

*As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Matthew 9:9-13*

Nancy and I have been married over 36 years. A few months after we got married, we bought a golden lab puppy, whom we called Casey. The prime reason we bought Casey was because labs are great family dogs – but, because I am a hunter, we also bought Casey because labs are great hunting dogs - used primarily to puruse, flush out and retrieve pheasants, grouse, and ducks. Casey was a great family dog, even as a puppy – and he really began to flourish after we took him through obedience training school when he was six months old. He showed us his true heart on the final test on the last night of his training, when everyone’s dogs were made to sit together on the one side of the auditorium, while the dog’s owners sat on the opposite side of the auditorium. And one-by-one, each owner would call their dog to come to them across the auditorium – a test to see if the dog would obey the voice of their owner and to come to them - and also a test to see if they would “stay” when the other dogs obeyed the voice of their owner. Casey passed both tests with flying colors. With Casey, we saw the truth that an obedient dog is a happy dog because dogs love their owners when they know exactly is expected of them.

Casey’s obedience was tested quite often, and he always did well, until the day Nancy and I were in the woods with him, not far from a road and Casey heard a sound and headed towards the road. And as he left we cried out and called him to come back to us, but this time he didn’t obey us and as we heard the sound of a car driving down the road, when then heard the sound of a heavy thud. And as we got to the road we found him dead lying on the side of the road. Why did Casey disobey our voices when we called him to come back to us? Well, Casey, was a great family dog, but he was also bird hunting dog and he did exactly what he was inherently born and bred to do – listen for sounds and chase down the source of those sounds when they’re on the move, and it cost him his life. If Casey would have obeyed our voices he would have lived a long happy life. But because that which was bred within him, chose to chase after something that was contrary to the happiness he knew from us, he died before he was two years old.

This is reflective of the tragic story of humanity. God created us in His image - and He then called us to have dominion over his creation and to be caretakers of the earth. God told us we could enjoy and experience any and everything that He created in this world – *except* we were not to eat of the tree that possessed the knowledge of good and evil. But we did so anyways. We did so because that which was bred within us, *which is the image of God*, caused us to believe - with some insidious reasoning from the devil, that we could be God – which caused us then to chase after that was contrary to the joy we knew with God, bringing death to every human being. Adam and Eve’s choice to rebel against and reject God by disobeying the voice of God brought sin into the world and infected us all with sin - to the degree that we are all now inherently born and bred to sin. We see the depths of that fall and heart of God’s mercy, grace and love right after Adam and Eve sinned.

*“The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God CALLED to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Genesis 3:7-9).* After confronting Adam and Eve about their rebellion and disobedience, God cursed the devil and the earth; and He passed judgement on Adam and Eve; and then He promised that He would send a Savior into the world to defeat sin, evil and death - so He might redeem, rescue and restore those who respond to His call to love Him and live for Him and live with Him forever. And so God called Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jacob, David, Jesus - and Jesus calls us today.

As we begin to look at our text for today we need to remember that theme of Matthew's gospel is that Jesus is the Sovereign King of Kingdom of God who rules and reigns and has authority over everything in the universe - who came to earth as the long-promised Savior/Messiah. *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross"* (Colossians 1:15-20). Mark and Luke make similar emphasis in their accounts. Mark's focus is that Jesus is the Son of Man who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Luke's emphasis is that Jesus is the Son of Man who "came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). In all three accounts - Matthew, Mark and Luke present Jesus' power and authority as that of the long-promised Messiah.

In Matthew we have seen Jesus' divine, sovereign authority over the physical world of illnesses, sickness and disease; and over the natural world of wind, water and storms; and over the supernatural world of evil and demons; and over the fallen world that we live in that is saturated with sin. The last one is the most personal and most powerful for us in that Jesus' authority over our fallen world is *the power to forgive sins*. Of all of what we've seen, this is of the greatest significance for us because sin is the root of all of our problems and forgiveness of sin is our greatest need. This is the context for our text for today. Jesus has just forgiven and healed a sinner who was paralyzed. Jesus had shown great compassion toward all those who were sick and many there would probably understand Jesus forgiving the man for his sins as an extension of that compassion to someone stricken with a severe paralysis. But what about people who were there who were in perfect health physically, but who also needed to have their sins forgiven, but who were despised by the Jews who thought they should be excluded from being forgiven?

*"As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him"* (Matthew 9:9). In Luke 5:27 we read: *"After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, 'Follow me.'* Mark 2:13-14 tells us: *"He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him."* We don't know how much time has passed since Jesus forgave and healed the paralytic, but it probably wasn't very long. Jesus had left Capernaum and was walking along the road that runs along the shore of the Sea of Galilee when he comes to the booth of the tax collector. We are not told what the booth looked like. It could have been a small building or a table with some covering for shade. Sitting in the tax booth is a Jewish man named Levi (Hebrew name) the son of Alphaeus. He is also known at Matthew (Greek name) and he is the one who wrote this gospel.

All three gospel accounts tell us that Jesus simply said, *"Follow Me!"* While this seems so direct and simple, this would have been an incredible calling that was being directed towards a tax-collector like Matthew. It was bad enough that Jesus had claimed to forgive the sins of a paralytic *in that* the common thought among the Jews at that time was that a person who was handicapped was crippled as a result of their sin or the sin of their parents or grandparents. But the thing that they would have accepted was that, because he was paralyzed, the man desperately needed forgiveness. But now Jesus was calling one of the most despised classes of people in all Israel to follow him. Tax collectors as a whole were despised. There were three kinds of tax-collectors and Matthew was of the worst. There were tax-collectors who collected general taxes such as those on land, property, and income. Then there were tax-collectors who held the "franchise" from Rome that allowed them to collect a wide variety of taxes including import duties, toll way fees and business taxes. They had unlimited latitude in their power to attach a tax to almost any article or activity. But these tax-collectors protected their reputation to some degree by hiring other tax-collectors to do their dirty work – and that is what the tax-collector Matthew did.

Tax collectors like Matthew were so despised that they were not allowed to enter the synagogue and they were forbidden to have any religious or social contact with their fellow Jews. They were ranked with the unclean animals and put in the class with pigs, along with robbers and murderers. They were considered to be liars and traitors, which barred them from giving testimony in a Jewish court. These would have been the things that Matthew dealt with as a tax-collector. And so, it would have been clear to those heard what Jesus said to Matthew and to the Jewish readers of Matthew's gospel, that when Jesus said, "*Follow me*" Jesus was extending his forgiveness to one of the most despised outcasts of society. Matthew responds to Jesus calling by telling us that "*he rose and followed*" Jesus.

Matthew was being humbly modest about how he responded to Jesus command. Luke 5:28 tells us that, "*And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.*" Of all the disciples, Matthew paid the highest financial cost in following Jesus. There would be no returning to his job; someone else would take his place. Matthew knew the cost and willingly paid it without hesitation. In fact, Matthew's further response bears that out. There was no regret to his total sacrifice. Instead, he reflected extreme joy over the grace Jesus has shown him by what he does next. In Luke 5:29 we read that, "*Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.*" Here Matthew tells us that he threw a party for "*a large company of tax collectors and others*" to celebrate Jesus' call on his life. The particular Greek word used here for "*others*" means "others of the same kind." Matthew and Mark state that they were "*sinners.*" These would be Jews who were also outcasts of society for various reasons – as well as prostitutes, criminals, Greeks and Gentiles. There is no doubt that Matthew wanted them to know what Jesus had done for him and could do for them too. Matthew invites Jesus and his disciples to his home - and then invited other "*sinners*" to hear the gospel.

"*And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'*" (Matthew 9:11). It would seem that while the banquet Matthew was holding in Jesus' honor, so that his friends could meet him, was at Matthew's "*house*" – it was apparently at a location where those who were attending could easily be seen by the Jewish religious leaders who were not invited or attending. In Mark 2:16 we read that "*and the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'*" And Luke 5:30 tells us that "*the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'*" What we're reading here is that the Pharisees and scribes were not so much irritated that the disciples were eating with sinners, but that Jesus was eating with them. That being said, it would seem the point of their statement to the disciples was to challenge to them, by saying "*How can you attach yourselves as followers to a man who associates with such sinful people.*" They reasoned that if Jesus was really a man of God, then he should not be in the company of such wicked people. If Jesus was really a man of God, he should be dining with good and upright people like themselves. Of course, none of them had invited Jesus to a dine with them. But in their minds, if Jesus was truly a man of God, he would not be in the company of people like Matthew. The Pharisees judged everyone else by their own standards. As far as they were concerned, righteous people associated with righteous people and sinners with sinners. Jesus claimed to be from God, but he associated with sinners, so he could not be who he claimed to be. This was their case against Jesus and all the proof they wanted to show that Jesus was not from God regardless of his teaching and miracles.

"*But when he heard it, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.' Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners*" (Matthew 9:12-13). When Jesus heard about what the scribes and Pharisees were saying, he then went out and directly challenged and rebuked them. All three gospel accounts say pretty much the same thing, but Matthew gives us a much fuller account of Jesus' response – probably because he is more personally involved here. Jesus makes three arguments against their prejudicial, judgemental premise that he should not associate with sinners - and in favor of his ministry of forgiveness and the redeeming, rescuing, restoration to God that occurs by Jesus' willingness to associate with sinners.

The first argument Jesus raised against those who oppose spending time with sinful people is based on *the realities of medicine*. “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*” This is a simple and logical argument. Healthy people do not need a physician and the sick are the ones who need to see the doctor. This same principle applies to the spiritual world as it does for the physical one. Those who are spiritually healthy do not need a spiritual physician, but those who are spiritually sick do. A doctor is expected to spend their time where people are sick. What sort of doctor would spend all of his time with healthy people and would refuse to associate with those that were sick? Jesus rebuke here was very clear. The Pharisees claimed to be those closest to God, but they avoided sinners rather than helping them. The scribes and Pharisees were quick to diagnose the disease of sin in others, but rather than offering a cure or comfort or compassion they pronounced prejudice and judgment.

One other point Jesus is making here is that there are people *who are sick* - but they refuse to acknowledge it and they do not go to doctors. I am sure all of us know people like that. It always seems to be obvious to everyone else that there is a problem, but when they are asked, they say it is nothing, they will be fine, and they do not go to the doctor - even though it is plain to everyone else they need a doctor. What this all means is that it is only the people who recognize that they are sick, go to the doctor – which means *it's only those who recognise they are sinners that can see their desperate need for God*. The Pharisees were sick as they could be because their hearts were saturated with self-righteousness, yet they saw themselves as in perfect spiritual health, so they refused to seek the spiritual physician and instead criticized him. Tax-collectors and sinners knew they were sick and they knew they needed Jesus.

The second argument Jesus raised against those who oppose spending time with sinful people is based on *the truth of the Word of God*. “*Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’*” These words are drawn directly from Hosea 6:6 and they were a deep stinging rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees for several reasons. First, Jesus preceded this quote with the phrase, “*go and learn,*” which was the common phrase used by the Rabbis to rebuke those who did not know something they should have already known. It was a stinging rebuke against their supposed superior knowledge. Second, the scripture quote itself was directly against their thinking and actions. They always were more concerned with carrying out every minute regulation that they had set up in their vain attempt to be righteous - rather than in carrying out what the Mosaic Law actually said. They missed the whole divine concept of God’s patience, mercy, and forgiveness running throughout the Old Testament. Third, the fact that the quote was from Hosea made the point even more stinging because if was from the story of Hosea’s continuing love and forgiveness to his wife Gomer, who as a prostitute, was extremely unfaithful – a picture of God’s love and forgiveness to Israel, though they had been extremely unfaithful to God. The story of Hosea and Gomer’s life was a picture of God’s desire for mercy rather than sacrifice. Without that kind of heart – everything the Pharisees said and did was unacceptable to God. Without mercy, they were shown to be more ungodly than the sinners who made no pretense of godliness.

The third argument Jesus raised against those who oppose spending time with sinful people is based the *very purpose for which Jesus came which was to save His people from their sins*. “*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*” When the birth of Christ was announced by an angel to Joseph, he was told that Mary would, “*bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*” The purpose of Jesus life to save sinners is a common theme all throughout Jesus’ teaching and actions toward people. He was always compassionate and forgiving. There were only two groups for whom Jesus had harsh words and actions. The first were the money-changers who had made the temple a place for thieves. The second are the self-righteous religious leaders who claimed to know the way to God, but instead self-righteously lead people away from God. Jesus was never hard to humble sinners; he always showed compassion and mercy. Jesus healed their diseases and cast out their demons. Jesus never excused sin, but he always extended grace to humbles sinners who admitted their sinful condition and their desperate need for God. As John Haddington once said, “I have been comforted for more than 20 years by the thought that Jesus welcomes, not only sensible sinners, but stupid ones as well.”

Jesus did not come to call the righteous. If a person could truly be righteous, there would be no need for Jesus to call them. If such a righteous person even existed, there would be nothing to forgive and they would self-righteously go to heaven on their own merits. Jesus' call to follow him does go out to the self-righteous, but self-righteous people do not follow Jesus because they see no need for him. Jesus came to call sinners to himself. In Matthew 5:3-8 Jesus said: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*"

The calling of Matthew and the following feast reveals to us the depths of Jesus' great mercy towards us. He reaches out to blatant sinners and social outcasts, and he even takes one of them, a despised tax-collector and calls him to be an apostle who would be one of the foundational leaders of the first church.

This is God's grace to us in that everyone in this room, in fact everyone who is born on earth is bred to sin. The rebellion of Adam and Eve against God in the Garden of Eden drastically and dramatically compromised any possibility of righteousness on our part. King David affirmed that in Psalm 51:1-17. He not only acknowledged the depth of his sin, but also confessed his desperate need for God.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!  
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.  
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.  
Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.  
Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.  
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.  
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.  
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

The apostle Paul confessed this ongoing battle with sin within his own life, but he, like Matthew before him, rejoiced in the call of Jesus in his life to turn from his sin and follow him. In Romans 7:17-25 he writes: "*Sin dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" Here the apostle Paul affirms that God promised that He would send a Savior into the world to defeat sin, evil and death - so He might redeem, rescue and restore those who respond to His call to love Him and live for Him and live with Him forever. And so God called Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jacob, David and the apostle Paul - and Jesus is calling us today. He calls us to follow him regardless of who we are or what we have done.

*I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.* 1 Timothy 1:12-17

God is calling us today. He is calling all of us to follow him. Some of us need to respond Jesus' call to follow him for the first time by surrendering our lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Some of us need to respond Jesus' call to follow him to take the next steps of faith in baptism, church membership and service. Some of us need to respond Jesus' call to follow him by giving more of ourselves to Jesus and less of ourselves to the world so we might know the freedom and joy of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ. Some of us need to respond Jesus' call to follow him because we are paralyzed by our sin and some of us need to respond Jesus' call to follow him because we don't think we ever sin. Today God is asking us "Where are you? In 1 John 1:5-9 we read: "*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*"

Pass, me not O gentle Saviour,  
Hear my humble cry.  
While on others Thou art calling,  
Do not pass me by.

Saviour, Saviour,  
Hear my humble cry.  
While on others Thou art calling,  
Do not pass me by.

Let me at Thy throne of mercy,  
Find a sweet relief.  
Kneeling there in deep contrition,  
Help my unbelief.

Trusting only in Thy merit,  
Would I seek Thy face,  
Heal my wounded, broken spirit,  
Save me by Thy grace.

Fanny Crosby

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