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# Mercy, not Sacrifice

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 21-28 September 2025 • St Matthew

Ephesians 4:1-14 • Matthew 9:9-13

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Matthew is often the first name we learn when we start to study the Bible — well, after Jesus. The four Gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, in the order of their appearance in the Bible. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John soon runs off the tongue of the Bible student. Each of these Gospels is written from a little different viewpoint. Matthew is the longest of the Gospels. Mark writes like a reporter: just the facts, put down clearly, with very little embellishment. Luke often focuses on the very human Jesus: he tells the story of his birth in great detail, as well as many other episodes from Jesus' life, from a human standpoint, emphasizing that Jesus made himself to be human so that we could relate to him and learn from him — and call on him, as we would a brother, when we need help. And John talks about Jesus and God and their relation to each other, and to us.

In our passage today, Matthew tells, very briefly, the story of his own calling by Jesus. He is a tax-collector, and therefore unpopular. The Jewish people didn't

like the tax-collectors, as they were agents of the Roman occupation, and they had great power over the people and their money. Many people thought they were greedy and dishonest. The way the Romans worked it, a tax-collector was given a certain figure, the amount of money he was to collect from the people in his assigned area. He had to give that amount and no less to his superiors. But nothing stopped him from collecting more than that amount — and any extra he collected, he could keep for himself. It was a great temptation for the tax-collector to try to get as much as possible, and he had the power of the government behind him, so he usually could. John the Baptist spoke of this in Luke's Gospel, when the people were crowding around him at the Jordan to be baptised:

Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked [John], 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.' (Luke 3:12-14)

Those who worked for the occupying Roman force were not to be trusted. It isn't hard to understand; do we not today complain about taxes and government workers? It is important to understand this, though, if we are to understand the impact of what Jesus did. So in our Gospel today, Jesus first encounters Matthew behind the desk in a tax-collecting booth. Jesus speaks to Matthew, telling him very simply, "Follow me." And such was the goodness of Jesus' Spirit, Matthew immediately follows him. Probably not many people saw this happen, and Jesus was already getting known for his actions in gathering disciples. But the idea of talking to a tax-collector in a friendly way, let alone inviting them to join you, would have surprised many people.

And later that evening, he sat down for a meal with Matthew and other people who were also considered to be, in a sense, untouchable. We are told they are sinners, and that's what the Pharisees call them too. What had they done? We don't know. Perhaps they were out of work or drank too much, or had committed crimes. Or perhaps they had fallen foul of the Pharisees' strict codes of behaviour. One has the feeling that the Pharisees would refer to anyone besides themselves as sinners. But Jesus is sitting at the table with them, breaking bread together, something you only do with people who are your equals. How could a devout Jew like Jesus do this?

The Pharisees don't accuse him directly. They ask his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" Jesus overhears them, understands immediately what they are thinking, and as he usually does, challenges them. And then he starts to explain why he has come.

We often say, “Jesus came to save sinners.” And that is what he tells the Pharisees. Jesus refers to himself as a doctor, and the sinners as the sick. Healthy people don’t need doctors — sick people do. So if all the people he’s eating with — the tax-collectors and the others — are sinners, then he’s in the right place. He’s with the people who need him.

But there’s more to it. Jesus knows that the Pharisees don’t count themselves among the sinners. But the truth is, we are all sinners, in one way or another. If that’s hard to understand, because you or I might think ourselves to be pretty good people, not perfect, but pretty good, look at it this way. We all need Jesus in order to gain the blessing of eternal life. We all need Jesus if we are to be made whole in God’s eyes. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life for us. The Pharisees, with all their rules and ostentatious prayers and pride in their perfection, need Jesus just as much as the so-called sinners and tax-collectors do. (Maybe more.) But they don’t realise it.

The Pharisees were stuck in the old ways of sacrifice, the old laws that God gave the Jews many centuries ago. Jesus is bringing a new way of living in God’s favour. God no longer desires sacrifice, and sacrifice never took away sins anyway. So Jesus tells them to learn mercy, rather than focus on sacrifice and the laws of Moses.

Jesus’ final words sum it up: “For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). In other words, not the people who consider themselves righteous, but the people who approach God with a humble heart, knowing that they are not righteous or perfect. Those are the people — we are the people — who will respond to Jesus’ love with humility and thanksgiving. And Jesus will bless us, as he blessed the sinners around the table.

The message is clear, and Jesus has pointed out the way we must follow if we are to please him. Let us then all give thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ for his mercy, his guidance and his love. Amen.