

Jesus, Friend of Sinners

Matthew 9:9-13

November 20, 2022

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Good Morning. What a blessing it has been to worship together this morning by singing our praises of God together. And, now we enter a time of worship by submitting ourselves to God's Word in such a way that we live our lives according to what it says. So, I invite you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew Chapter 9:9-13.

Before we read, I want to ask you a question, "Are you a friend of sinners?" By the term sinner, I mean those who have little or nothing to do with Christianity or the church. They know it. And it doesn't matter to them.

When I reflect on that question myself, I think about my adolescent years as a Christian. As a teenager, I spent more time trying to be accepted by sinners than being a friend to them. They didn't have Christ, but they seemed to have all the friends, the fame, the fun, and sometimes the fortune. I wanted acceptance.

In my college years, the pendulum seemed to swing the other way for me. Recognizing my immaturity in seeking acceptance from sinners, I intentionally pulled away from that pursuit and found my place of belonging with brothers and sisters in my college ministry and those from my church family. At this point, I didn't have much time for sinners.

In my adult life, the Lord, in his loving, Fatherly discipline, has led me through seasons of repentance of sin in my own heart which have led me to come to realize that I am a wretch. I am a sinner - a sinner in need of the same grace that others need.

"Are you a friend of sinners?" Just know I ask myself the same question. But now, I ask it a little differently. "Is this sinner (me) a friend of sinners? Perhaps an even healthier way to phrase the question is, "Is this sinner saved by grace (me), a friend of sinners in need of grace?"

Now, we are currently in the middle of our Extraordinary Discipleship series. It is part of a bigger theme that we have been exploring the entire year called Extraordinary. We are looking at the life transformation that happens when an extraordinary God encounters ordinary people.

In our Scripture today, we are going to witness an incredible story of the sinless One, Jesus Christ, and his heart toward sinners. We are going to see the calling of a disciple, who many at the time would have been quick to label as an unlikely choice because he was a sinner.

Through this incredible story of Jesus's encounter with a sinner and his calling as a disciple, we are going to answer the question "Why is discipleship extraordinary?"

So, let's begin by reading in Matthew 9, starting in verse 9,

Matt. 9:9 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.

Matt. 9:10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Matt. 9:12 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

Matt. 9:13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Why is Discipleship Extraordinary?

1. It Transforms Your Character (9:9)

Here, in Verse 9 we are introduced to Matthew the tax collector. His story is found in three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Mark and Luke he is referred to as Levi, but in the gospel of Matthew, he is called Matthew. However, we know that Matthew and Levi are the same person because all three of the stories are basically identical.

Most likely, Jesus gave Levi the name Matthew to commemorate his inclusion as a disciple. The name Matthew literally means "the gift of God," which would be a reminder to him that his salvation and calling were a gift from God.

Jesus did this on other occasions. He changed Saul's name to Paul, and Simon's name to Peter. So, today we will refer to him by the name Jesus gave him, Matthew.

We see Matthew sitting at his tax booth. Matthew was a tax collector. In Jesus' day, it would be difficult to find someone hated more than a tax collector. There are two main reasons why a tax collector was hated. These are some side notes, some background information that will help us understand these Scriptures better.

Why were tax collectors despised?

- **They were notorious thieves**

They were known for stealing money. You can imagine that in their day, accountability for tax collectors was not good. They didn't have computers or email. I'm sure the mail was very slow. So the people weren't able to receive statements of their taxes. They just had to rely on the word of the tax collector that what they owed was the correct amount.

But the tax collector couldn't be trusted, because one of the ways they would steal is by increasing the actual rate of the tax a person owed. The person being taxed doesn't know any different.

They could say, you owe \$500 when you really owe \$400. They would then pass the \$400 on to the government and pocket the rest for themselves. So, most of them had acquired substantial wealth by dishonesty and thievery. That is why the gospels are full of references of them being completely despised.

They are despised so much that they couldn't even worship in the temple because they were considered unclean due to their evil practices. The religious leaders hated them. Businessmen hated them. The common people hated them.

Now, it is important to note that this is happening in the town of Capernaum, next to the sea of Galilee. This is Jesus's home base for ministry. In Mark's gospel account of these events, listen to what it says in Mark 2:1

Mark 2:1-2 When Jesus entered Capernaum again after some days, it was reported that He was at home. So many people gathered together that there was no more room, not even in the doorway, and He was speaking the message to them.

Now, this scripture in Mark is the introduction to the story of Jesus healing the paralytic man which happens right before the calling of Matthew. So many people are around Jesus and the home that four friends have to cut through the roof of the house to lower him down to Jesus. Scribes and other religious leaders are there to see this.

So, Matthew's hometown - the place where he lives and does his business, is also Jesus's home base for ministry. And, when Jesus is home, he attracts a crowd. He had been there previously teaching them and healing them. People were already calling him the Messiah. Surely, Matthew had heard of him in his own town, or even seen him before.

Now, I personally believe that Matthew had already been wrestling in his own heart whether or not he believed that Jesus was the Messiah. The Scripture doesn't say this, but my own conviction is that Matthew had accepted by faith in his heart that Jesus was the Messiah.

I can imagine him coming to work on this day. He is doing the same tasks, but he is thinking about other things. He is pondering in his heart what faith in Christ means for him, for his relationships, for his job, for his future. Then, all of a sudden, there is a commotion. A crowd starts coming toward his booth. He hears a couple of people talking about Jesus healing the paralytic man.

Before he could make sense of everything, Matthew is face to face with One whom he ponders in his heart. And Jesus, in this moment, offers him a chance of a lifetime. Follow me! Walk with me! Journey with me! I want you. There are a lot of other people that don't want you, but I do. I choose you. Follow me!

And Matthew gets up, and leaves his old life behind him and follows Jesus, the one who will give him new life and acceptance.

Isn't this the very essence of a change in character. We are not simply talking about behavioral changes. Not just external changes, but internal. We are talking about the core of who you are being completely changed not because of what you do, but because of who you follow. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says,

2 Cor. 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

If you are in Christ, the new creation has come. Your character is changed completely by the saving work of Jesus. Your sin is redeemed. Your salvation is sealed. You walk in new life. You have a name change. You are no longer Levi, you are now Matthew because of this gift from God. Discipleship is extraordinary because it transforms your character. Let's continue in verse 10,

10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

When you follow Jesus he first transforms your character, and then secondly he transforms your community.

Why is Discipleship Extraordinary?

- 1. It Transforms Your Character (9:9)**
- 2. It Transforms Your Community (9:10)**

Matthew holds a great banquet for Jesus at his house. This reaffirms that Matthew had acquired great wealth because he had a home big enough to throw a dinner party and invite all of his friends.

This is just amazing to me. The first thing he does is throw a party in honor of Jesus. And who does he invite? He invites his friends. If you were a tax collector back then, some of your only friends would have been other tax collectors or outcasts.

The outcasts in society typically group together because of that common bond. And Matthew just wants to introduce them to one who has given him a chance at a new life. We do similar things. When we stumble across great things that could benefit others, we share it. I know I do.

I remember a few years ago I received an email from Southwest Airlines that said they were offering a three day window to purchase airline tickets to a bunch of destinations for \$49. I was able to get airfare for a conference in the fall for a third of the normal price.

So, what did I do? I became Southwest Airlines spokesman. For the next three days, I was telling everybody about it. You want to get cheap airfare for a vacation? Even if you're not planning one, just go on there and pick a place. Boom. Vacation planned.

Recently, I got a great deal on a grill at Sam's that has the griddle top. I love that grill. I'm like a hibachi chef now. I can cook the entire meal in just a few minutes, clean up the grill in 2 minutes and walk inside to a clean kitchen. I've told many people about this grill. It's awesome.

I just wanted to share that discovery so that others could experience a similar opportunity. We all have done things like this before. If we have great news we want to share it.

So, Matthew invites his friends and other tax collectors to a dinner party to spend time with Jesus. He introduces them to Jesus for a couple of reasons: (1) to let them know who he is following now (so this may be a farewell party of sorts). I'm leaving my old way of life behind, behold, He is the new way for me.

And (2) to help his own friends move from outcast to the inner circle of Christ's grace. Matthew was a sinner saved by grace introducing his friends in need of grace to Christ, the giver of grace.

When was the last time you held a dinner party for Jesus? Are you actively introducing the people you care about to the one cared enough for you to change your character? Going back to that passage in 2 Corinthians 5,

2 Cor. 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

2 Cor. 5:18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

2 Cor. 5:19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

2 Cor. 5:20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

2 Cor. 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin[b] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We are Christ's ambassadors for reconciliation, his mouthpiece to declare that salvation has come in Jesus Christ. When you follow Jesus, he will use you to transform your community. So, church LET'S GET TO IT.

Invite your lost friend to church. Have them over for dinner. Invite them to your community group. Go visit them at their house. Call them on the phone. I encourage you to do something that will give you the chance to introduce them to Jesus.

Pastor Craig Groeschel Life Church in Oklahoma, one of the largest churches in America tells his church to do anything short of sin to introduce people to Jesus. When you follow Jesus, he will transform your community. Let's move on to verse 11:

Matt. 9:11 When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

What an interesting question. And the answer that Jesus gives to this question gives us the third reason discipleship is extraordinary. Discipleship is extraordinary because when you follow Jesus, he transforms your character, your community, and third, he transforms your church.

Why is Discipleship Extraordinary?

- 1. It Transforms Your Character (9:9)**
- 2. It Transforms Your Community (9:10)**
- 3. It Transforms Your Church (9:11-13)**

Let's get back to those side notes now, that background information about tax collectors. We learned first that tax collectors were despised because they were notorious thieves. The second reason is because they collected taxes for a foreign government.

Why were tax collectors despised?

- **They were notorious thieves**
- **Collected taxes for a foreign government**

A first century tax collector in Israel worked for the Roman Empire which was the world power of that day. Matthew was a Jew, an Israelite, and his job was to collect taxes from other Jews to support this foreign government.

The Romans had taken over roughly two centuries prior to the time of Jesus. They ruled by setting up governors over various nations or territories now under their rule. The governors would appoint chief tax collectors over the region to collect taxes from citizens of other nations for the Roman government.

Some of you know the Bible story of Zacchaeus. You know, that song you learned as a child: Zacchaeus was a wee, little man, and a wee, little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see. That man, Zacchaeus, was a chief tax collector over an entire region of Israel.

Matthew was not a chief tax collector, but he would have worked for a chief tax collector in his area. Remember, Matthew is from Capernaum which is a town right on the sea of Galilee.

Historical sources reveal that the Romans taxed goods along trade routes, specifically along waterways. Therefore, most of the goods that were sold along the sea of Galilee would have been taxed, and this includes the sale of fish.

Since Matthew's tax booth was right there on the Sea of Galilee, we can reasonably conclude that one of his main jobs was taxing fishermen. Why is this so important? Matthew is the 5th disciple that Jesus called. But who were the first four? Fishermen!

These disciples have just witnessed Jesus heal a paralyzed man. Then walking away from this house with Jesus, they see Matthew. And Jesus talks to him!!

This is a tax collector, one of their own people, who is notorious for stealing their hard earned money and collecting another portion of it to send off to support foreign government. What do you think these fishermen thought of Matthew?

I can just imagine Peter elbowing his brother Andrew, "Hey, look at that scum tax collector over there." They can't stand him. And then, they realize Jesus is speaking to him. "Why do you think Jesus is talking to him?" Then they hear their Rabbi ask him to be one of them. This must have completely shocked them.

Later, they find themselves at a party with Jesus, sharing a meal with not just one, but multiple tax collectors. They must have been confused and trying to understand what Jesus was doing.

And at this point, the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews, who wouldn't allow tax collectors to worship in the synagogues, come up NOT to Jesus, but to the disciples and say, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

In their own way they were trying to say, "Remember, these are the people that steal your money. These are the ones who you despise so much. These are the ones who aren't even allowed to worship God because they are so unclean and filthy in their sin. And you are associating with them."

A fisherman would have respected a spiritual leader such as a Pharisee, and to hear a Pharisee ask this must have affirmed their confusion even more. Why are we doing this? These people are filthy and evil, and this one gets called to follow Jesus and now he's trying to get his buddies in too. What is going on?

At this point Jesus turns to answer the Pharisees and I believe also to teach the disciples an important lesson. Verse 12-13,

Matt. 9:12 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

Matt. 9:13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus's answer to their question is one of the very first lessons that Jesus taught to his disciples and to his critics. He reveals his heart toward those he is calling. It is not the healthy who need a doctor, it is the sick.

And Jesus defines who the sick are in this scenario. Sinners are those with an understanding of their unworthiness before God and their need for healing. It is not the righteous who follow the letter of law, those who believe they are perfect, but are disgusting on the inside, and actually point their fingers at others in judgment as if they are God.

You see, religious rituals can aid people in a better understanding of God and help to deepen their relationship with him. God is in fact the one who implemented the sacrificial system in the old testament and the one who still calls us to observe the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper in the new testament.

But without a love for God in our hearts and a yearning for obedience to him based on that love, then rituals actually mock God. You see, God wants our hearts, not just a blind devotion to a religious checklist.

Jesus says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice. He is saying: "I desire to be merciful and save sinners who understand they need saving, place their faith in me. I don't just want to pat people on the back for following a set of regulations. I see the heart and I want to change the hearts of man.

I desire mercy for even the worst of sinners like the tax collector. Listen to this parable Jesus shared later in his ministry, Luke 18:9-14 says,

Lk. 18:9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

Lk. 18:10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

Lk. 18:11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

Lk. 18:13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Lk. 18:14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Some may say that this attitude is a problem that isn't as prevalent today. But, I believe this is the very attitude that brings churches into decline, cripples their mission, and eventually closes their doors.

It's that attitude that breeds conversations like this: “Hey man, did you see that person in church today. If only they knew who that guy is and what he's done. There's no hope for that person. I just can't see them turning their life around.”

Or, “if only they knew how that person has treated me, then they would shut the door in their face. I don't think I can go back there if that person continues to be there.” Jesus is saying here, my mercy is for the tax collector, the thief, the murderer, the backstabber, the raging alcoholic, the adulterer, the porn addict, the outcast.

Now, Jesus doesn't condone this behavior. It is not his will that man should perish in sin. But, he doesn't isolate his grace from sinners. He doesn't hang out with sinners just so they can know how sinful they are. He hangs out with sinners so they can know how gracious he is towards those who trust in him for salvation from their sins. There is a big difference.

Our church will continue to be transformed if we take on this attitude of our Lord. What a genuine place Northshore Church is and will continue to be if we are focused on doing what is right, loving mercy, and walking humbly before our God.

With genuine hearts we can say to the world: regardless of what you have done, Jesus still holds out his hand inviting you to follow him. The reason I know he does and he will is because he did it for us, sinners. Even at our best, we still fall short of his glory. But Jesus desires mercy. Thank God he had mercy on us.

When I titled this message, Jesus, Friend of Sinners, I could help but think of the Casting Crowns song with the same title. Listen to the powerful words of this song for the church today:

**Jesus, friend of sinners, we have strayed so far away
We cut down people in Your name, but the sword was never ours to swing
Jesus, friend of sinners, the truth's become so hard to see
The world is on their way to You, but they're tripping over me**

**Always looking around, but never looking up, I'm so double minded
A plank-eyed saint with dirty hands and a heart divided**

**Jesus, friend of sinners, the one who's writing in the sand
Made the righteous turn away and the stones fall from their hands
Help us to remember we are all the least of these
Let the memory of Your mercy bring Your people to their knees**

Nobody knows what we're for

**Only what we're against when we judge the wounded
What if we put down our signs
Crossed over the lines and love like You did?**

**You love every lost cause, You reach for the outcast
For the leper and the lame; they're the reason that You came
Lord, I was that lost cause, and I was the outcast
But You died for sinners just like me, a grateful leper at Your feet**

**Jesus, friend of sinners
Open our eyes to the world at the end of our pointing fingers**

**And let our hearts be led by mercy
Help us reach with open hearts and open doors
Oh, Jesus, friend of sinners, break our hearts for what breaks Yours**

Jesus invited Matthew and he got up and left his tax booth. His heart, his character, was forever changed. Jesus used him to transform his community when he introduced him to the One who showed him love when everyone else showed him hate.

His new band of brothers learned a crucial lesson that Christ's invitation is extended to the lowest of the low. These men would later become the first leaders of His church. With this new message that Christ's salvation is for all, the church expanded, multiplied, and was transformed forever.

Jesus gave Matthew a chance of a lifetime. A tax collector, who's entire vocation was focused on laying heavy burdens onto people. Jesus says, follow me, and your new life will be consumed with lifting burdens off of people.

The same opportunity is available to us today. Jesus is saying to all of us, Follow Me, I'll transform your character, I'll transform your community, and I'll continue to transform this church as we partner in his mission not to lay burdens on people as the righteous, but to lift burdens off as the redeemed.