

Jesus is the Friend of Sinners

- I. Hope for those who know they're sinners
- II. A Warning for those who think they're not

*(Matthew 9:9-13) 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 collectors 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."*

Do you remember Steven Avery, the man featured in the documentary, "Making a Murderer"? Tell me, how would you feel if yesterday you learned that Steven Avery was released from prison and today he comes strolling into church and plops down in the pew beside you? How would you feel? Would you stick out your hand and say, "Welcome! So glad you're here." Or would you kind of slide over and think to yourself, "What is he doing here?!?" I have a hunch which way I'd be leaning.

But now let's turn the tables a minute. Let's imagine that just for a moment, you are Steven Avery. If you are the one walking into this church for the first time, how do you think you would feel? Do you think you would feel welcome here? You think you would feel like you fit right in? Do you think you would come back again?

Now let me make it clear that, to the best of my knowledge, Steven Avery has not been released from prison, so that imaginary scenario is completely irrelevant—or is it? Could that scenario get us thinking about how we might react to someone whose reputation leaves a bit to be desired? Maybe it's an ex-con or an unwed mother, Maybe it's a drug addict, or someone who hasn't stepped foot in a church for years? How are we supposed to feel about that person?

Or turn the tables. What if you are that person? What if you came today with a considerable amount of baggage? What if you have a few black marks on your record? Will you feel welcome here? More importantly, how does God feel about you? Do you feel like God would accept you, in light of your past? You realize those are not just hypothetical questions. They are issues that confront us on a regular basis. They center around two basic questions. 1. How am I supposed to feel about someone who has lived an obviously sinful life? 2. What if that someone is me?

Fortunately for us, these are the questions that God's Word answers for us today. On this Festival of friendship, we turn to Matthew chapter 9 and we discover a most amazing truth. And the truth is:

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We'll see that that fact represents

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First, Jesus offers hope for those who know they're sinners. Our text records for us the account of Matthew being called to be one of Jesus' 12 disciples. Matthew, who by the way is

the writer of this gospel account of Jesus' life, records his own call to discipleship with these words. *As Jesus went on from there [namely from the city of Nazareth], 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.*

A couple things to note in those words. First, notice that Matthew was a tax collector. That's not exactly the equivalent of working for the IRS today. In Jesus' day, tax collectors were absolutely despised for two reasons. First, because they were working as agents of the hated Roman government. And secondly, tax collectors were infamous for being greedy and dishonest. They made their money by overcharging people. That's why tax collectors were hated by the Jews, banished from the synagogues, and lumped together with all the other public "sinners".

Isn't it amazing that this was the kind of man that Jesus approaches in a very public setting and says, *"Follow me."* And Mathew gets up and leaves everything he has and follows Jesus. Really? He goes from public sinner to a full-time disciple? How do you explain that? Did Jesus put some kind of spell on him? "You will follow me." No, a much more plausible explanation would be that Matthew had simply been watching and listening to Jesus as he conducted his ministry around Capernaum. And Jesus' words and actions had had an impact on Matthew's heart.

At the same time, let's not discount the impact that Jesus simple invitation would have had on Matthew. I mean, for Jesus to pick this tax collector out of the crowd and say, "You, you are the one. I want you to follow me." You talk about God's forgiving love in action. Jesus shows mercy to a man who has done absolutely nothing to deserve it. That's what changes Matthew's heart—and his occupation.

But notice, once Matthew comes to grips with the fact that Jesus has accepted him in spite of his bad reputation, Matthew can't wait to share Jesus with a bunch of other people who have similar reputations and track records. How does Matthew record the event? *While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples.* You've got to think that Matthew played a key role in bringing these people to Jesus. You can just about hear Matthew saying, "C'mon, you have to meet this Jesus. He's a rabbi who didn't condemn me for my past behavior. Instead, he forgave me." That's good news. That's hope for people who know they're sinners.

And yet, isn't it something that the very quality that causes sinners to be drawn to Jesus is the quality that causes religious people to be repelled by Jesus? St. Matthew records the reaction of the religious elite when he writes, *When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"* You see what's happening here? The religious leaders were assuming that because Jesus was associating with these people, he was therefore condoning their sinful behavior, maybe Jesus was joining in with their sinful behavior. Kind of like, "birds of the feather flock together."

The Pharisees, on the other hand, took the opposite view. "We've got to stay away from those sinners. We don't want them to contaminate us." If Jesus really is a man of God, why would he be hanging out with sinners? Jesus' answer? *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick."* You understand what Jesus means, don't you? By their very profession, doctors have to spend time with sick people. So with Jesus. If he's going to save sinners, he has to spend time with sinners. They're the ones who need him. Or as Jesus says here in our text, *"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

My friends, do you realize what a comfort that is to know that Jesus has come not to save

holy people, but to save sinners? That's what allows us to come clean before God. We don't have to hide our sins, or try to explain them away. We can bring them to God. We can be honest and say, "God I blew it. I ridiculed my child. I disrespected my parent. I cheated my employer. I failed to show love to my spouse. And that was just this week. Throughout my life I've fallen in countless other ways. But I believe that you took all my sins and carried them to the cross. And there you were punished in my place. By taking the rap for me, you proved you really are the sinner's best friend.

Yes, Jesus is the Friend of Sinners. Yet, here in our text, Jesus offers more than I. Hope for those who know they're sinners. He also offers II. A Warning for those who think they aren't.

You realize that here in our text Jesus is speaking to a group of people who thought that they didn't need a savior from sin. The Pharisees thought that by their outwardly moral behavior, they were better than everyone else. They were the clean people. They were the healthy ones. And Jesus acknowledges, at least hypothetically, that if they really are clean, if they are healthy, then they don't need a doctor. They don't need Jesus as their savior.

But Jesus also realizes that the Pharisees self-diagnosis was not an accurate one. The Pharisees were not righteous. They were not spiritually healthy. And they proved that by not showing mercy to their fellow sinners. That's why Jesus says, "*Go and learn what this means: [and then he quotes what God says in Hosea 6:6] 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'*" In other words, Jesus is convicting the Pharisees of not showing mercy to the sinners and tax collectors. Because the Pharisees thought they were keeping God's laws better than anyone else, they didn't have time for anyone who was not living up to their standards.

The question is, do Jesus words to the Pharisees have any application for our lives today? Yes, I'm afraid they do. Do you realize how easy it is for us to judge other people because we think they're committing a worse sin than we are? (e.g. "Did you hear what he was arrested for? Can you believe the attitude she had? Did you see what they were wearing to church? Don't they know how to make their children behave? What are they doing here anyway?") If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we all have looked down our noses at people we've judged to be more sinful than we are. Or we turn the tables and we look down our noses at the people that we think are judging us. In either case, we're doing exactly what the Pharisees did. We're focusing on someone else's sin, rather than my own. We're saying, "I'm not that bad. But they are." But what did Jesus say in Matthew Chapter 7? "*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?*" Or to put it another way, concentrate on what you're doing wrong, rather than what others are doing wrong.

And yet, even more important than seeing our own sins is seeing what Jesus has done with our sins. By his death on the cross, he's paid for them in full. He's washed them away. He's thrown them in the bottom of the sea. And really, that's what allows us to come here today, it's what allows us to gather in his house, to stand before the Lord's throne. We are here not because we're such good people. No, we are here because we know we're not such good people. We are here because we spent all week creating all this garbage and there is only one person who will take it off our hands. And that person is Jesus. In the words of the hymn writer, Jesus Sinners Does Receive.

You've maybe heard me say that I've always felt like there is a big invisible banner over the door of our church. It doesn't read, "Good people belong in here." No, it reads, "Sinners are welcome here!" The next time you wonder whether you really belong here at Mount Olive, because of something you've done or said in your life, because of something that's weighing on

your conscience; think about that banner, “Sinners welcome here.” And the next time you look at someone else, the next time you’re frustrated by something they’re doing in their lives, when you are tempted to say, “What are they doing here?” think about that banner, “Sinners Welcome Here.”

Please don’t misunderstand the sign. It doesn’t mean that Jesus condones sin. He doesn’t. And therefore, neither can his church. What it means is that when the sinner confesses his sin, Jesus always forgives. How did St. John put it, *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. {9} If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)*

That’s good news. And in the end, it’s Christ’s love for sinners like us that makes us want to share with our friends and family the best news of all, the news that Matthew the former tax collector once discovered for himself. And that’s the fact that Jesus really is...the Friend of Sinners. To God be the glory. Amen.