

Be Accepting - Matt 9:9-13

The apostle Matthew, was a tax collector. A tax collector was, at the core, a traitor to his own people. And he was doubly despised by his fellow Jews; because he not only collected taxes from his own people for the Roman occupiers, but also because his collection of that tax was characterized by greed, graft and abuse.

From a strictly human standpoint, there was no hope for a tax collector to ever find favour with God. He was not only a sinner; but he was a particularly accursed sinner. In fact, He was not even worthy to be considered a normal sinner, but stood in a category all his own; which is why the Bible often quotes the phrase "tax-collectors and sinners".

And this was the kind of man God chose to write a gospel account we have in the Bible. It makes you wonder if God doesn't view some very notorious sinners in a way that is quite a bit different from the way the rest of us typically do! He clearly viewed Matthew differently than the people of his day typically did!

This man was a very notorious and very despised sinner - a sinner particularly hated by the Jewish people. But he was a sinner that Jesus called to Himself, one that He pardoned and cleansed, and that He placed into his service, and made into one of His own twelve ambassadors to the world, and to whom He gave the privilege of penning the longest and most "Jewish" of the four gospels.

Someone has once said, "The church is the only fellowship in the world where the one requirement for membership is the unworthiness of the candidate."

Now, you may think that this story is meant to teach us about the wonderful accepting mercy of Jesus; and about how great His love is for unworthy sinners. And of course, I believe that's one of the things that this story is meant to teach us. It's certainly meant to encourage those of us who are deeply and painfully aware of our sinfulness - that Jesus loves even the worst of us, and is able to call us to

Himself and put us into His service. But even though that's one of the outstanding points of this story, I don't think that's the only point that God is seeking to get across to us in it.

I believe that another point is what we find Jesus telling, not the terrible sinners, but the comparatively "righteous" Pharisees! They were astonished that Jesus would allow such wicked, dirty sinners as Matthew into His presence - and that He would even go so far as to eat with them! And yet, in doing so, Jesus was illustrating to them that this is the way God is toward those that the world considers hopeless and irredeemable.

Jesus is showing how He wants you and me - His followers, who have already received His forgiveness and who are now called to be like Him - to behave toward those whom even the people of this world consider to be "sinful" and "defiled" and "unworthy". Our merciful Saviour Himself prioritizes mercy over sacrifice; and He is showing us in Matthew's story that He wants for us to have the same priority that He displays, toward the needy sinners He places around us.

The first way He sets the example for us is by . . .

1. GOING TO WHERE NEEDY SINNERS ARE (v. 9).

I believe that Matthew heard much about Jesus. He must have heard all the stories and gossip about the things Jesus had done in his own home town, Capernaum: My suspicion is that Matthew heard a lot about all these things - and what's more, I'm sure Matthew did a lot of thinking about them. I suspect that all the stories and instruction he had received from the Scriptures - from the time that he was a little boy - began to come back to him. I believe he knew enough about the Old Testament prophecies to begin thinking that this Jesus maybe someone very special indeed.

But I also suspect that the realization of who Jesus was had caused Matthew's heart to sink in despair. ***Somewhere along the way, Matthew had chosen a life of sin. He had sold himself out to the***

offers of the Roman authorities, he had chosen to become a betrayer of his people for profit. I strongly suspect that Matthew had come to believe that there was no hope for heaven in his future. The Messiah's ministry may have been going on right there in his own home town; but he himself worked in a tax collectors booth - and there's no way for the two things to find a point of contact. **Jesus may have been going around healing many people; but Matthew was sure that Jesus wouldn't even give someone like him the time of day.**

I believe Matthew had even become like so many people today, who are lost and hopeless in their sin. He had simply resolved himself to his spiritual doom - that he was going to die one day and go to eternal judgment; and was now just going through the motions of life - carrying on with his sin as if it didn't really matter anymore, and seeking to make the most of it all while he could.

Now, I can't help but think that Matthew wrote the next words with a particular degree of emotion swelling up in his heart. He says that, as Jesus passed by, "He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office". And given Matthew's spiritual condition, consider what a wonderful thing it is that Jesus "saw" him! He didn't just see him; but He saw him sitting in that place in which he thought Jesus never would have seen him - in that place from which he would have naturally expected someone such as Jesus to turn His head away!

Have you ever been so mad and so disgusted at someone's sin that you couldn't even look at them? I believe that Matthew was used to people looking away from him. He had sort of hardened himself to people's averted eyes and sneering lips. But here was Jesus, looking right at Matthew!

Think of what must have gone on in Matthew's mind as he saw that Jesus saw him! And I don't think that Matthew could have possibly missed the love for him that he saw in Jesus' eyes. **After all, Jesus knew what Matthew was. He was sitting there in his tax collector's booth. And so, there would be no other reason for**

Jesus to "see" him, except because He loved him. I believe that Jesus' look of love melted the hardness in Matthew's heart.

By the way the next time you drive past a porn shop, or some other notorious place of sin, just remember: Jesus knows the names of everyone inside. He knows who owns the place, and who works there. He sees them every day. He knows how they ended up in such places. They too think that they are so lost in their sin that He wouldn't want to have anything to do with them. But the truth is that He sees them and He cares very deeply about their souls. Their sins as well as ours were on His mind when He went to the cross.

Do they see the love of Jesus' in our eyes when we look at them? Do we, with our look, communicate that Jesus knows about them and cares about them - that they are precious to Him? Or do we simply turn our heads away in disgust, and confirm them in their hopelessness?

Jesus "saw" Matthew. What a shock that must have been to him. And what an even greater shock it must have been to Matthew when Jesus then - with His eyes locked in love upon him - extended His hand to him and said, "Follow Me"!

Jesus came to someone who didn't dare seek Him! Jesus took the initiative and went to where a very notorious sinner was - in fact, right in the midst of his sinful activity - and called him. . Jesus took the initiative of mercy.

And do you know that that's why our merciful Saviour Himself said He came? He said, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus, our great example, calls us to do the same toward the lost and needy sinners around us. We're to seek them out! We're to go to the places where THEY are - lost in the despair of their sin, and feeling sure that there's no hope for them. We're to show them mercy by "seeing" them, and inviting them to rise up and follow Jesus.

Another way that our Teacher of mercy sets the example for us was by . . .

2. WELCOMING NEEDY SINNERS INTO FELLOWSHIP WITH HIMSELF (vv. 10-11).

Matthew left his wicked profession behind, and rose up and followed Jesus. And next, he tells us, "Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples" (Matthew 9:10). When Mark tells this story, he lets us know that this was Matthew's own house that Jesus went to. It must have been a very large house, considering that "many tax collectors and sinners" came and joined Jesus and His disciples in it. And Luke tells us even more - letting us know that Matthew was putting on a great feast in Jesus' honour (Luke 5:29).

Matthew had found the Saviour; and I believe he wanted to have a bunch of his former friends over to meet Jesus and be introduced to the Saviour too! When one hopeless and needy sinner discovers the mercy of the Saviour, he wants to share that mercy with other hopeless and needy sinners!

Did you know that Jesus was often criticized because of the kind of people He was found eating with? His opponents said that He was "a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:19). Those who watched Him would complain, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7). But it's fascinating to see how the most sinful of people seemed to be the ones who were most comfortable in His presence and the most eager to be with Him.

I believe that sinners flocked around Him, because they felt the truth of His promise: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me will by no means be cast out" (John 6:37).

Now, contrast this with the attitude of the Pharisees. They were the religious leaders of the day. They were having a fit about seeing Jesus and His disciples having dinner with such riff-raff. Matthew tells us, "And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, 'Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" (It's a pretty safe bet that the tax collectors and sinners weren't flocking to the homes of the Pharisees!)

A couple of points here. First of all, I notice that the Pharisees chose to bring their complaint to the disciples. They didn't bring it to Jesus. I think that they didn't dare bring their complaint to Jesus! They'll beef about it to His disciples, but they were afraid to talk to Him about it. Those who are righteous in their own eyes not only prefer not to be around sinners - they also would prefer not to be around Jesus either!

And another thing when they spoke to the disciples, the Pharisees referred to Jesus as their "Teacher". The Pharisees were complaining to Jesus' disciples that their "Teacher" was setting an unspeakable example to them - eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners!

And they're right. Jesus did set an example for His followers. Jesus' close association with sinners is meant to be our example to follow. We are to love the poor, needy, despised sinners of this world so much that we welcome them into our presence so that they'll know that they are loved and accepted. We're to invite them to come and get to know our Saviour, and taste of His mercy!

I'm curious - how welcomed do you think needy sinners feel around you and me? Do they feel loved by us? Can they sense the welcoming love and mercy of our Saviour from us?

A third way that Jesus proves to be our Teacher of mercy is in the example He gives of . . .

3. DECLARING IT TO BE GOD'S PURPOSE TO SHOW MERCY TO SUCH NEEDY SINNERS (vv. 12-13).

Now please don't misunderstand this. This isn't the same thing as saying that God doesn't care about sin. In order to convey God's love and mercy, we mustn't alter the message of God's word, or seek to soften the condemning power of God's law. God calls sin "sin"; and He warns that sin will be judged.

But as it says in John 3:17; "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." The big message that God wishes to convey to the sinners of this world is not that He condemns them. He does indeed condemn their sin, our sin; but His great message is that He has sent His Son to pay the penalty for sin on their/our behalf, and that He is now ready and able to show mercy to all who will come to Him for it.

That message is the message that Jesus proclaimed. Look at how Jesus replayed this to the Pharisees. He did so in three ways.

First, through what we might call the "logic" of His actions. Matthew tells us that, when Jesus heard that the Pharisees were complaining, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick".

Who else would you expect the Saviour of sinners to be associated with than sinners who need to be saved? Our church family should expect to be filled with people who are broken and damaged by the ravages of sin; because we proclaim the Saviour of sinners!

Second, Jesus used the scriptures to show that it was God's purpose to be merciful to sinners. He quotes the words of God to them from the Old Testament passage of Hosea 6:6. In fact, He even says it in a way that imitated the way they themselves talked to people - saying, "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice'".

Jesus wasn't saying, of course, that God did not require a sacrifice for sin. Clearly He did, as the Old Testament law given through Moses teaches us. And in fact, He still does! That sacrifice - and all

that was being pictured for us of it in the Old Testament laws concerning sacrifice - is fulfilled completely for us in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. God gave the sacrifice of His own Son for us as an act of mercy. And Jesus - in quoting this verse - is teaching that the sacrifice was all about mercy! Mercy was the end, and the sacrifice was the means to that end. Jesus is showing that His Father places the priority of mercy over sacrifice; and that so should we.

And finally, Jesus shows that it was God's purpose to be merciful to sinners from a clear affirmation of His own mission. He says plainly, "For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Jesus came to save those who are sinners - who know that they truly are sinners, and who know that they have no hope apart from God's mercy through the Saviour! And this suggest to me that, as Christians, we need to be very careful how we talk about the despised sinners of this world. Let's be very careful how we think of them - especially the really gross and seemingly hopeless sinners. Let's remember that we are all sinners and that Jesus came to save us all!

Let's rejoice in Matthew's story. His story reminds us of how deep the mercy of our wonderful Saviour can reach. It reaches to the salvation of even the most despised of sinners. As sinners ourselves, how glad we should be for this!

But let's be very careful that we also learn from the example of our Saviour. He is our Teacher by example. And what He teaches us in this passage is that we are to show mercy to the all sinners of this world, just as He did. All are accepted by Christ. May Christ the great teacher help us to make it so. Amen.