



Matthew 9:9–13

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.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 col-

lectors and sinners?” 12 On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Reflection

Yesterday’s passage began with Jesus returning to his own town. You’ll remember that towards the end of his first year of ministry Jesus was run out of his home town, Nazareth in Judea, at which point he moved north to Capernaum in Galilee for his second year of far more public ministry. It’s likely that Matthew’s tax booth is set up somewhere on the outskirts of Capernaum. He’s collecting taxes from

fisherman, and farmers and day labourers who are struggling to make ends meet either fishing on the sea of Galilee or working some rich landowner's farm.

Life was hard in Galilee and to this the Romans added a heavy tax burden. No-one in any society has ever loved the tax man but their reputation was even worse in Jesus' day. In the main, tax collectors were rich, corrupt traitors whose livelihoods came from oppressing their fellow citizens. Their whole job was to take money off their fellow citizens – with a fat commission kept back for themselves – and to give it to the enemy who then used it to build bigger armies to oppress them even further. It didn't get much worse than being a tax collector, they were despised. You can see this in the way the bible al-

ways groups them as 'tax collectors and sinners.'

To one of them Jesus says 'Follow me,' his name is Matthew, and he gets up, leaves it all behind and becomes Jesus' disciple. In the next scene we see Jesus having dinner at Matthew's house. We get the impression of a banquet, Matthew's invited all his friends, many tax collectors and sinners. Chances are Matthew is quite wealthy, the dinner may have been a lavish affair. Amongst them Jesus and his disciples are comfortable and at ease.

But the Pharisees were aghast, this is unspeakable behaviour for religious teacher, it's hard to count how many of their rules Jesus was breaking in this moment. You see in the ancient world sharing a meal

with someone was far more intimate and significant, both socially and religiously, than it is today. For Jewish people, the shared meal was a formal occasion where the food consumed was made sacred through various rituals such as ceremonial washings or tithings. Devout Jews did not even associate with Gentiles, and certainly never shared a meal with them, let alone with tax collectors and sinners.

They weren't brave enough to confront Jesus directly, so they levelled the charge at his disciples:

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Although perhaps they said it loudly enough to be sure that Jesus would over-

hear. They may have been seeking to shame him in public, letting others know what he'd been up to in private, to expose his secret sin which was only a sin in terms of the rules that they'd added on top of God's word.

Jesus replies with two striking statements. Firstly, Jesus explains:

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”

Jesus' mission on earth is to save people, both Jew and Gentile, from their sins. What's Jesus doing mixing with tax collectors and sinners? Far from condoning their behaviour, he's on mission. He's come to seek and save the lost, to bring salvation to sinners so what could be more natural

than to be mixing with sinners in the hope that some of them might be saved, just like Matthew has been. That's likely Matthew's intention as well, he's met Jesus, his first thought being to then introduce Jesus to all his friends, that they too might come to know him.

But there's irony here as well, and a turning of the tables. Because the Pharisees are sick too, perhaps even sicker than Matthew's dinner guests, in that they are more blind to their sin. The Pharisees are so caught up in their religious self-righteousness, all their rules that they've added to the bible, rules they so proudly keep and publically keep, that they cannot see their own hard-hearted sinfulness. Jesus encapsulates all of this in his second statement,

But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

‘I don’t want your endless sacrifices and ceremonial washings,’ says Jesus, ‘I want a humble and repentant heart. Your self-righteousness, your empty religious practices, all your pride and outward show conceals a heart that is sinful and hardened and further from the kingdom of God than these tax collectors and sinners who at least can see that they are living sinful lives. If you had humble and repentant hearts you’d see yourself for who you truly are, sinners just like these, in desperate need of God’s grace, and then you’d be filled with mercy for them like I am. I desire

mercy and not sacrifice. When you work out what this means then you'll be close to the kingdom of God. For I haven't come to the call the righteous – because they don't exist, no-one is righteous in God's sight, no, not one, all have sinned, all have fallen short – I've come to save sinners, to those who are aware of their sin.'

Think

There's much to consider in this passage isn't there? As you reflect over it now perhaps consider the fact that this entire year we'll be walking with Jesus with a sinner and tax collector as our expert guide. This tax-collector-sinner encountered Jesus and went on to write the gospel that bears his name. You might reflect over how Jesus has transformed your life since becoming

a Christian. You also might consider how, straight after his conversion, Matthew throws a huge party and introduces all of his friends to Jesus. Do you celebrate your relationship with Jesus like this? Have you introduced him to your friends? Have you made a big deal about what he means to you in the circles in which you tread? Or have you kind of kept him on the quiet? On the flipside, how many of your friends are sinners in need of grace? How often do you mix meaningfully with non-Christians? Perhaps take a moment to reflect on the people in your life. It's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. If almost all of your friends are Christians then where does that leave you in terms of Jesus' mission on earth?

Prayer

Then spend some time praying. 'I desire mercy, not religion says Jesus.' Not empty religious rituals and routines, but a heart for the lost, humility that doesn't look down, but goes out to those in desperate need of salvation and mixes with them. Not proud Christians caught up in our own affairs, but humble servants on mission in unlikely places for Jesus. Pray that you would be a person like this and anything else that God has put on your heart this morning.

