

HAVE YOU LEARNED THIS?

Matthew 9:9-13. 18-26 Text: vs. 13 *“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

A few days before the call of Matthew, Jesus had healed a paralyzed man which caused a lot of controversy. Before Jesus healed him, he said, *“Son, cheer up! Your sins are forgiven you.”* (9: 2) But the man had not confessed his sins. He hadn’t even asked forgiveness. And that offended the Scribes who were there. They were teachers of the *Torah*, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They were offended at Jesus’ apparent blasphemy. To them, He had assumed God’s right to forgive sins. And then, He healed the man!

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson today. Jesus had again offended Jewish leaders. *“As Jesus passed by from there”* serves as a transition from the story of the healing of the paralytic man (9:2-8) to the call of Matthew. (9:9-13) Jesus was coming *“to his own town”* which Matthew tells us was Capernaum. (4:13) Capernaum was a main trading village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee and was the main trade route connecting Damascus in the north to Egypt in the south. It was there Jesus *“saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax collection booth.”* Matthew may have been a customs agent collecting duties on goods passing through Capernaum. Travelers, caravans, and traders passed through there. But when Jesus said to Matthew, *“Follow me,”* Matthew didn’t ask to follow Jesus. He didn’t repent. He didn’t ask forgiveness. Matthew just dropped everything, got up, and followed Jesus.

Matthew’s call was in much the same way as he called Simon and Andrew. (4:18-22) He told them to *follow Him*. And they did! He needed men close to Him He could trust. Men who would work *with Him*. Not *against Him*. Later, Matthew, whose name means *“gift of God”* would write the Gospel of Matthew from which we are studying today.

And in our lesson today, Jesus called Matthew to discipleship. Up to this point, there were just six disciples: Andrew, Simon Peter, John, James, Philip, and Nathanael who were coming with Jesus to Capernaum where Matthew was gainfully employed by the Jews and the hated Romans. He was a tax collector. The disciples had left their careers to follow Jesus, because being asked by a famous Rabbi such as Jesus was a very big deal. The disciples really didn’t know what they were going to be learning from this Rabbi, but they knew that if things didn’t work out, they could always go back to fishing.

But it came at a high cost for Matthew. Being a tax collector, merchants, farmers, and importers who imported goods into the area made Matthew responsible for collecting import duties. Plus, under Roman authority, he collected any income taxes or other charges the Romans set. Matthew ensured Rome got their money. So, if things didn’t work out with Jesus, he wouldn’t get his old job back. And he wouldn’t get any other jobs because people thought he was a thief and a traitor working for the Romans. He would be excluded from the Jewish community. Matthew was taking a big risk in becoming a disciple of Jesus. Those men had put Jesus before money. And they didn’t have to think twice before leaving everything to follow the Lord.

Could you have done that? Or would you have said you have to *think about it*? What are the *benefits*? Do I get a *vacation*? Is there a *retirement plan*? When Jesus saw Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth on the way into town He said, *“Follow me.”* We don’t know if anything else was said, but Matthew got up and followed Jesus, immediately. Not the next day. Not when it would be more convenient. Not in 20 years when he would retire from his job and have a good pension. No! It happened *immediately!* No questions asked. And then Matthew invited Jesus and His disciples to his house to have dinner.

When the Pharisees saw that, they asked, *“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”* They were criticizing Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners. And by doing so, they missed the whole point! Their question caused Jesus to explain to those Pharisees that *“It’s the sinners who need salvation. It’s those who are enslaved who need to be freed.” I came not to judge the lost, but to save them.”* Yes, Jesus was a friend of sinners, and not particularly concerned about those who already were *“religious*. Those who were self-righteous. The point He was making was, He came to save those who were lost. Not those who *believed* they were *already* righteous. *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

It’s the same today! There’s more hope for a murderer to be forgiven than for someone who *thinks* they don’t need God’s forgiveness. Those religious leaders criticizing Jesus while he was eating with tax collectors and sinners thought their religious rituals were satisfactory to God. But if you don’t believe you need mercy, then you will not receive any. And if you know you need mercy, you will receive mercy. You don’t get mercy when what you deserve is God’s wrath! Grace is what you get when you *don’t deserve* it.

A man was standing outside heaven hoping to enter. He watched others as they were welcomed through the Pearly Gates to walk on the streets of gold. He saw a group clothed in white robes waving banners approaching the gates.

He asked the gatekeeper, "Who are they?" The gatekeeper answered, "They are the prophets who told of Christ's coming and of the great joy that would be experienced at His birth." The man said, "Well, I'm not a prophet, so I guess I can't enter with them." Soon, he saw a smaller group clothed in white robes and asked, "Who are they?" "Why, they're the apostles who walked with Jesus: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Bartholomew, and all the others. They preached the Gospel and established the church." The man said, "Well, I'm not an apostle, so I can't enter with them, either." He continued watching. Soon, another procession came that was larger than the first two. They were clothed in white and carrying banners of victory. Again, he asked, "Who are they?" "Those are the missionaries and ministers who went into all the world with the Gospel, inviting the lost to come to Jesus." The man bowed his head and said, "I'm not one of them, either." Then he heard countless footsteps in the distance. An enormous mixture of people, more than could be numbered, appeared. He didn't understand, but he knew some among the group were Publicans, Sinners, Harlots. He thought, "Surely the gates of heaven will not open for them." But, to his amazement, the Pearly Gates swung wide open, and he heard the heavenly choir singing songs of welcome. Amazed, he asked "Who are they?" The gatekeeper said, "These are those who have sinned greatly, but have been forgiven. They have been saved through the grace of Almighty God." The man leaped for joy and said, "I'm one of them. I can enter with them." And he did! He walked right through the pearly gates and received the welcome of the heavenly choir. Can you? Will you? Have you learned yet, that ***"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."***

Before you get too impatient with those Scribes and Pharisees criticizing Jesus, think how you might react in a similar situation. Suppose you're walking by a Sports Bar. You look through the window, and there at a table with a crooked politician, a shady businessperson recently indicted for fraud, a couple of prostitutes and three notorious MS-13 gang members sits Billy Graham. Billy's not thumping his Bible at them. He's not preaching. He's leaning back in his chair looking relaxed. Smiling. Talking. Even laughing. In fact, he's enjoying his time with those no-goods. That's how it looked to the Scribes and Pharisees when they saw Jesus, mingling with outcasts and people of bad reputation. It made it look like God Himself was interested in the rabble of society.

And that's just the point! The Pharisees asked why Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus said, ***"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners"*** which brings all this down to you. Should our congregation feel comfortable where we are now? Or should we be out at the edges where we feel uncomfortable? Where we touch the community around us. How should we respond to non-Christian people? And there are plenty! What Jesus said in our lesson this morning is very clear. ***"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."***

Our Church should be like a Clinic right here on the Circle in Everglades City. A *Spiritual Health Clinic!* A place where *Walk-ins are welcome*. We have a sign over the door as we leave church that says, *You are now entering the mission field*. We should have one on the other side of the door, on the outside, which says *Walk-ins are welcome*. There's no doubt, Pharisees were committed "churchgoers." But "Churchiness" has never impressed the Lord. When Jesus talked about sacrifice, He was referring to *religious traditions and ceremonies*. Paraphrase Matthew 9:13 this way; ***"Until you can look at all people with mercy and compassion, your church attendance and worship are meaningless to Me."*** In other words, people who are spiritually sick, need *Spiritual Treatment*. Not Tradition.

The church is meaningless to a lot of people. To some, the church is living in the past, rather than reaching out to the present. Jesus said the world is sick. It needs to show Mercy. Not "churchy" traditions. People need Compassion. Not Condemnation. As a church, we need to show the mercy of Jesus not just to each other. But to everyone God sends our way. But we need to do more than that! Jesus doesn't want us to just sit back and wait for the lost to come His way. He has already given them an invitation. ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*** (Mt. 11:28) Look at His last statement in Matthew 9:13, our text for today, ***"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."***

This church must be a *spiritual clinic*, open to all who will come to God, the Great Physician, for spiritual healing. Like Jesus, we need to say to everyone who will listen: ***"Come with me to the Clinic on the Circle in Everglades City. I want you to meet the Great Physician there. He healed me. He will heal you, too."*** Have you ever said that to anyone? If you have, then you're already **LEARNED THIS!** But, if you haven't said it, start doing it *today*. Tell someone, ***"Come with me to the Clinic on the Circle in Everglades City. I want you to meet the Great Physician. He healed me. He will heal you, too."*** AMEN