

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Matthew 9:9-13

The Life of the Party

6/2/2024

Matthew 9:9–13 [9] 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. [10] And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. [11] And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” [12] But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. [13] Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

So this is the story of Jesus calling Matthew, or Levi as he is sometimes called, to be his follower.

Matthew went on, probably, to write the Gospel of Matthew that we’re reading today, so it makes sense that as he tells the story that he would zero in on his own calling as an important moment for him: this was the moment I met Jesus and nothing has been the same since.

But it isn’t only for personal reasons that this calling of Matthew is especially pointed out. Mark and Luke both focus on this one in their accounts as well. Not all of the disciples got their personal testimonies shared in the gospel accounts with this much detail, so what happens here is important for us to absorb, and there must be something unique about this one that the Lord wants us to see.

So on this day, Matthew started out as a regular tax-collector. The tax collectors were Jewish people who sold out and worked for Rome, which was occupying their country. They collected taxes that funded the Roman occupation. So most of

the Jews in Israel would have seen their occupation as a corrupt one: they would have been seen almost like fund-raisers for Hitler.

So the whole cause they devoted their lives to was a bad one. And they earned their living often through fraud and coercion. They had a certain amount they had to collect for Rome, but then added whatever amount they could to that amount so they could keep it for themselves. And because it was a tax bill, it was enforced by the Roman soldiers with the swords over their shoulders, so they had a guaranteed customer base and guaranteed income, so they did very well.

But they didn't do very well socially: they didn't have a lot of friends outside of the tax-collector community. They were defiled people, held at arm's length in respect. The phrase "tax collectors and sinners" was commonly used in the New Testament.

That was their label - they were among the outcasts in Israel. They didn't even pretend to be pious¹, they knew they were sinners, everybody knew they were sinners², so they just didn't run in the religious circles in Israel.

Jesus never denies they are wicked people who have devoted their lives to a questionable cause and earn their income through fraud and deceit and coercion. They really are corrupt people.

And

Matthew 9:9 [9] 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.

Notice that Jesus saw a man called Matthew sitting at the Tax Booth. Not just a rando tax collector, but Matthew. He had a name. The same thing happens when Jesus meets the tax collector Zaccheus, Zaccheus climbs a tree to see Jesus

¹ I'm getting this from the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18.

² Jesus even says in one place, "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (Matthew 5:46). Jesus uses them as an example of what even the worst people are capable of - even tax collectors love their friends. They are wicked people, but even they love.

(being a wee little man), and Jesus says to him, “Zaccheus, hurry down, we’re going to your house.” These legitimately corrupt people don’t just have labels, but names. Jesus loves these people.

So Jesus walks up to the tax booth where Matthew is sitting. The disciples see Jesus approaching a dirty, rotten tax collector and have to be thinking, “Jesus is gonna call this guy out! Watch Jesus own this guy! He’s gonna tell him what kind of scum he is.”

And Jesus says to Matthew, “Follow me.”

What? This is crazy - this is not the kind of guy a dignified Savior should have in His company. The Messiah, should stay away from tax collectors. He’s supposed to save us from tax collectors - Matthew is an enemy! The Messiah is supposed to eliminate the enemies.

But the best way to eliminate an enemy is to make him your friend. So Jesus invites him into his band of followers. Immediately Matthew walks away from his tax-collecting booth and follows Jesus.

And next thing you know:

Matthew 9:[10] And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

According to Mark and Luke, this took place at Matthew’s house.³

Matthew and Mark say there were many tax collectors and sinners there, Luke says it was a “large company”⁴ of tax collectors. And Luke describes this dinner party as a “great feast.”

This is a big party at Matthew’s house, probably a big house that he had bought with wages from unrighteous work. There’s lots of food and drink, and the place is

³ Mark 2:14-15, Luke 5:27-32

⁴ Luke 5:29

riddled with tax collectors and sinners. It looks like the bar scene in Star Wars. And Jesus is right in the middle of it.

And we are going to look at this party first from Jesus's perspective, and then from the perspectives of each of the three groups of people around Jesus: the **disciples, the sinners, and the Pharisees.**

And toward the end I'm going to ask you to evaluate yourself to see which of these groups of people you would fit in most easily based on the way you're living today: The disciples of Jesus, the sinners, or the Pharisees. Don't try to answer that yet, but try to observe the characteristics of each group to see where you fit.

But let's start first with the most important guest at this party, **Jesus Himself.**

What is He up to here?

Even before the birth of Jesus, the angel announced to Joseph what Jesus came for:

Matthew 1:21 "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

So here's Jesus at the party, going to where the sinners are, to save them.

This is different than an endorsement: he isn't endorsing their sin, he isn't affirming their sin, he isn't coddling their sin. Jesus isn't making a statement that tax collectors don't need to change - they should just be themselves, keep ripping people off, ignore the haters.

Jesus clearly calls them to repent. When Matthew followed Jesus, he left the tax booth. It had to be one or the other, and when Jesus calls Zaccheus, we know that his repentance involved paying back those he had defrauded four times over. So Jesus is not endorsing the unethical practices of this bunch, He is not saying they're fine just the way they are. He doesn't encourage them to embrace their identity as thieves. If Zaccheus is any indicator, they will be led to a point where

they have to repent in a costly way if they are going to truly follow Jesus. They are sinners who need to repent, Jesus never says otherwise.

But Jesus loves them.

So when Matthew invites Jesus to a big dinner at his place with the other tax collectors, Jesus shocks them all by saying, in effect, “I love tax collectors - I’ll be there.” So Jesus is on a mission to save sinners.

And He’s making a sacrifice to do this. Jesus has been amazing his Jewish audiences with his authority and power. But now, Jesus goes to a party with the ruffians, and this will mean that the elite religious people will look down on him. The Pharisees are the most influential people in Israel. So if they start calling Jesus’s legitimacy into question, Jesus could easily lose His influence and everything He has been building.

But Jesus doesn’t care, because **sacrificing to save** is how Jesus rolls!

And the religious people *are* going to use Jesus’s behavior in these social settings to accuse Him of being an illegitimate teacher. In Luke 7:34, Jesus says the religious leaders handle Him this way:

Luke 7:34 - The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

Jesus is, of course, innocent of the charge that He’s a glutton or an alcoholic. But He is guilty on the other charges: He’s a true friend of tax collectors and sinners. He loves those guys.

Jesus is going to continue on this trajectory. He’s not only going to go to the shady places, He is going to go to the cursed place, the lowest place, as He goes to die on the cross. There, He will sacrifice not only His reputation, not only His perceived cleanliness and what the people see as holiness, but His life for tax collectors and sinners:

Matthew 20:28 “even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus is on a mission to give His life.

Jesus cares more for these deplorables than He does for doing everything right by the religious crowd. And thank God!

We didn't need a Savior who would come and move toward the top of the elite. We needed a Savior who would get His hands dirty with sinners like us. And not only dirty, but bruised and bleeding on the cross, paying for all the shadiness of sinners like us.

If Jesus had pleased the Pharisees, He wouldn't have saved anybody.

But Jesus came not just as a great teacher, but as the Great Physician:

Matthew 9:11-12 [11] 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.

Jesus is the doctor who would come and rush into the tent filled with the infected ones in order to make them well. And it would cost Him His life, but that was the plan all along. He came to heal, and to heal, He had to be near the sick.

It's interesting that Jesus calls Himself a physician here in this context. At this party, there's no physical healing. He's bringing a different kind of healing here. He's the great physician who can certainly heal disease, but He is, even more, out to heal the soul.

And in verse 13, Jesus will say: **“[13] Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

Jesus is calling sinners to repent. He is calling them to turn from their sin, never claiming that Matthew's buddies weren't sinners, but inviting them to a totally new life. And that's the greatest healing He brings.

And eating a meal with sinners was a close association with them. He wasn't just teaching a class they attended, not just lecturing them about their sin, but going to their house, their party, eating with them, breaking bread with them, sharing His life with them.

And though the Pharisees criticized, He only moved closer to sinners. So close to sick sinners that He became sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21).

So Jesus is on a mission to save.

And Jesus's presence at the table with these tax collectors is an invitation to all of us: come to Jesus. He welcomes sinners who repent! These guys were corrupt, but Jesus welcomed them to turn and follow Him.

And if you know that you're sinful, you're ready to repent and turn to Him, and if you'll believe that on the cross He paid for your sin, He will forgive you. It is by grace that you're saved, not by "not being a tax collector or sinner."

Jesus shows here His willingness to sacrifice His reputation for you, and soon He'll show his willingness to give His life for you. He cared more for you than pleasing the authorities, saving you was His mission.

And notice that it isn't a joyless mission.

Jesus is feasting. In the next passage that we'll look at next week, Jesus will be questioned about why they're not fasting like the good religious people.

Jesus just keeps showing up at parties. His first miracle is turning water into the best wine at a wedding feast. He goes to this party that would be characterized by joy and laughter, and leads his followers there. Jesus's whole kingdom would be

characterized, not by dour religious snooty elitism, but by festal joy and love for the broken and the lowly. Jesus doesn't really care about religious respectability, He's choosing joy over religious impressiveness.

So that's part of what Jesus is doing here.

What are the Disciples doing?

Matthew 9:[10] And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

So the disciples, the followers of Jesus, are right there with Jesus at this feast. Matthew groups them together with Jesus. "Jesus and His disciples." The followers are following. They have followed Jesus right onto His mission to these sinners.

In His initial call to the disciples back in chapter 4, Jesus had told them:

Matthew 4:19 "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

To be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, is to go where Jesus goes and to do what Jesus does. And so the disciples are right there with Jesus on his mission to these tax collectors and sinners.

Sometimes we think discipleship, the process of growing as a disciple, is a process just of being educated more. I work through a discipleship curriculum and I am a disciple. And certainly, being a learner is a big part of being a disciple. Learning doctrine, learning Bible, learning to interact with the false doctrines in the culture around us, learning who Jesus is, those are all important part of following Him. Jesus taught His disciples frequently, so teaching and learning is a big part of it. And I fear that sometimes there is so little learning in the Christian life that we could find ourselves following the wrong Jesus - we need to grow in our knowledge of Him.

2 Peter 3:18 [18] But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (ESV)

We grow in knowledge. But, side-by-side with our knowledge, we are supposed to be growing in grace. Grace just means “gift.”

When we learn who Jesus is, everything we are given is meant to be given away to others. We aren't supposed to be basins of grace, but conduits. We share with others the Jesus who has been shared with us.

And the more we know that Jesus got his hands dirty with sinners - sinners like us, and we're following (we're disciples of) that Jesus, the more we will get our hands dirty with sinners. We will give away all we've received - we will move toward sinners.

So often what we call discipleship is actually pharisee making. We educate into isolation and think we've made a disciple. The Pharisees have a lot of knowledge, but they are completely missing grace.

We are right to want to live lives that are sanctified, set aside, made holy for God's use. But disciples of Jesus are not removed from the world, they are in the world, but not of it.

They have a gospel in their hearts that is powerful enough to sanctify them while they are with sinners, not one that sends them running from sinners.

So part of being a disciple is going with Jesus to those who are not disciples of Jesus. Sharing our faith.

And this call can seem overwhelming- how will I make time for this? But it doesn't have to be a major addition to your calendar, just a major change in focus on your life:

Moms who spend a lot of time with their kids might think, “How could I ever share Christ with those who don’t know Him yet? You are doing so by being with your kids and sharing Jesus with them. Take heart.

Busy career people might wonder how they could ever carve out time for more Christian activity. But bring Jesus to the circles of influence you already have at work.

See yourself as a missionary to neighbors, to the other parents whose kids are on the team you coach, to the other students at school. Live life with missionary intentionality and you’ll be following Jesus on this mission.

So Jesus is on a mission of self-sacrifice to save sinners, the disciples are right there with him, feasting with sinners, and giving an answer for the hope they have.

Now let’s look at the “Sinners”

Matthew, apparently, was so compelled by Jesus that he threw this party and invited all of his friends.

You can imagine how those conversations went:

Matthew says, “I met the Messiah and I’m one of his followers now.”

The tax collectors say, “Does this guy know who you are? The Messiah let you follow Him? You’re a tax collector like us!”

Matthew says, “He specifically asked me to follow Him, and He knows who I am - he walked right up to me at the tax booth and called me!”

The tax collectors say, “The Messiah invites tax collectors and sinners? What kind of Messiah is that? Messiahs call the holy people! I’ve gotta meet this guy.”

Matthew says, “Party at my house Friday night. He’ll be there.”

So Matthew throws the party, and Jesus shows up.

And so do a whole ton of tax collectors and sinners.

They have filled this house because they are really fascinated by Jesus. Matthew is the one who is officially following Jesus, but still probably really doesn't know much about Christ or what He is doing. And his friends, the outcasts, the ones who know they are in need of a doctor, are getting the doctor.

The ones who know they're sick have close access to the Great Physician. The ones who think they're OK, the Pharisees, aren't even inside the party. But the outcasts, the poor in spirit, the humble, the broken, the defiled, are welcomed into the Doctor's office.

Jesus is very attractive to their irreligious, and repulsive to the religious.

The guys who know they are sinful and defiled, who know they have no hope in themselves of being considered righteous, are the ones that are being drawn to this Jesus who loves them, who calls them, who offers grace and forgiveness, who provides a way of repentance, who goes to their world, their parties, their houses, who is choosing festal joy over religious up-tightness - this Jesus is compelling.

And maybe already you know you're in this tax collector and sinner category. You have no relationship with Jesus now, and you've rejected Him because you've seen so many joyless judgmental Christians that you assume you have to give up your joy to follow Him. But people like you were drawn to Him and welcomed to turn to Him all over in the Bible. It's the religious people who think they're ok on their own because of their religious observance that rejected Jesus.

Perhaps you won't come to Jesus because you think you have to become a religious Pharisee first. They were the farthest from Him! But those who knew they were sick got right into the Doctor's office.

Just like today, if you have no health problems, you probably can't get right in for a check-up within a day or two. But if you're sick, you get right in to see the doctor.

Jesus is attractive to the broken, and welcomes sinners who know they are sinners to turn to Him. He doesn't welcome those who think they don't need Him! People like the Pharisees...

So what are the Pharisees doing?

Matthew 9:[11] And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

They are just now beginning their attack on Jesus, just with some initial shots they're firing. And they are asking questions to create a cloud of concern around Jesus and His disciples. "I'm concerned about your teacher." (Notice, not *our* teacher.) How could he be legitimate if he is eating with these people? Something must be off. I'm worried about that guy.

They're subtly attacking Jesus's character and reputation, they're spreading doubts about Jesus, they are dropping some low-grade, slanderous accusations about Jesus and his work.

And they are completely convinced they are OK themselves. They're pretty smug and self-sufficient.

Pharisees were dialed in with their policies and procedures. They kept their lives safe from the unclean.

They're very quick to condemn everyone that didn't meet their finicky standards. Their concern for doing everything exactly right over-rode their concern for those in need. They were good at religion, good at following some rules, but terrible at love, and didn't think they needed to be saved by Jesus. They could read all of the small letters on the eye chart, but missed the big E again and again.

It's like they had a really clean doctor's office, but never saw any patients.

And Jesus gives them this command:

Matthew 9:[13] Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus tells these Bible scholars to go and study their bibles some more (their problem wasn't knowledge - they needed the right knowledge and needed to know more.) And He tells them to "go and learn what this means "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." Notice the quotes around "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

Jesus quotes from Hosea 6 there.

In Hosea, Israel had broken the covenant with God. They had been depicted as an unfaithful wife to God, and God is depicted as a faithful husband who goes after his adulterous wife to forgive and restore her.

And in Hosea 4 and 5, God calls out the spiritual leaders in the land: the priests. They had begun to worship false gods, and as a result the people were. But they still did some religious, priestly things: they still offered sacrifices. And they felt like they were ok.

So Jesus is telling these Pharisees that their very clean, very finicky religion - a religion that would never carve an idol to bow down to it, was a false religion. They didn't love and know God, they didn't show mercy. They just did the rituals.

So Hosea 6:

Hosea 6:1-6

- [1] "Come, let us return to the LORD;
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.**
- [2] After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.**
- [3] Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD;
his going out is sure as the dawn;**

**he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth.”**
**[4] What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early away.**
**[5] Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets;
I have slain them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light.**
**[6] For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.**

In that passage, the faithless Israelites are called to return to the Lord, and the Lord coming to them for refreshing and healing and life.

So Jesus tells the Pharisees, “That’s what I’m doing here. I’m going after faithless Israel. I’m not trying to get them all to be as finicky and buttoned up as you guys, you’re actually as far away from God as the priests in Hosea’s day. I’m here so they can know the Lord! I’m going to bind up what has been torn. To refresh the weary and thirsty.

And if you knew what that meant, you’d be doing this too.

Or, you’d be at this table, acknowledging your need, pressing on to know the Lord even though you’re doing everything right in the sacrifice department.

But they didn’t see their need, they didn’t see the good in what Jesus was doing, they didn’t know who Jesus was, and they missed the party.

Every couple of weeks we take the Lord’s supper. And in a sense, this is coming to a table with Jesus. Jesus is with us by His spirit, and he offers us this feast of bread that symbolizes his torn body and wine that symbolizes his spilled blood.

And one of the things we do is we take this supper is we examine ourselves - to see if we are living like Jesus is real, if we are confessing and renouncing our sins.

And today let's examine ourselves by asking who we are in this story.

To eliminate the obvious, you're not Jesus.

But are you his follower? A characteristic of his follower is that you follow Him to the table with tax collectors and sinners. You follow Him to where the sinners are to bring healing and life. You love people and move toward them. You don't endorse or participate in their sin, but you do participate in their lives.

Now to be sure, the followers of Jesus at that table and the followers of Jesus in this room have plenty of issues. Those guys fought over who was the greatest, there was family drama as a couple of them had a mom petition Jesus to make her kids great. And people like Peter would sin and fail, Thomas would doubt. But they were, in all of their sin, at that table with Jesus.

Or are you a sinner? Someone who recognizes your need.

If you know your sin and your need and you believe in Jesus, you are closer than the Pharisees.

Or are you a Pharisee. You don't sense your need for Jesus.

Either because you don't believe in Him at all, or you think you're OK on your own. The only ones not welcome to the table are the Pharisees.

And the only ones welcome to the table are the ones who know their need.

Prayer of Confession:

Father, we come before you humbled by the example of Jesus, who willingly dined with tax collectors and sinners, demonstrating your massive mercy and love for the lost. We're in awe of the fact that His love for sinners like us didn't stop there but carried Him all the way to the cross. We confess that too often we have

failed to follow in his footsteps, choosing instead to distance ourselves from those deemed unworthy or unclean by society. Forgive us for our self-righteousness and pride, and for the times we have judged others without recognizing our own need for your grace.

Jesus, we acknowledge that you came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Yet, we confess that we have often failed to recognize our own sinfulness and need for redemption. Like the Pharisees, we have at times exalted ourselves in our religious practices and looked down on those who don't meet our standards. Have mercy on us and give us the humility to see ourselves as you see us, in need of your saving grace.

Holy Spirit, renew within us a desire to follow Jesus to the places of brokenness and despair, and empower us to be instruments of your mercy and compassion in the world. We pray that confessing these things wouldn't just be words, but would be a catalyst for transformation in our hearts and lives, as we seek to embody the love and grace God in our world that needs you.

Assurance:

Luke 19:10 "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) How can we guard against falling into the trap of spiritual pride and instead cultivate a posture of humility in our own lives?

- 2) How can we practically follow Jesus into the places of brokenness and need in our society, bringing the message of hope and redemption?
- 3) Which group of people in this passage do you identify with the most: the disciples, the sinners, or the Pharisees?
- 4) What attitudes and behaviors make you say so?
- 5) What adjustments can you make in light of that assessment?
- 6) How can we cultivate an attitude of mercy and compassion towards those who are still outsiders to the Christian community?