

## “Unlikely Christians”

Matthew 9:9-13

Pastor Dan Erickson

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I remember hearing the news story... “Jeffrey Dahmer was baptized as a Christian in prison yesterday.” I thought, “Wait a minute, Jeffrey Dahmer, the serial killer, and sex-offender, who had killed and dismembered 17 young men between 1978-1991. No, he cannot possibly be a Christian.”

Oh, yes, I knew that “Son of Sam” serial killer, David Berkowitz had professed faith in Christ. Yes, Charles Manson family members, Tex Watson and Dennis Rice, were now very outspoken Christians. But *Jeffrey Dahmer*? He did horrible, unspeakable things. People like that don’t become Christians. He is too evil, too wicked of a sinner. He must be trying to impress a parole board or something.

Yet, then I thought, wait a second. Where do I think Christians come from? The stork doesn’t bring them. They don’t hatch from eggs. Christians are sinners, sinners who by God’s grace recognize their need for salvation. They are people who know they need to be forgiven and thus, by God’s grace they turn to Jesus Christ. I must never forget that if I experience God’s gracious salvation, there is no reason why even Jeffrey Dahmer could not do the same.

In fact, numerous people who we might consider very unlikely Christians, have ended up being faithful servant of Jesus, who were used by God in amazing ways. Now, that is not quite what happened with Jeffrey Dahmer. After being baptized in May of 1994, he was killed by another inmate in November of that year. Thus, it is very difficult to know if Dahmer’s profession of faith in Jesus was even genuine. I do know that Roy Radcliffe, the pastor that baptized Dahmer and had weekly Bible studies with him after that, believed him to be sincere. And really what you or I think doesn’t matter, because ultimately Jeffrey Dahmer, like all the rest of us, will be judged by God and God alone.

Friends, this morning we come to a delightful story that reminds us that sometimes the most unlikely people experience God’s grace and become believers in and followers of Jesus Christ.

Our text is Matthew 9:9-13. As we explore this passage, let’s pray the Lord would enable us to understand how important its message is for us today.

**Matthew 9:9a** **As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth.** Apparently at the outskirts of Capernaum, Jesus comes to a customs and tax collection booth on the border between the jurisdictions of Philip the Tetrarch and Herod Antipas. Manning the booth is a man named Matthew, who, according to Mark and Luke, is also called “Levi.”

Those who work for the IS today are not always very popular, but in Jesus’ day tax collectors are about as low as one can get. They were seen as both collaborators and extortionists. Tax collectors were employed by the occupying Roman government. They worked for the enemy. And when they collected taxes, they often overcharged. If \$100 in tax was owed, they would collect \$200, send \$100 to Rome, and keep the rest for themselves. Some tax-collectors, like Zaccheus in Luke 19, were able to get rich that way. It is no surprise that Matthew is not a popular figure in the community.

**Matthew 9:9b** **and he (Jesus) said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.** It seems like a very sudden conversion. Tax collector to disciple of Jesus within a matter of seconds. It is a dramatic conversion. However, it is likely Matthew has had some type of exposure to Jesus and His ministry before this time. And though abandoning his tax collecting booth would seem to sever all ties with the Roman government, he certainly could have had an associate cover for him temporarily.

One of the most interesting parts of the series “The Chosen,” is the portrayal of Matthew, a young man somewhere on the autism spectrum. He is brilliant, good with numbers, keeping records and taking notes, but socially awkward and sometimes socially clueless. Yes, it’s speculation but it is a plausible explanation of why a Jewish person might choose to work for Rome.

If Matthew was socially handicapped, he would have few, if any, real friends. Thus, he would not really lose friends going to work for Rome. And he might have the type of skills that would make him an efficient tax collector as well as a very capable author of one of the New Testament gospels. If we get to hear Matthew's real story in heaven, we will probably learn whether that portrayal is at all accurate.

One thing we learn about Matthew from our text is, though he maybe abandons his career with Rome, he doesn't abandon his friends. **Matthew 9:10 And as Jesus reclined at table in the house** (Matthew's house), **behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.** Social outcasts tend to make connections with other social outcasts.

When someone becomes a follow of Jesus, they often end up cutting ties with the people they used to hang out with, not Matthew. He wants to introduce his old associates to Jesus. And what better way to do that than having a dinner party. So, it is Jesus, some of the other disciples, Matthew's fellow tax collectors, and sinners, which likely means prostitutes.

Matthew's circle of social misfits may have also included drunkards...people addicted to alcohol and petty thieves, people who preferred stealing to working. These are not the respectable members of the community. **Matthew 9:11 And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"**

When we go to someone's house for dinner it is usually an indication we like that person and enjoy talking and dining with people there. The Pharisees, most strict Jewish religious leaders, are asking, "Why does Jesus spend time with such undesirable people? Are these His friends?"

**Matthew 9:12 But when he heard it, he (Jesus) said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."** This analogy is weakened a bit by today's preventative medicine. Healthy people often do go to the doctor for a checkup. Yet, we still get the point. It is sick people who need a doctor. It is the spiritually sick whom Jesus has come to help. If

someone was spiritually healthy, in a right relationship with God and living in a way that pleased the Lord, he/she would not need Jesus' help. But clearly none of Matthew's friends are in that category.

Jesus then tells the Pharisees, **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."** These fellows had often memorized the content of their Bibles, the Old Testament. Yet, they were missing the meaning. They needed to go back and look at passages like **Hosea 6:6** and understand what the Lord means when He says, **For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings.** Though the Pharisees were very thorough about following religious rituals, they were very critical and unmerciful toward those who struggled, especially those guilty of obvious sins, like tax collectors and prostitutes. They saw themselves as "righteous people" with no sins for which they needed to repent.

However, Jesus knew that was not really the case. Jesus' purpose in coming to earth was to call people to turn to God and receive His grace and forgiveness, or as He says in **Mark 1:15**, repent and believe the gospel. He came to guide the lost, heal the broken, and give life to those who are spiritually dead. Of course, Jesus would spend time with sinners. That is who needed Him. That is what His ministry, His job, was all about. It would be absurd for a physician to refuse to be in the same room as sick people, and likewise it would be ridiculous for a savior not to associate with sinners. That is why Jesus has dinner with tax collectors, prostitutes, and drunkards.

Matthew does not record the Pharisees' response to Jesus, perhaps because they didn't have one. Jesus' logic seems irrefutable. Yet, we need to realize that Jesus' words are not just for religious leaders living 2000 years ago. This passage highlights two important truths that the Lord wants each of us to recognize.

#1 No one is "too much" of a sinner, too bad of a person for Jesus. Today a physician often refers a patient to another doctor, but no one is ever simply turned away because they are "too sick."

You probably know that more people die in hospitals than anywhere else. Can you imagine if a hospital tried to improve its record and started telling patients, “You are too sick, you might be terminal, we only accept people who we know are going to get better.” A hospital like that would not be doing its job. They exist especially to help the very sick.

Likewise, Jesus says, “Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy burdened.” No matter how messed up your life is, no matter how wounded or broken you are because of either your sin or someone else’s, Jesus says, “Come to me.” It doesn’t matter if you have a criminal record, if you have been divorced multiple times, if you have had an abortion, or if you claimed to be atheist. Jesus is never shocked by the degree or depth of someone’s sin. He will never say, “Boy, I’ve never seen anyone as bad as you.” Instead, He reaches out and calls all sinners to turn to Him for grace and forgiveness.

Folks, we as Christians, we as a church, are called to do the same. We are to reach out to people. No matter how severe or gross their sins are. We need to remember that throughout Church history some great sinners have, by God’s grace, become great Christians. Their sins seemed far worse than Matthew’s.

Perhaps the most well-known are Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul, and John Newton, the vile slave trader, who became a pastor and the author of “Amazing Grace.” More recently there was Chuck Colson, a convicted felon for his role in the Watergate scandal. Before that, he really had no use for God and thought of himself as totally self-sufficient. Colleagues said Colson would step on his own mother to get what he wanted. Yet, by the grace of God, he would become not only a Christian, but one of the Church’s most prominent spokespersons until he died in 2012. He also founded Prison Fellowship, an organization that continues to help men and women in prison find true freedom through Jesus.

Then I think of Brian Cole. He spent 27 years of his first 44 years incarcerated because of drug offences, attempted murder and other crimes. He was also involved in the occult and satanism. Then in 2009, after three suicide attempts, he got involved in a faith-based treatment program at

the county jail in Chippewa Falls, WI. He soon trusted in Jesus Christ and began a new life. By 2012 he was a youth pastor, and in 2016 he became pastor of the Oaks Church in Drummond, WI. That is a Converge Baptist Church near Ashland, and he continues to serve there. Yes, Brian is a very unlikely Christian. Yet, he is someone whose life was transformed by the Lord in a marvelous way. He is now a faithful follower and servant of Jesus Christ.

Yet sometimes our attitude toward those we consider “sinful people” shows we do not understand or are forgetting that the Lord works in the lives of people like this. We fail to realize that sinners are from what Christians are made. Thus, we often choose to keep our distance from folks we consider unlikely Christians. We like being around nice people like ourselves, so we avoid those who are crude or claim to be atheists.

Many of us would be way out of our comfort zones inviting someone like Brian Cole, or even Chuck Colson to our house for dinner before they had become Christians. Even after the apostle Paul became a believer in Jesus, many Christians did not want to be around him. Sometimes we keep our distance from sinners because we don’t want to tarnish our reputation.

A few years ago, I read an article by a pastor telling how he refused to go to a reunion of his college football team because alcohol was going to be served. His teammates assured him there would be plenty of pop to drink and no one would pressure him to consume any alcohol. The pastor told them he would come if the alcohol was kept in a different room, because he didn’t want anyone taking a picture of him with people who had drinks in their hands.

This pastor seemed proud of his demand, but I thought, “Wow, is that different from Jesus.” Can you imagine Jesus being worried someone would take a picture of Him next to someone with a drink? He was willing to sit next to prostitutes.

But, Pastor Dan, aren’t we supposed to be separate and keep ourselves unstained by the world? Yes, we are. But that doesn’t mean we refuse to associate with sinners. **1 Corinthians 5:9,10 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning**

**the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.** In other words, the Lord expects that we will associate with immoral, sinful people. That is the only way we can be effective ambassadors of Jesus.

Some people would prefer that the Church be a country club for saints, rather than a hospital for sinners. A few years ago, a Pentecostal church in England banned a woman from coming to church because she smelled bad. The woman never bathed, and some other people had stopped coming to church because of the horrible odor. That is a rather unique situation, but there are churches where those who struggle with drug addiction or homosexuality are not welcome in the worship service. In many more churches there may be signs that say sinners welcome or everyone welcome, but the folks in that church would prefer that the bad sinners stay away. How tragic. Maybe we should put up a sign in our church that says, "Sinners welcome, not just nice, polite sinners, but crude, disgusting sinners too." No, sinners are not welcome because we approve of sin, or because we think it is "no big deal."

Sinners are welcome because this is a spiritual hospital. We invite those infected by sin to come and find the healing only Jesus can bring. And friends, if you are thinking, "Pastor Dan, we really don't want those people here, do we?" You better go back and read our text, because no one is too much of a sinner for Jesus.

**#2** Everyone is enough of a sinner that he/she needs Jesus. When Jesus says He is calling not the righteous, but sinners, He doesn't mean that some people don't need help. **Romans 3:23** tells us **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** Every human being on this planet is a sinner. No matter how good of a person someone is, he/she still needs the forgiveness found in Jesus.

Maybe you think the worst thing you have done in your life is stealing a cookie from the cookie jar when you were six years old or maybe driving too slow in the fast lane. Yet, the Bible is clear, even if you violated God's law only once, there is no way you can make up for that. Unless Jesus pays the penalty for your sin, you must pay it yourself.

Any and all sin points us to the truth of total depravity. This important teaching of the Bible doesn't mean everyone is as bad as he could possibly be, or that we always choose to do what is wrong. Obviously, that is not the case. It doesn't mean that sin infects us to such a degree that even the good things we do are done with less than perfect motives. It means there is no one on the planet whose worst sin was driving a car too slow in the fast lane.

When I heard the news three years ago that Ravi Zacharias, the brilliant evangelist, was guilty of sexual sins, I was not shocked. Very disappointed, yes, but sin doesn't shock me, because I know we are all sinners. I know I am.

I have done pretty well at not committing any sins for which I could be arrested. Yet, in Matthew 5 Jesus makes it clear that lust and hatred, things of which I have been guilty, are really the roots of adultery and murder. Though much of the media and educational system do their best to deny the dark side of human nature and tell us all we are basically good, that I'm okay, you're okay, deep down inside we know it is not true. Each of us has been infected by sin. Though we try to hide the symptoms and stubbornly refuse to accept treatment, unless we turn to Jesus our sin will destroy us. Everyone is enough of a sinner to need Jesus.

So, these are our two basic truths. No one is too much of a sinner for Jesus. Everyone is enough of a sinner for Jesus.

So, what do we do? First, no matter who we are, or what we have done, each of us need to put our trust in Jesus Christ. Going to church, giving money to charity, or being a nice person, doesn't get rid of our sin. Only Jesus and His death on the cross for us can do that.

If today you are not trusting in Jesus as Savior and Lord that is what, by God's grace, you need to do. If you have questions about this, please talk to me or anyone of our pastors.

Second, those of us who are believers in Jesus need to share the good news, the gospel, with sinners who don't know Jesus. These sinners include those who think their sin is too bad for the

Lord to forgive, and those who don't really think they need that forgiveness.

I want you to take a moment and try to identify one or two people, individuals you know, in either one of these categories. They either feel things they have done put them beyond the boundaries of God's grace, or they think they are doing just fine without God and don't need His grace or help.

Identify these individuals and throughout the week pray for them. Pray the Lord would open their eyes so they can see the truth. Pray the Lord would make them aware of both their sin and the gracious forgiveness found in Jesus Christ.

Then ask the Lord how you might help these people come closer to faith in Jesus. Maybe it is inviting them to church, maybe it is giving them something to read, or maybe its sitting down for coffee with them and talking about what it means to be a Christian. And always remember, the gospel is great news, because it is great news for sinners, and thus, it is great news for all of us.