't say that Matthew was the one honest tax collector that Jesus thankfully rescued from a corrupt lifestyle by calling him. Matthew was a sinner. Just like Peter and Andrew, James and John, and all his disciples were sinners. Jesus called them all to saving faith in him. He also called them all to serve in his kingdom. He did the same for Matthew. *"Follow me,"* Jesus told Matthew. *Matthew got up and followed him.* Luke tells us in his Gospel account that Matthew left everything to follow Jesus. His life as a tax collector was now over. He'd spend the rest of his days serving in God's kingdom.

Matthew gets to work right away. He hosts a meal in which he invites Jesus and fellow disciples. But he also invited other people. Our text tells us, *"As Jesus was reclining at the table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners were actually there too, eating with Jesus and his disciples."* Matthew knew that Jesus had the only cure for sin. So he invited other sinners to see this great physician of souls. He invited people from work. He invited others he knew needed the healing only Jesus could give. And so Matthew wasted no time in doing the work for which Jesus had called him. He invited many to see Jesus.

We all play an important role in doing the work of extending God's kingdom to people. No one is more important than anyone else in carrying out this work. At this time, the NBA playoffs are down to the championship round. Only two teams are left to win a championship. Some players are leaders in scoring and other vital statistics. But some players you don't see much on the court. They may be riding the bench. Everyone on the winning team will receive the same championship ring. All are be responsible for winning it all. Even if they never score a basket, with hard work in practice and support from the bench, they make the starters better. They all play a vital role.

That is true for all of us here at St. Michael's. We all play a vital role in doing the work of God's kingdom. One thing we all can do is pray. Pray for those who do God's work for us in a public setting. Support them. Encourage them. And be a Matthew. Offer gospel invitations to the people you work with and the people that you live by. Maybe it's a new family next door or down the street. They may have school aged kids. Let them know about Sunday School and our VBS day at the park. Show them mercy the way God has shown your mercy.

Mercy can only describe how God calls sinners like us to live with him eternally. In mercy he even calls us sinners to serve in his kingdom. Some in the public ministry. All of us in God's kingdom. There are people in your life who need the healing that only Jesus can bring. God help us all to answer his call to mercy.