

“Mercy, Not Sacrifice”

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13).

Matthew was a tax collector...and this was no small thing. Israel was an occupied nation, and while Herod sat on a Hebrew throne, there was no doubt that Rome was in charge. This fact colored every aspect of Judean life in the first century, from the presence of Roman soldiers in the streets, to the basic rules of commerce and conduct. Nowhere was the imposition of Roman rule more bitterly felt than in the burden of Roman taxation. And the way in which Rome extracted taxes from the Jewish population was wickedly resourceful.

Rather than trying to navigate the nuances of an unfamiliar culture, the Romans employed Jews to work the tax booth, and with threat of Roman punishment always looming, these Jewish contractors were given the authority to extract whatever taxes they wished. Of course, Rome demanded her cut, but tax collectors could pad the bill any way they saw fit, and tax collectors notoriously became rich on the backs of their own countrymen. So, not only were these Jewish tax collectors considered turncoats and traitors, they were also thought of as thieves who benefited from the burdens they imposed on others. As you can imagine, love for tax collectors was more than lacking, and these men were a symbol of selfishness and sin.

With this background in mind, think for a moment about the shocking invitation Jesus offered in the first verse of today’s Gospel reading. “As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me’” (Matthew 9:9). In two simple words, Jesus turned Matthew’s world upside down. A rabbi who had already healed the sick, cast out demons, and calmed the storm had issued a personal invitation to a man with whom most people refused to even speak. And in that divine moment of grace, Matthew’s life began anew.

It’s said that misery loves company. And when you’re a tax collector, your options for friendship are pretty limited. So, it makes perfect sense that when this rescued rogue rejoiced in his redemption, he celebrated. And the people Matthew invited to the party were only ones who would frankly come. So, the celebration begins, and Jesus joins the feast. And this is where the story really gets legs.

Like the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Pharisees get wind of the festivities, and whether they were watching from the door, or getting reports from their spies, their reaction is immediate and indignant. Approaching Jesus’ disciples, they ask, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Make no mistake, this is not polite curiosity. In Jewish culture, and even in our own, table fellowship, was an intimate sign of acceptance. It validated these tax-collecting outcasts and their sinful friends as people of worth. And the Pharisees couldn’t have been more offended, and our reaction would have been no different.

It is so important for us to hear this reading today, because we are a lot like these Pharisees. So often, we view our lives and the lives of others as if looking at a scoreboard; constantly checking to see if we are ahead or behind, continually searching to see if we have done enough, and we

delight in comparing ourselves to others. When I was a teacher, students would frequently ask if they could check their grades, but when I opened my grade book to show them, I always had to cover the lines of the other students in the class, because they didn't merely want to check their grades, they also wanted to see how they stacked up to the others in the class. And this is exactly the attitude of the Pharisees in our reading from Matthew.

You see, on the outside, the Pharisees had followed the rules. On the surface, they had kept the Law, and they had certainly sacrificed to do it. Yet, here was Jesus, a respected teacher and healer, giving personal attention to openly sinful people. To the Pharisees, this was an outrage! "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" The Pharisees didn't ask this question, because they genuinely wanted an answer, rather this inquiry was an indictment of what they considered inexcusable and deplorable action. And at the heart of their question they were making the clear statement that these sinners were unworthy of social acceptance. And how does Jesus respond? He rebukes their arrogance, and He does it by challenging these scholars' understanding of Scripture, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'."

Jesus uses words from the prophet Hosea to condemn the pride of the Pharisees, and today, these words also apply to us. In fact, these ancient words are aimed directly at our self-righteous, scoreboard-watching hearts, and they should make us squirm. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Here, Jesus shows us that even though we may look pretty polished on the outside, and even though we may have done all kinds of "good" works for others, and even though we may have lived right and followed the rules, in eyes of God we are sick with sin, and our illness is terminal.

The words of law spoken to the Pharisees, and found throughout Scripture, shatter our faulty foundations and unveil the truth that we have nothing to offer God, and there is no sacrifice we can make for our sin that doesn't condemn us. And the truth of God's Word that we must hear today, is that we have done nothing to deserve God's help. *And that is exactly why He came!*

Today, we are given the heart-changing, life-giving, and incredible assurance that God doesn't give us what we deserve. Instead, God deals with us by His mercy. You see, Christ Jesus came because we were sick. He came because we were dead in our sin. Christ came to this earth in our own flesh as the ultimate sacrifice, so that God could deal with us by mercy – not because we earned it, not because we deserved it. No! He came for us and He died for us, because He loves us.

And mercy means that the scoreboard of this life is meaningless, and we can live our lives loving and serving others without worrying about whether or not we have done enough. God's mercy motivates us to see the sin-sick hearts around us, not with self-righteousness and disdain, but with compassion and care. And God's mercy allows us to measure others not by what they have done, but by what Christ has done for them!

Mercy is never earned, it is only given. And because Jesus died in our place, today, His mercy calls us and today, your life begins anew. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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