

Jesus, Friend of Sinners
 Matthew 9:9-17
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 Ames, Iowa
 November 19, 2023

The Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays are just around the corner. During these holidays, we will do a lot of eating together. The text we will study this morning is about Jesus eating a meal with people. As a matter of fact, there are lots of places in the gospels where Jesus eats meals with people. It is important to consider who Jesus eats with and why He eats with them. These meals help us understand who He is and what He came to do. As a matter of fact, before Jesus was crucified, He left us with a very important meal that we celebrate every other Sunday—The Lord’s Supper.

Consider this: The Lord’s Supper is the fulfillment of the old meal called the Passover. However, the Lord’s Supper is not an add on to the Passover. No. The Lord’s Supper celebrates the fullness of the powerful grace and mercy that comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The Lord’s Supper is a meal that is more powerful than the old meal. The Passover meal cannot contain the new one because the Lord’s Supper is filled with the Son of God.

Let’s look at our text, and I will show you what I mean. Here is my main point: Jesus is a Friend of sinners whom He calls to follow Him. *Let’s walk through the narrative and make our application at the end.*

On the heels of healing and forgiving the paralytic, Jesus called a tax collector, Matthew, to follow Him in v. 9:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, “Follow me,” and he got up and followed him.

So far, we have seen Jesus’ ministry to people at the bottom of the barrel in society. So, if you think the Roman centurion, the leper, and the demon-possessed men were unacceptable and unclean, tax collectors beat them all. Tax collectors were the worst of the worst in Jews’ eyes because they were considered traitors.

As a tax collector, Matthew was considered *politically* unacceptable. After all, he worked for the enemy in his hometown of Capernaum. Capernaum was a crossroads town where people passed through with their commerce, so it was an excellent place to collect taxes and tolls.

Matthew would have collected a tax of one-tenth of the harvest. He would have collected a *1% income tax*. He would have also collected a *poll tax* on people from ages 14 to 65. He collected a *duty tax on imports and exports*. These could be quite expensive taxes. He could also collect *taxes on roads, bridges, wagons, and animals*. To top it off, tax collectors were notorious for overcharging. They would give the Roman Empire their due but keep the excess for themselves, thus making themselves rich at the expense of their very own people. Needless to say, the Jews hated tax collectors.

Matthew was considered *religiously* unacceptable. Jewish leaders used Leviticus 20:5 to bar tax collectors from worship. Leviticus 20:5 says to cut off any person who *“prostitutes [himself] to Moloch.”* So, tax collectors were treated as *religious outcasts* and considered *unclean*.

Finally, Matthew would have been considered *socially* unacceptable. Because tax collectors were politically and religiously unclean, Jewish law prohibited socializing with tax collectors. Simply *helping* them, *walking* along the road with them, or *being* a guest in their homes would have been considered a violation of Jewish law and, therefore, made you unclean. Bottom line: Tax collectors were to be avoided like the plague, and hanging out with them was unthinkable.

Matthew was at the bottom of the barrel when it came to being considered unclean. You can’t get any lower than him.

But when Jesus called him, he got up and followed Him. Luke's Gospel emphasizes the fact that Matthew left *everything* to follow Jesus. This implies that Matthew left all of his wealth and possessions behind to go where Jesus led him.

Next, v. 10 tells us that Matthew did the most natural thing a new disciple would do. He wanted to introduce all of his tax collector buddies and other social outcasts to meet Jesus. So, he planned a big meal at his house and invited all of those sinners to be his guests.

Remember, hanging out with sinners in Jesus' day was spiritually and culturally unacceptable. So, the Pharisees got wind of what was going on, and being the Jewish theological and cultural referees, they threw a flag on Jesus. They showed up at Matthew's door, and instead of talking to Jesus, they approached His disciples v. 11 says they ask:

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus overheard their question and answered their question in vv. 12-13. To answer their question, Jesus gave an analogy and applied it to His ministry. He said:

It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. [AND]

For I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners.

These statements mean the same thing. However, let's make sure we don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. He was not saying there are two classes of people in the world. He was not saying He came to help the *sick* and not the *healthy*. Likewise, He was not saying He came to save the *unrighteous sinners*, but the *righteous* don't need any help, as if there really is a class of righteous people. Scripture is clear. No one is righteous, not even one. All have sinned.

One little side note of irony here. Jesus took a jab at the Pharisees when He said:

Go and learn what this means:

I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

When Jesus said, "*Go and learn what this means,*" He was using a traditional Rabbinic teaching phrase. Rabbis would say this to their students when their students needed to learn something. It would be like a teacher going over your test and telling you to look at the ones you missed and go back and study the book and learn the correct answer.

For Jesus to say to them, "*Go and learn what this means.*" had to infuriate them because they thought Jesus was some backwoods Rabbi, and now He was teaching them.

Notice what He called them to learn? He called them to study Hosea 6:6. The Hebrew word for *mercy* in Hosea 6:6 is *hesed*, which means *covenant love*.

Here's the background. The people of Hosea's day had abandoned Yahweh and His covenant with them. They had become *apostates*, and it was evident by how they treated one another. The people went through all the religious motions, but their hearts were far from God, and it was evident by how they treated one another, especially the poor, needy, outcasts, and those who were weak and vulnerable, like widows and orphans.

Listen, Jesus wasn't telling the Pharisees that they needed to be more sympathetic and kinder. He was telling them that they were like the apostates of Hosea's day. It was a slap in the face to the Pharisees.

These men practiced ritualistic religion, but their actions showed they had no heart for God, and it was revealed by the way they treated the tax collectors, outcasts, and sinners. They had preserved the externals of their religion but lost the heart of God's covenant with His people.

Next, in vv. 14-17, Matthew perfectly places the discussion on fasting following Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees. Look in v. 14 because He is going to blow up the old wineskins of Judaism.

Then John's disciples came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

You see, fasting was a sign of piety in Judaism, and people fasted for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, it was used as a picture of sadness, mourning, and broken-heartedness. Sometimes, people fasted when they longed for God to change things in their lives. In this context, fasting was in regard to hasten the coming of the Messiah.

Both John's disciples and the Pharisees practiced fasting at that time. They were not wrong to fast. It was a normal spiritual discipline used to cry out for and anticipate the coming of the Bridegroom, the Messiah.

Looking back to the book of Hosea again, Hosea 2:16, 19-20 tells us:

*In that day—this is the Lord's declaration—you will call me, "My husband," . . .
¹⁹ I will take you to be my wife forever. I will take you to be my wife in
 righteousness, justice, love, and compassion. ²⁰ I will take you to be my wife in
 faithfulness, and you will know the Lord.*

These were promises that showed how God would draw His people to Himself like a groom seeking after a bride.

However, John's disciples came to Jesus because they were struggling. They seemed to be having trouble accepting that Jesus was the promised Messiah. After all, John had affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, and now he had been arrested and languishing in prison.

They were probably thinking: So, what's the point of all of our religious piety if John is suffering in prison? Is He really the Savior?

Jesus answered their question with a question and then gave two short parables. Look at His rhetorical question in v. 15:

*Can the wedding guests be sad while the groom is with them? The time will
 come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.*

Jesus' rhetorical question was the answer that was an incredible claim. He was basically saying,

*"The groom is with you now. You have fasted for Me, and now I'm here. This is
 not the time for My followers to fast. It is the time to feast."*

In the last part of v. 15, Jesus alluded to His execution on the cross. When that day comes, Jesus' disciples would be sad, and then on that day, they will fast and, by implication, mourn for Jesus' return to set all things right.

Finally, in vv. 16-17 he uses two parables to drive His point home. These parables were common sense things or slices of life in Jesus' day.

He said *no one puts an unshrunk patch on an old garment, or it will make the tear worse when the new patch eventually shrinks*. In other words, Jesus can't just be patched onto the old forms of fasting in Judaism.

The second short parable is much like the first. *He said you don't put new wine in old wineskins because the old wineskins can't expand anymore*. In other words, the new wine of the new covenant would burst the old skins, and everything would be ruined.

Matthew wants us to see that in the coming of Christ, God was doing something new. The New Covenant is not an add-on to the Old Covenant. It is the fulfillment of the Old that also makes the Old obsolete.

Jesus' coming would transform everything because the long-awaited Bridegroom was making a way for sinners to come to God and find forgiveness and salvation and be made righteous.

Similarly, fasting was going to change. Old Testament fasting was a longing for the King to come. New Testament fasting looks back at the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, believing firmly that the King has come and, at the same time, looks forward to Jesus' return. It longs for the consummation of the Kingdom of God when God will make all things right. Let's make some application to our text.

I. Jesus is a Friend of sinners (vv. 9, 11-12)

In vv. 11-12, Jesus was not dividing people into two groups: the righteous and the unrighteous. There never was a righteous group. His point is that there is only one class of people—*sinners*. Everyone is unrighteous and, therefore, a sinner who needs to be forgiven their sin and saved.

In Romans 3:23, the Apostle Paul tells us:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Matthew realized he was a sinner and needed to be saved. It's no accident Matthew placed his call to discipleship right after the healing of the paralytic man. The famous painter Rembrandt painted his masterpiece called *The Passion of Christ*. In it, he painted himself at the foot of the cross to show that it was his sin that nailed Jesus to the cross.

In the same manner, Matthew put himself in the gospel, and he strategically placed himself among the sinners, after the paralytic who had his sins forgiven, and in a room full of sinners eating a meal with Jesus.

Friend, if you want to be healed and given new life in Jesus, then you must admit you are a sinner and, by faith, trust in Christ. The question is: *Are you like Matthew and understand that you are a sinner in need of Jesus' forgiveness of your sin?*

You see, we all stand condemned before a Holy God because of our sin and unrighteousness. We will have to give an account of our lives to Him, and He will deal justly with us according to our sin. Jesus came to heal those sick of their sin by taking their sin-sickness upon Himself. It was our sin that killed Jesus on the cross.

Yet, this is how Jesus heals us of our unrighteousness. He takes our unrighteousness from us and then pays for our sin on the cross. Our healing is complete because after Jesus was buried in the tomb, He rose from the dead on the third day. Now, His resurrection becomes our ultimate healing and deliverance. To all who answer His call to follow Him as Matthew did, He forgives and saves.

II. The Gospel of Jesus Christ destroys religion (vv. 13-17)

I want you to apply vv. 13-17 this way. Stay with me here. Jesus came for unrighteous sinners. The Pharisees believed they were righteous because they kept the Law of God. They had a contractual mindset of relating to God that thought this way: *"I obey, and God saves and blesses me. I disobey, and God punishes me."*

Friend, this is old wineskin thinking or old garment thinking. The gospel destroys any mindset of a contractual relationship with God.

Here is how this works out in our lives. Have you ever believed that God owed you blessings or some good thing or that you shouldn't have had a bad thing happen to you because you have been faithful to God? Most Christians have had that thought at one time or another. Many believe this is how God relates to us. This belief is horribly wrong.

One of the issues we see in this whole passage is how deadly it is to believe you live in a contractual relationship with God. The Pharisees believed they were righteous because of their good works and, therefore, God owed them. In reality, they were self-righteous and sought self-justification.

They believed that what God brought into their lives was a reaction to their deeds, their law-keeping, their sacrifices, and *their keeping themselves pure as opposed to unclean*. They wanted to avoid anyone or anything that would cause them to be considered unclean. If they did this, then God would accept them, and only good things would come into their lives.

If we are honest with ourselves, we sometimes believe the same misunderstanding the Pharisees did. We quite naturally believe that what God brings into our lives is a reaction to our deeds. We believe that our circumstances reflect the way God feels about us. When this happens, we tend to say: *"Haven't I earned better than this? or Why does God hate me?"* when we experience suffering, tragedy, or difficulties in life.

The gospel is the New Wine of God that destroys the thought that we live in a contract-based relationship with God. The cross of Christ ends any kind of idea that *what goes around comes around* relationship with God *because it is not the purity that you produce that saves you but the purity of Christ that is imputed to you.*

Listen, when we begin to drift into the mindset that God has treated us unfairly, then we need to remember that Jesus never sinned. He lived in perfect obedience to God, and yet, He suffered, was betrayed, misunderstood, mocked, beaten, and tortured. He did nothing to deserve this kind of treatment. No contract was broken, and yet He did this to bear the consequences of our sin. So, when we begin to try to relate to God contractually, we need to remember Jesus' treatment on earth. When we feel we deserve better, the cross can stop that thought in its tracks because we should never believe we deserve a more comfortable life than Jesus.¹

This leads us to our third application because what we learn is that the company we keep doesn't make us unclean or impure. This means we can reach out to those who need Jesus in whatever situation they are in and introduce them to Jesus.

III. A local church is a family of sinners telling other sinners where to find healing and forgiveness (v. 10).

In v. 10, after Matthew answered the call to follow Jesus, he throws a banquet to introduce his friends to Jesus. This is a picture of the church carrying out one of its main purposes—to share the good news of salvation in Christ with the world.

Not only was Jesus a Friend of sinners, but Matthew was a friend to sinners too. Now, as a forgiven sinner, he knew friends who needed Jesus' forgiveness.

What Matthew did in v. 10 is a picture of the church. The church has always been a home for sinners. People who are broken, repenting, and learning to follow their Savior. Churches need to be places where broken people can find forgiveness, help, and hope.

As our culture continues to fracture and find new ways to disintegrate, the church is going to need to be a place where sinners find the hope of new life in Christ.

Listen, when people hit bottom through drug abuse, divorce, sexual abuse, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, gender dysphoria, and the damage of gender transition surgeries, they are going to need the hope of forgiveness and new life in Christ. We are going to need to be a friend to them so we can introduce them to Jesus.

IV. How can a church full of sinners be a merciful friend of sinners? (vv. 10-13)

Let me give you four steps to take: First, be a good listener. When you hear things that shock you, don't recoil in disgust or react in self-righteousness. You don't have to accept and affirm their sin nor condemn it at this point. Just listen well and try to understand them and their struggle.

Second, share the good news of the gospel. The gospel offers hope for sinners because Jesus is a Friend of sinners. Make sure they understand who Jesus truly is. They may have a misunderstanding of Jesus, the church, and Christianity. Let them know that being a Christian does not mean people are perfect, but they follow the One who was and is perfect for them and died to pay for their sin. Tell them how Jesus lived the perfection we need and could never achieve and died on the cross to restore our relationship with God. When sinners repent, they are asking for God to show them mercy, and He will give it freely to all who ask.

Third, speak the truth in love. In our culture today, the tendency is almost to demand that others validate their sin. For example, a person struggling with gender dysphoria may want to be called by different pronouns. A woman seeking to transition into a man might want to be addressed with male pronouns and vice versa.

Friends, Scripture says that God made people male and female, and He doesn't make mistakes. God's design is good. We must not reinforce Satan's lie that He has caused them to believe. The Deceiver is still at work whispering lies into the hearts of people,

“Did God really make you male or female? You don't have to remain the gender God created. You can change it and make your world and life the way you want it to be.”

¹ Cameron Cole, *Therefore I Have Hope*, 139-140.

With gentleness and wisdom, we must speak the truth and grace to people. Some will not like how we respond, and the conversation may be costly, but we must speak the truth in love.

Fourth, we must go the extra mile. Friends, we will need to walk with people who are recovering from the damage of sinful choices. People who come out of serious, sinful circumstances need Christians to walk alongside them while they heal. It will not be easy, nor will it be quick in most cases. Healing and discipleship are often a long, slow process of learning how to follow Jesus.

V. The gospel is about being made new (vv. 14-17)

Jesus didn't come to put a patch on Judaism or pour the wine of the New Covenant inside of Judaism. It won't work. It will destroy both Judaism and Jesus' teaching. Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant, and by doing so, He gave birth to the New Covenant that is established by His blood shed on the cross.

The power of the New Covenant saves His people from the inside out. The power of the New Covenant causes sinners to be born again by the Holy Spirit and creates in us a love for Jesus, His word, and His church. The New Covenant is powerful overflowing grace that results in the complete transformation of the heart of a person, which over time means the person loves Jesus more and, therefore, becomes more like Jesus.

Here is our problem. Sometimes, we really do not want Him to completely transform our lives. Some people want to have Jesus on their terms. They just want a little of Jesus and hold onto their pet sins. Some people love their religious activity and, therefore, want a contractual relationship with Jesus whereby they perform some religious activity, and Jesus cashes the check for them.

You see, many people don't want to eat the full meal with Jesus. They don't want the *Marriage Feast of the Lamb*. Instead, they want a *Happy Meal with Jesus* where they can open the box, get their prize, and go on their way.

Jesus will have none of that. The gospel will not allow that. The gospel is the soul-exploding power of God, and those who come to Jesus will be powerfully changed, or they will remain in their sin.

So, where are you with Jesus? Are you feasting with the Lamb of God or just wanting a Happy Meal with Jesus so you can feel a little better about yourself or relieve your conscience for a little while?