

## **The Third Sunday after Pentecost**

June 21, 2020

Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church  
Farmington, New Mexico

**Matthew 9:9-13** 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.

10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

12 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (NIV2011)

### **Healing Reaches Hearts**

No one makes house calls anymore. In our world everything has been monetized. Your interactions with real human beings are being dictated by readouts on spreadsheets in some corporate office. Even when it comes to how much time you spend with your doctor. How much of that care can be handled by someone besides the doctor. How often care for human beings feels like you are put through a factory automation process.

Except when it doesn't. Last fall when we were getting updates on Dan Jensen's medical condition, I heard some refreshing news. Dan had gotten weak and wasn't able to keep his medical appointments. So his doctor came to the house. Maybe that's more common today than I realize. But because I don't hear about that level of personal care and individual attention very often, I found it very encouraging. Someone taking the time and energy to give that kind of medical attention to a patient is very encouraging.

That's what makes the actions of Jesus so beautiful in Matthew chapter 9. Jesus goes out of his way for a sin-sick soul. Jesus gives personal time and attention to reach this one heart. And by this interaction, he sends a clear message that he cares about all sin-sick hearts. Jesus goes after sinners. Jesus persistently seeks out those who need his healing. Jesus is the Physician you need for your soul. Jesus reaches hearts. He reaches you to bring your heart the healing only he can provide. His healing works in you and through you to reach more hearts.

How Jesus operates stands out because it is so unusual. Not just going to the home of someone like Matthew. Not just associating with someone like Matthew. It was downright scandalous. First of all, meals weren't just about sharing a pizza with some friends or throwing some burgers on the grill for family. Meals in the Mediterranean culture at the time cemented relationships. They signaled approval. So anyone who became aware of Jesus eating with Matthew would have seen that as approval of his lifestyle choices. It would have given the impression Jesus was on the same level as someone scorned by

society. Not just that Matthew worked for the hated occupiers. Tax collecting surely required some skills and education. But opened opportunities for natural tendencies toward greed and dishonesty. Tax collectors would have been viewed about the same way we think of drug dealers. They have to make sure they send back an exact amount to their suppliers. But whatever they can get above and beyond that is theirs to keep. Upstanding members of society see them as parasites preying upon vulnerable victims.

So it's not just unusual the dinner party guests Jesus chooses to surround himself with. It's downright scandalous. It would cause any moral person to question what kind of rabbi Jesus must be. And yet, Jesus has an ultimate goal in mind.

One Bible scholar suggests that we shouldn't read too much into what Jesus is doing. That we shouldn't stoop down to the level of questionable company. Actually, that's exactly the point. I disagree with this scholar. Jesus does want us to get down on the level of the looked down upon members of society. But notice that nowhere does Jesus come to affirm sinners. He never encourages them to continue in sinful lifestyles, whether that is the greed of tax collectors or the sexual sin of prostitutes. That's obvious from the call of Matthew away from tax collecting toward following Jesus in a new, permanent calling. Jesus considers them the sick who need a doctor. And doctor's don't just hang out with the unhealthy and tell them to go home and get worse. They come to bring healing. Jesus reaches hearts with his healing.

Why does Jesus waste his time with the Pharisees? We understand that people like Matthew, people like him, people he would associate with need forgiveness. They obviously need Jesus.

Identifying sinner as a certain class of people so we see ourselves set apart from them. We can find culturally and historically accurate equivalents to tax collectors today. But as long as we are asking the question and trying to find someone else who fits that description, we are falling into the same trap as the Pharisees. I am a sinner. I am the one who is sick. I am in the same situation as the tax collector no matter how I want to see myself or how everyone else sees me. And it's worse. Failing to see myself as sin-sick will prevent me from benefitting from Jesus' healing.

To reach hearts with healing, Jesus has to do some painful surgery. He has to expose a more dangerous disease lurking inside so many human hearts. Jesus comes to confront the deeper issue of self-delusion.

Sin is a heart issue. In our day the concept of sin is more compatible with the idea that we are just not fully aware of God, we are lacking a complete understanding of God. Luther goes back to the etymology of sin from both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament that describes sin as missing the mark. Something is just off. Close, but hitting the spot right next to God's target instead of God's target itself. Then, says Luther, sin does something more dangerous. Sin makes excuses. Sin causes me to tell myself I'm not so bad. At least I tried. Sin causes me to put my focus back on myself. If I just try harder, I can eventually get to where God wants me to be. If I just had more instruction and

better encouragement, I could get to where God needs me to be. That's what Luther calls the original sin. The sin that connects us back to the Garden of Eden. Sin deludes us into trying to be like God. (Bayer, p. 135)

By their attitudes, the Pharisees showed that they were missing the mark of God's righteousness. Jesus has to confront them: **"But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"** (Matthew 9:13) They had assumed they were the righteous ones. But by failing to show mercy even to despised tax collectors, they proved their sinfulness. They had excluded themselves from God's healing by their discriminating attitude toward certain kinds of sin and special categories of sinners.

They were like a doctor who gets ready for surgery. He scrubs down and follows all the hygiene precautions. He makes sure he gets all the personal protective equipment covering himself. Then as a victim of serious gunshot wound gets wheeled into the operating room from the ambulance, he stands away from the action, afraid of getting blood on himself.

That's attitude we find inside each human heart is what makes the scandalous associations of Jesus so radical, yet so refreshing. Jesus is mercy. Jesus combines mercy and sacrifice. Jesus comes to bring healing to your heart.

Mercy is not deserved. No, mercy sees a need, a failing, a weakness and is moved to address it. Fill it. Jesus embraces sinners by getting down into the muck and filth of our sickness. Jesus was completely focused on the obedience God demands without forsaking the disobedience lodged in our hearts. Jesus wasn't so focused on his own performance that he failed to see the need in our hearts. The sinless heart of Jesus reaches out to those diseased with excuses and justifications for my behavior, contaminated by my self-righteousness and delusion. The flawless sacrifice of Jesus sees the equal need of Pharisee, tax collector and sinners like you and me. The sinless, healthy, righteous Sin of God came to become one with sinners at his crucifixion so he could free us and heal us from all sin. Jesus rose victoriously from the dead to call sinners to a radically different life. Jesus reaches your heart to bring you new life. A new life filled with mercy and sacrifice.

It's easy to see how costly this association with Matthew and other tax collectors was for Jesus. How his openness toward them opened him up to criticism and judgment and rejection by the religious elite of his day. But we need to understand what it cost Matthew too. The moment Matthew abandoned his tax collector's booth, he turned his back irrevocably on a lucrative career and financial security. He did it to follow a sketchy rabbi with a questionable pedigree and uncertain outcome. Yet whatever Matthew lost when he ended his career as tax collector he exchanged for infinite profit in his association with Jesus. The healing he gained for his heart far outweighed anything had chose to give up in the form of earthly comforts.

Mercy from Jesus qualifies you to be another Matthew. Do you have guilt lodged deep in your heart? Have you wronged someone and left a debt because of that hurt? Confess your sin to Jesus. Confess to the one who paid your debt in full. Do you harbor anger in your heart? Has someone hurt you so bad you can't let go of it? Are you waiting to let go until

they have set things right? Find forgiveness in Jesus. The same mercy that reached you in your infinite debt of sin to God allows you to reach out in mercy to anyone who has angered you. No matter how badly. No matter how long ago. Forgiveness given freely to you without conditions allows you to forgive even the most harmful hurts against you. Do you feel like you don't have enough? Do you secretly question why God has given so many of the blessings you want to someone else, but failed to deliver to you, no matter how hard you pray? Celebrate the riches of God's mercy to you. Stand in amazement at the infinite value of the new life and new purpose God has given you by the healing work of Jesus. Give generously from the inexhaustible storehouse of riches God has delivered over to you.

Don't wait until you feel healthier. Adopt God's habits for you. Find your healing in the work of Jesus. Tap into his power to see how he has changed your heart. Commit to a radically new life.

What is the perception of Christians in our world today? Too often the non-Christians in our world see us the way we see the Pharisees portrayed in the Bible. We can point out that their perceptions about us are faulty, they are basing their ideas on a few bad examples or they don't really understand what Christianity is all about. But the mercy shown to us by Jesus can give us courage to treat sin the same way. Not excusing sin or affirming sinners in destructive lifestyles. But being bold enough to associate with those whose souls are sick with sin. Not being too afraid of contamination that we get down on the level of those who are shunned by society. To make time for the tax collectors in our lives. Even giving attention to the Pharisees we see around us.

If you had tested positive for COVID-19 and then given a cure, it would give you a different attitude toward the sickness than the rest of us who have no idea what it's like. You would likely be a little more sympathetic. You might be willing to offer your assistance to someone who is suffering. That's what we get from the mercy of Jesus. He reached down to us in mercy when we were suffocating in sin. Jesus brings us the healing of forgiveness. His healing gives us a new life and new calling. We permanently follow Jesus in his mission of mercy. We are the ones Jesus uses to bring his healing to even more hearts. Amen.

*+ May he who began a good work in you carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. +*