

## Receiving Sinners, Rejecting the Self-Righteous

Matt. 9:9-17

**Intro.** Certain periods of history are marked by upheaval and sweeping change. We're living in such a time...a season when almost every institution is up for grabs. Yet for those who believe in the God of the Bible, the greatest period of change came with the arrival of Jesus Christ. Jesus *"turned the world upside down."* (though I prefer to say *"He turned an upside down world right side up."*) This AM we begin to see how His gospel of mercy and forgiveness came into direct conflict with the religious establishment and the legalistic mentality they lived by. We see Jesus receiving sinners while rejecting the self-righteous who were offended by His compassion and grace. We see tension as the old was passing away and replaced by something new and superior.

When Jesus forgave the paralyzed man, the religious leaders felt He usurped authority that belongs to God alone. Under their breath they muttered, **"This fellow is blaspheming!" – Matt. 9:3** and blasphemy was an offense worthy of death. Their complaint wasn't voiced out loud because of the Galileans who flocked to Jesus. Unlike the Pharisees and law teachers, the "people of the land" (as they were called) weren't blinded by religion or preconceived ideas. They were eager for change. What alarmed these leaders most was the miracles. Unlike other Messianic wannabes, Jesus backed up His teachings by miracles He performed...miracles they couldn't deny! **Chap. 9** begins with many religious leaders crowded in Peter's house. Jesus challenged them with this question....**"Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ."** Then he said to the paralytic, **"Get up, take your mat and go home."** And the man got up and went home. (vs. 5-7)

Have you ever been smacked in the face with irrefutable evidence when your mind was already made up the other way? I hate when that happens! *"Don't confuse me with facts, my mind is made up."* The opposition hoped the man would remain paralyzed and Jesus shown to be a fraud. They would rather be right than see this man healed! They were horrified when he jumped up, grabbed his mat and ran home. But that's what legalism and self-righteousness does. It makes us insensitive to the lost and needy while blinding us to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Religion promises deliverance while holding people in bondage. Doing right things for God obscures the great things God has done for us. In full view of the watching crowd, Jesus exhibited unearthly compassion and authority, yet they saw Him only as a threat.

This morning we come to **vs. 9-17**. This section exposes the resistance of the religious and how out of sync they were with the mercy of God and the reason for Christ's coming.

**1. The unorthodox and provocative setting – vs. 9, 10 - As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples.**

When Jesus left Peter's house at Capernaum, He encountered a man named **Levi**...a tax collector. Jesus seems to have given him a new name...**Matthew**. **Matthew** means *"gift of Yaweh"* or *"gift of God."* Now remember, **Matthew** is the apostle who wrote this Gospel, but he wrote with humility and modesty as though he was someone other than himself. He was probably a customs officer at the border of Capernaum's trade route.

Under Roman rule, the Jews were taxed for everything! There was a ground tax on produce / income tax / and a poll tax! On top of these statutory taxes there was a transportation tax for roads and bridges / a tax on pack animals, cart wheels and axles. There was duty charged on all goods whether imported or exported / and a sales tax. Sound familiar? Rome was the epitome of big government.

The reputation and popularity of ancient **tax collectors** couldn't have been lower. To the Jews, they were lowlife, "the scum of the earth." They were "sell-outs" employed by Israel's enemies. They taxed the working class and were made rich by extortion. Like Zacchaeus, Levi was a great sinner in great need of God's salvation and forgiveness. We don't know how much exposure he had to the teaching and miracles of Jesus. But this much we know...when Jesus looked him in the eye and said, "**Follow Me,**" he closed up shop and followed Jesus. **Lk.5:28** says **Levi left everything, got up and followed Him.** Without a hint of self-congratulation, **v.9** simply says, **Matthew got up and followed him.** Matthew knew He needed what Jesus could give him. God's Spirit was at work in His heart. His obedience to Christ is an example for every believer.

But Matthew's call is really back-story to the dinner meeting that happened soon after Jesus called him. Having met Jesus, Matthew invited friends to dinner at his home. His purpose was to introduce as many as he could to the One who didn't reject him but accepted and loved him as he was. Like Peter, Matthew must have owned a big house because **Lk. 5:29** says, **Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.** Imagine what it was like for Matthew's wife. He comes home from work one day and says, *"Honey listen, I've quit my job to follow Jesus. And guess who's coming for dinner?...All my friends plus Jesus and His disciples!"*

Matthew's ministry began with a guest list of associates and friends...other **tax collectors**. If religious leaders gathered at Peter's house, Matthew hosted a bunch of thieves and sinners. The Pharisees weren't invited nor would they have come if invited. **Pharisee** means "*separated one.*" Feeling "*holier than thou,*" they refused to be defiled by contact with a crowd like this. They proudly misapplied **Psa. 26:4, 5** which says, **I do not sit with deceitful men, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked.** So the Pharisees remained outside in more ways than one. Yet the most holy man to ever walk the earth ate dinner with the lowest crowd of sinners in Israel. Change was in the wind.

## **2. The Pharisee's question answered three ways – vs.11-13**

As they did so often, the religious leaders didn't ask questions to gain information. They asked questions to gain ammunition to be used against Jesus. Luke's account says, **But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples – Lk. 5:30.** The last time they asked Jesus a question directly He sent them away red-faced and embarrassed. Because they didn't want to do that again, they cornered His disciples. **"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"** Their question revealed their isolationist mentality. Judaism had degenerated into a world of categories. Aside from the Gentiles who were nobodies, Israel was roughly divided in two groups...the orthodox or religious elite and "*the people of the land.*" The orthodox felt confident they were righteous and holy. They separated themselves from everybody else. Their attitude was represented by the Pharisee of **Lk.18:11 - The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.** The Pharisee's prayer went like this..."*God allow me to take this moment to say 'thank you' for me.*" He judged everybody else as **robbers, evildoers, adulterers** and **tax collectors**. The Pharisee's and law teachers had no respect for the crowd gathered for this dinner party. They despised every person in the house including Jesus.

They reasoned this way...if Jesus is a holy man sent by God, why would He eat dinner with a crowd like this? To share a meal was a sign of friendship! So an accusation aimed at discrediting Jesus began here at Matthew's house. Jesus alludes to this accusation in **Matt. 11:19 - The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."**

Some twist this claim and use it not so much as an accusation but as justification for their own indulgent lifestyle. Both twists are a distortion of what is true about the Lord Jesus. While remaining holy and undefiled, Jesus was a friend to sinners. Aren't you glad for that?

Though Jesus may have overheard the conversation, He never had to eavesdrop to know what was being said. Earlier when He healed the paralytic, **Mk. 2:8** says, **Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things?"** Listen, no one knows us better yet loves us more than Jesus!

So Jesus proceeded to answer their question three ways. **First**, he answered their question **logically**. In **v.12** He said, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** That makes perfect sense to me...how about you? Just as people infected with Ebola need a doctor's care, sinners need a savior! So Jesus came among those whose need was great. This doesn't mean the religious guys were spiritually **healthy**. They were as sinful as the **tax collectors and sinners** they hated. But they felt they were OK and better than others. Repentance didn't apply to them. They didn't feel the need for a savior. But think about this...which group is in the greater danger...those who seek help because they know they are sick, or those who are sick and refuse to acknowledge it?

Next, Jesus answered their question **scripturally**. In **v.13** He said, **But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'** Because these men were satisfied with their religion, they were unteachable and unreachable! They resisted change and anything new. Jesus directed them to their own OT and specifically to **Hosea 6:6**. There the Lord spoke to Israel and said, **For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.** This is a basic fact about the nature of God...God is merciful. The orthodox were zealous to keep the feasts and bring the right sacrifices, but were totally lacking in mercy or compassion for the "people of the land." In the story of the Good Samaritan the priest and Levite passed by the man beaten and left for dead. Yet the principle of **Hos. 6:6** applies still today. Religious activity is meaningless when prejudice and hatred is harbored in our hearts.

In a few minutes we'll celebrate the Lord's Table. The whole meaning of communion is undermined and negated if we harbor unconfessed sin or bitter, unloving attitudes toward others. To the fractured Corinthian church Paul wrote, **Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.**  
- **I Cor. 5:8** So Jesus said, **"go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'**

Then finally, Jesus answered their question **missionally** or on the basis of His mission and the reason for coming. He said, **For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."** This isn't hard. The salesman selling cable to the conservative Amish, is in the wrong neighborhood. The same is true for the barber who tries to sell me hair gel or a blow drier! Here Jesus states His mission plainly. He said, I didn't come for the self-deluded who think they're righteous...for people who sense no need for salvation and forgiveness. Jesus came for sinners...for people who know they're sinful, broken and in need of a savior...people like Matthew, his associates and friends.

So why wouldn't Jesus be part of a crowd like this? From a **logical** standpoint, Jesus is like a doctor and sinners are like people made sick by sin. **Scripturally**, God isn't impressed by the religious rituals and routines of people who withhold mercy and compassion. God values mercy and compassion because they reflect His holy nature. And **missionally**, Jesus said this...**For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.** – **Lk. 19:10**

The self-righteous aren't comfortable with mercy and grace. They put people in categories and withhold affection from those they view unworthy. But in God's sight, a sinner is a sinner is a sinner.

And every sinner needs the Savior. In God's sight there are no categories. **Rom. 3:10** declares, **"There is no one righteous, not even one!"** The self-righteous agree with **Rom. 6:23** which says the wages of sin is death, but he struggles with the rest of the verse...but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. The legalist doesn't get this at all. He lives by loveless duty and merciless ceremonies. He missed the essential truth that God is merciful, forgiving and eager to save the lost!

### **3. The disciple's question answered by three illustrations - vs.14-17**

We know so little about the disciples of John the Baptist. But we know they embraced his message of repentance from sin. Though made righteous in the OT sense, they couldn't yet know the glory of the Gospel. They knew nothing of the finality of Christ's coming death where the requirements of the Law were fulfilled once for all. But neither did John the Baptist or the disciples of Jesus. Having been jailed, John even seems to have wondered if Jesus was in fact the Messiah! But things were changing. The covenant soon ratified by Christ's shed blood was new and far superior to the Old Covenant and the old ways. The contrast is stated in **Jn. 1:17 - For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.** I'm over-simplifying for the sake of time, but someone has put it this way...*"The law said, 'do this and live, but grace says live and do this.'"* Kenneth Wuest, the noted greek scholar wrote these lines... *"Do this and live!" the Law demands, but gives me neither feet nor hands. A better word God's grace does bring, it bids me fly and gives me wings.*" While God's salvation has always been based on His grace and embraced by personal faith, the specific test of faith under the Old and New Covenants is not the same. According to the Old Covenant, the believer was required to obey the Law of Moses and offer the appropriate sacrifices. Under the New Covenant, believers are not lawless or free to live as we please. God requires us to trust the Lord Jesus who fulfilled the Law's demands and live by means of His indwelling Spirit. Yet at this pivotal time, none of this was understood as we understand it today.

So the question from John's disciples...**"How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"** They said John taught us genuine sorrow for sin is accompanied by fasting. In their minds, fasting had become obligatory...a legal requirement. Their thinking was still heavily influenced by OT Law. Without being too hard on them, they sound a bit like the Pharisees. And friends listen...legalistic Christians can sound a lot like Pharisees! Instead of asking, "How is your fellowship with Jesus?" they may ask, *"How many times were you in church last week?"* or *"Why doesn't your pastor wear a neck tie?"* They may say, *"We take communion every Sunday, why don't you?"* or *"Our ladies wear head coverings, but I see yours don't, Hmmm...."* Jesus brought change and a new reality, but they wouldn't have it.

So Jesus answered the disciples of John. The length of His response reveals His patience and sympathy for their lack of understanding. But let me ask you this...*"How are you with change?...I mean, How are you when some knucklehead suggests we do something different from the way we've always done it?"* I think I know the answer! You're just like me! I'm quick to suspect there's something wrong and nefarious with a new idea. If you want to read a story that shows how human nature resists change, read the story of Jonas Hanway. Hanway was the first to bring the umbrella to America. Here's a few lines...*"Hanway steadily underwent all the staring, laughing, jeering, hooting, and bullying; and having punished some insolent knaves who struck him with their whips as well as their tongues, he finally succeeded in overcoming the prejudices against it."*

Can we even begin to imagine how hard it was for the Jews to transition from law to grace? So much of the NT was written to address this sweeping transition and the ramifications involved. An example of this tension is **Acts 15:1 - Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching**

**the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."** John's disciples felt fasting was necessary...here others insisted on circumcision.

Down through history, all sorts of requirements have been added to the simple by grace through faith formula by which we are saved. **Matt. 9** records the first instruction given to address this enormous change of thought and approach to God. Jesus answered with three illustrations.

**First** He said, "**How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.**" A typical Jewish wedding lasted 7 days. It was a time of celebration and feasting, not a time of sorrow or fasting. In keeping with John's turn or burn message, his disciples probably fasted on Mondays and Thursdays just as the orthodox did. But the disciples of Jesus were radically different. Their message was Good News..."**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**" The kingdom was near because the Messiah had come. How could the disciples of Jesus fast in the presence of the Messiah...the long awaited bridegroom of Israel? How could they be sorrowful having heard His Good news and witnessed the powers of the Kingdom? Jesus said, the time will come when the bridegroom would be taken from them. This is the first hint of the crucifixion. In the distress of those coming days, His disciples did mourn, pray and fast! But fasting wasn't appropriate when Jesus was still with them!

**Second**, Jesus answered with an illustration of a patch sewn on a garment. "**No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.**" The new or unshrunk cloth represents the Gospel of Grace. The old garment represents the Law with all of its regulations and requirements. The point is this...when used as a patch, new cloth that has never been washed will shrink and tear an old garment. In the same way, the life the Gospel brings isn't a patched up life. The new life isn't a new approach to doing things the OT way. Even fasting, though it has some spiritual benefit, isn't legally mandated. And truth be known, some of the most miserable and insecure people in the world are those who think they can gain the new life by their own efforts to keep a set of rules. Jesus said, "**You must be born again**"...and we must!

**Finally**, Jesus answered with an illustration from **wine and wineskins**. A **wineskin** was the hide of an animal with leg and neck holes stitched up to make a container. (I'm thinking glass bottles were a welcome invention!) But empty leather wineskins soon dried out and cracked. If new wine still fermenting was put in a brittle wineskin, the skin would burst and the wine would spill out and be wasted. So Jesus said, "**Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.**" Once again, Jesus points out the radical difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. To mix grace with law as an operating principle, is to ruin grace altogether. Grace is everything for nothing to those who don't deserve anything. Add anything to that principle and you've destroyed it.

Once again, this new way was very hard for the Pharisees and the disciples of John to grasp. It has continued to be the most divisive issue in Christianity throughout the history of the church. The tendency to cling to Law and trust our ability to keep it / or the tendency to mix a little law with grace / or the tendency to pervert grace by practicing lawlessness...still divides Christians. It's something we need to get right...and by God's grace and the truth of His Word, this should be our desire.

But don't miss the other point of this message...the point that was so shocking and offensive to the religious elite. Jesus was a friend to sinners. Their isolationist policy was unmerciful and completely out of sync with the God whose mercy and compassion reaches out to every human being...even tax collectors...even those who offend and persecute us...even ISIS. And say it with me...**EVEN ME!**