

Jesus Came To Call Sinners

Matthew 9:1-17

Key Verse: 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.”

John Brockman, in his book, “The Greatest Inventions of the Past 2,000 Years,” mentions such things as the printing press, electricity, the computer, reading glasses, aspirin, and the eraser. The eraser? Is this one of the greatest inventions? Yes. Many great artists, such as Michelangelo and Da Vinci, used the eraser extensively in developing their works. Without the eraser, Beethoven’s fifth symphony might not have been perfected. Our lives are like an artist’s canvass or a music score with many mistakes and flaws. We need something to erase these so that the masterpiece God intends may emerge. Jesus is our Eraser. Jesus came to erase our sins so that we may live a new life, a beautiful life in his image.

Today’s passage tells us about Jesus’ purpose in coming. Jesus came to forgive sins and call sinners. As soon as Jesus revealed this, conflict began to arise with the religious leaders of Israel. These men had studied the words of God very diligently, like we do. They had a strict moral standard. They fasted, prayed and gave tithe offerings to God regularly. But their problem was their limited concept of God. They knew about God, but they did not really know God personally. They did not recognize God as God when they confronted him in person through Jesus. They did not know God’s mind and heart. Most of all, they did not know God’s mercy. So they were unmerciful and judgmental toward others. They condemned those who lived outside the law. They never considered helping such people, but only wanted to insulate themselves from their bad influence. We can understand the religious leaders. It is easy for us to ignore mercy and become judgmental. Sometimes we seek only to protect and preserve ourselves, our own families, and our own community. In doing so, we easily ignore the heart of God. Then our own spiritual lives become dry and we stop growing. Today, let’s learn the heart of God.

I. Jesus has authority to forgive sins (1-8)

Jesus had planned to give his disciples a time of rest by crossing the lake to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But on the way, they met a storm of wind and waves, followed by another storm of two demon-possessed men. Jesus demonstrated his power and authority to calm the storm and to drive out demons. The disciples could experience the power of Jesus and learn more of who he is.

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This gave true rest to their souls. Now, after crossing the lake again, they came to Jesus' own town of Capernaum (1). It was time to learn even more about Jesus.

Look at verse 2a. **“Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith....”** Two amazing things take place in this event. The first is that men brought a paralyzed man to Jesus. The Greek text includes the word “behold” (*ιδου*). This means the author wants us to understand the unusual nature of this event. In regard to the men, it was an act of courageous faith. They were coming, not for their own healing, but for the healing of their friend. They were mindful and sacrificial. In Mark's gospel, “some men” refers to four people (Mk 2:3). These men had to work together with one mind and spirit for a common purpose. Furthermore, they had faith in Jesus. They could overcome all obstacles that hindered them because they believed Jesus would heal their friend.

Another amazing thing is how Jesus responded to the men. He saw their faith. According to Mark's account, they pushed their way through a crowd of people, opened a hole in the roof above Jesus, and lowered the mat the man was lying on right in front of Jesus (Mk 2:4). Their act was abrupt and rude, perhaps illegal. They could have been arrested and charged with criminal trespass and destruction of property. It was socially unacceptable in such a legalistic and orderly society. Most people see outer appearances and then judge others based on subjective assumptions. But Jesus was different. Jesus saw their inner motive. Jesus saw their compassionate concern for a burdensome man, their certainty that Jesus would welcome and heal him, and their overcoming spirit. In a word, Jesus saw their faith. Their faith was not abstract and theoretical, but practical, living faith. This faith pleased Jesus and he was willing to bless them.

How did Jesus bless them? Look at verse 2b. **“...he said to the man, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’”** Jesus accepted the paralyzed man as a son. Outwardly, the man looked gaunt, weak and burdensome. But when he came to Jesus, though carried by others, Jesus welcomed him as a dear son and comforted him, saying, **“Take heart.”** Here we learn that Jesus accepts those who come to him in faith as his dear children, saying, “Take heart, son;” “Take heart, daughter.” This is the voice of comfort and encouragement; it is the voice of the Messiah.

Jesus' words were not just good wishes to make him feel better. Jesus' words solved his fundamental problem from the root. Jesus said, **“Your sins are forgiven.”** To Jesus, this man's most urgent, fundamental problem was not paralysis, but sin. Basically all sickness, disease and infirmity stems from original sin. This does not mean that his paralysis was directly related to a specific sin he

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had committed. We should not infer from this that whenever a person is sick it is because of their sin. But Jesus wants us to realize that our sin problem is most serious and urgent, even more so than cancer.

The symptoms of paralysis are similar to the symptoms of sin-sickness. The paralyzed are severely limited physically. They need help all the time. It is easy for them to become demanding and critical toward those who try to serve them. It is easy for them to begin complaining about everything. Of course, all of us should be thankful in any circumstance and find out what we can do to be a blessing, not a burden to others. For example, Nick Vujjic was born without any limbs. As the son of devout Christians in Australia, he once prayed to grow arms and legs. When this did not happen, he realized that God wanted to use him as a blessing to others just as he was. He began to master the daily tasks of life. He learned to write using the two toes on his left foot with a special grip that slid onto his big toe. He learned to use a computer and type using a “heel and toe” method. He learned to throw tennis balls, play drum pedals, get himself a glass of water, comb his hair, brush his teeth, answer the phone and shave. In seventh grade, he became captain of his school, and at age seventeen started a non-profit corporation, “Life Without Limbs.” He is now a popular evangelist and motivational speaker who encourages others to overcome their weaknesses by faith. He always gives glory to God and thanks God whenever he has opportunity. Usually people blame others or their circumstances or human conditions for their misery. But the real problem is within themselves; it is a sin problem. Sin makes people powerless. Sin is the fundamental cause of human misery.

The issue is, how can we solve the sin problem? Many people do good things, hoping they will compensate for their evil deeds. This is the essential teaching of all kinds of religions. Other people torture themselves with guilt and condemnation hoping to bear the full punishment for their sins. Still other people try to forget about their sin problem through meditation, drinking or using drugs. But the Bible teaches us very clearly that no one can solve their sin problem by their own effort. The Bible says, **“There is no one righteous, not even one”** (Ro 3:10). Only God can solve our sin problem. How did he do this? In his great mercy, God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ into this world, not to condemn the world, but to save the world through the forgiveness of sins. Jesus paid the full price of our sins through his death on the cross. On the cross, he prayed, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”** (Lk 23:34a). In this way he forgave all our sins. Jesus declared to the paralyzed man, **“Your sins are forgiven.”** Jesus erased all of his sins completely. When Jesus erases our sins, they are permanently erased, and God remembers them no more. Isaiah 43:25 says, **“I,**

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even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” Jesus is our Eraser. Jesus erases all our sins permanently through his blood so that we may be freed from the paralysis of sin. Jesus empowers us to live a blessed and healthy life. Thank you, Jesus!

What was the response to Jesus’ gracious words? Some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” (3) In Mark 2:7 they added, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” In one sense, they are right. Only God can solve our sin problem. Sin is primarily an offense against God, so forgiveness must come from God. Jesus wanted to persuade them that he came from God for the purpose of bringing forgiveness of sins. Jesus asked them, **“Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’”** (5) For any human being, these are both easy to say but impossible to do. Yet God can do both. Jesus wanted them to know that he is the Son of Man sent by God with authority on earth to forgive sins (6a). So he said to the paralyzed man, **“Get up, take your mat and go home”** (6b). When he heard the voice of the Son of God, he got up. In John 5:25 Jesus said, **“Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.”** Jesus’ word has power to make the paralyzed leap like a deer. Perhaps the man jumped, danced, dunked a basketball, and then went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man (8). Here we can see that those who receive forgiveness of sins from Jesus are completely changed and live a totally new life. They are no longer powerless people but powerful people; they are no longer ungrateful whiners but thankful and dynamic children of God. When we receive forgiveness of sins from Jesus our value system, lifestyle, purpose, and hope are all transformed. We become God’s children who grow in his glorious image.

II. Jesus desires mercy, not sacrifice (9-17)

In this part we see a progression. In dealing with the paralyzed man, Jesus declared the forgiveness of sins. In dealing with Matthew he shows that he not only declares forgiveness but lives together with sinners to heal us and make us useful to God and people. That is the purpose of his coming.

Look at verse 9. As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. Jesus said to him, **“Follow me,”** and Matthew got up and followed him. According to Joachim Jeremias, tax collectors made up the very bottom layer of Jewish society, below even the prostitutes and slaves. They were the most despised people in Israel. One of man’s basic desires is to

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receive recognition and honor from others. More than that, everyone needs self-esteem. But Matthew ignored these things. He pursued money as if it was everything. In the process, he lost his self-esteem and people's respect. He forfeited his identity as one of God's chosen people. He had money, but he could not buy happiness with money. He could not buy peace, righteousness, or joy with money. He found that he lost many valuable things in order to get money. Now it seemed there was no way to erase his past mistakes. His life was ruined, messed up. No one understood him. Most people condemned him without knowing his pain. But Jesus understood him. Jesus said, **"Follow me."**

What does **"Follow me"** mean? Simply speaking, it means to be Jesus' disciple, who would learn of him, grow to be like him, and eventually be a blessing to others. It was an invitation to a new life. Jesus' words gave Matthew new hope and direction. Yet Jesus also required an immediate commitment. Matthew did not hesitate or make excuses, saying, "I am too lost!" or "It's too late!" Instead, he looked at Jesus who was full of hope and love, got up from his tax booth, left everything behind, and followed Jesus. As he did so, his despair, guilt and shame vanished. New joy and peace began to flow from his heart. Then he opened his home and invited many tax collectors and sinners to a dinner party with Jesus. It was so joyful, with people laughing and eating deliciously. Most of all, it was because Jesus was with them. Jesus listened to all of their agonies and wiped every tear from their eyes, one by one. They found new hope in Jesus. In this way Matthew began his house church ministry.

Everyone seemed to be happy. However, when the Pharisees saw this, they were most unhappy. They felt that people who had no right to be joyful were too joyful. They were offended and asked his disciples, **"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"** They thought the best way to deal with sinners was to cast them out of their community. So they segregated all kinds of sinners and refused to have fellowship with them. To their way of thinking, Jesus would be contaminated by sinners and ruin his holiness. Jesus wanted to correct their view of sinners. So he said, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** When doctors see a sick person, they do not think that he is useless. Doctors see the person and the disease separately. Doctors believe that if the disease is dealt with, the person will be healed and become useful. To doctors, it is not the person, but the disease that is the problem. Likewise Jesus sees sinners like a spiritual doctor. Jesus distinguishes between sin and sin-sick people. Jesus sees that if only the sin can be cured, the person can be healthy and become useful. So Jesus treats sinners with great hope, deep understanding and tender care, like a doctor who wants to heal them. Here we learn that our view of sinners is important. We tend to

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disparage those who sin purposely and repeatedly and to write them off. This is contrary to the view of Jesus. We have to learn from Jesus who had the view of a good doctor toward sin-sick people.

Look at verse 13. **“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** The Pharisees needed to learn something. They had a lot of Bible knowledge, they worked hard and sacrificed a lot. But they did not know God’s heart. God wants us to know his heart above all. God’s heart is filled with mercy. God does not use his power to crush sinners who make mistakes. Rather, in his great mercy, God understands, bears with, forgives, and restores people, and gives us new hope to make a new beginning. James 2:13b says, **“Mercy triumphs over justice.”** No matter what else we may know about God, we must know that God is merciful. Without knowing God’s mercy, we don’t really know God. The purpose of Jesus’ coming was to show God’s mercy to sinners. Mercy should characterize God’s children. We should examine ourselves. After years of serving God sacrificially, have we become legalistic and judgmental rather than merciful? Lord, have mercy on us!

In verse 14, another group of grumpy people came to Jesus. They charged that Jesus’ disciples were not following the religious rituals common to John’s disciples and the Pharisees. They did not understand Jesus’ new teaching about God’s mercy. They were bound by old forms and practices. They were very dutiful and rigorous but lacked any real joy. Christian life is not about observing religious rituals. It is living each day with Jesus in joy like that of a wedding (15). In verses 16-17, Jesus uses two metaphors. Jesus explains why gospel ministry could not be joined to the old Jewish system. Jesus compared Judaism to an old garment, or an old wineskin. This indicates that it is hard and inflexible. Jesus compared gospel ministry to unshrunk cloth, or new wine in new wineskins. It is dynamic, life-giving and transformative. There was no way that the gospel could be contained by the Jewish system as it was being practiced. Instead of trying to combine the two, Jesus made a new beginning with his disciples. Here we learn that Jesus’ people need to have a mindset that allows them to learn and change and grow as Jesus works among them. We should not be bound by old forms and systems but be willing to change and expand according to the work of the Holy Spirit. As our bodies need exercise for good blood circulation, so our inner person needs to grow and develop through learning God’s mercy. Let’s learn God’s mercy from our hearts so that we can embrace all kinds of sinners with the love of God.