

Matthew 9:9-13

Introduction

We come now to the second of two teaching interludes in this collection of nine miracle stories (Matthew 8-9). For Matthew, no doubt, this interlude will be uniquely special as it is the story of his own call and conversion by the pure grace of God.

Verse 9 – As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

Right away, we are reminded of the calling of Simon and Andrew, and James and John (Mat. 4:18-22). The wording is basically identical, and according to Mark, the setting also appears to be the same – with both “calls” happening on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Mk. 2:13). But for all the similarities, there is one very major difference. Simon, Andrew, James, and John were all fishermen. Matthew is a tax-collector. And “tax-collector” meant “sinner”. Yes, we know that everyone sins, but tax collectors were *sinner*s. What we mean is that tax collectors were *famous* for their sins.

✓ Luke 7:36-39 – One of the Pharisees asked [Jesus] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a *sinner* [prostitute], when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a *sinner* [prostitute].”

In Matthew 21:31-32, Jesus Himself refers to “the tax collectors and the *prostitutes*.” In Matthew 18:17 Jesus says to regard the unrepentant sinner as a “*Gentile* [pagan] and a tax collector.” And throughout the Gospels, it is common to hear simply of “tax collectors and *sinner*s.” “Palestine was under Roman rule, and for amoral social climbers one of the more coveted tasks was tax collecting for the colonial power. The jobs usually went to the highest bidders. Tax collectors betrayed their own people for their private interests and so were despised” (Bruner). The tax collector’s work brought him into constant contact with Gentiles, which meant that the tax collector was in a constant state of uncleanness. “By Jewish law a tax-gatherer was [excluded] from the synagogue; he was included with things and beasts unclean...; ‘*robbers, murderers, and tax-gatherers*’ were classed together” (Barclay; quoted in Bruner). Tax-collectors were “swindlers,... equated with pagan slaves and not allowed to give testimony in courts [Lev. 20:5]” (Jeremias; quoted in Bruner).

Now lest we begin to feel too sorry for the tax-collectors, we need to realize that they were fully deserving of this treatment. To knowingly seek a job that would ostracize you from your people both politically and religiously and automatically bring upon you the hatred of all... Well this almost always meant that you basically had no morals and no conscience. Tax-collectors were more than willing to oppress their own countrymen in the service of the occupying power if only

they could get rich. Not only were the tax-collectors hated by men, but their immoral and wicked lifestyles would certainly have been abhorrent in the eyes of *God!* So politically, religiously, and morally and spiritually, in the eyes of both God and men, tax-collectors were fully deserving of their status as the low-life scum of the earth. It's not like they are the innocent victims here! On the contrary, they are the ones who prey upon the helpless, and have no regard for God and His laws.

In light of these things, then, let's re-read verse nine: "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth. and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him." This is scandalous. Imagine the president of the United States appointing a convicted felon to the post of Attorney General. Here is the Ruler of God's kingdom appointing a *tax-collector* to the post of disciple and apostle. Notice that it wasn't until *after* the appointment that Matthew left off his tax-collecting. It wasn't until *after* the call that Matthew gave up his profession. But when he did give it up, he gave it up completely. Luke says: "*And leaving everything*, he rose and followed Him." Humanly speaking, Matthew has a great deal to lose (all his wealth and prosperity) and not much to gain (he may well continue to be hated and despised by many). And yet just like the fishermen Simon and Andrew, and James and John, even a tax-collector will immediately leave everything to follow Jesus when he receives that gracious summons! The question is, *why* would Jesus call a tax-collector in the first place? In light of all that the tax-collector has done, in light of his disregard for God's law, and in light of the many people that he has callously oppressed and lives that he has ruined, would it not be just and right, indeed, would it not make the most *sense* to leave him in his sins – destined for the final payback of judgment day? And the answer, of course, is yes, this would be right. This would make the most sense. This would satisfy our inborn sense of justice. So then, in light of all the options Jesus had, why did He choose a tax-collector?

Verse 10 – And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

If we had lived in first century Palestine, this is the very thing that would have turned us away from Jesus. This is just the kind of story that, if it leaks, will ruin the credibility of Jesus for untold multitudes of people. Matthew doesn't tell us (as Luke does) that it was he himself who made the great feast for Jesus, and that it was in his own house. No doubt Matthew is joyfully celebrating his completely undeserved appointment to be among the twelve disciples and followers of Jesus. And so as he celebrates, he invites a whole bunch of other undeserving low-lives and moral scum to join him around the table with Jesus. *This* is what Matthew most wants to highlight for us, and he does so with yet another "behold": "And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, ***behold*** [look!], many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples." At first I am inclined to ask: Why should Matthew be so amazed? After all, he is the one who invited these people! But I think Matthew's amazement is not so much that the tax collectors and sinners came, but that *Jesus* came.

Here are Jesus and his disciples reclining around the same table and sharing an intimate meal not just with people who had sinned, but with people who were *famous* for their sins. These were people who publicly flaunted the Ten Commandments and flagrantly broke God's laws in the pursuit of their own pleasures and desires. I think we can assume that in the case of at least some

of these people, when the meal is over they will go right back to their pleasure seeking, sinful ways. Today, these people would be gays and lesbians, prostitutes and adulterers, drug addicts and drunks, thieves and murderers, rapists and child-abusers. As one commentator sums up: Clearly righteousness was the last concern of this crowd, and yet here they were sitting at the same table with Jesus and his disciples” (Hagner). In first century Palestine, to recline at the same table and share a meal together was a very important symbol of identification and oneness. And so *in one sense*, this meal was a sign of Jesus *acceptance* of tax-collectors and sinners, homosexuals and murderers (cf. Hagner).

“Behold!” Who would have imagined that the Messianic King (and His chosen disciples) would recline at the *same* table with “tax collectors and sinners”? In fact, who would have imagined that one of His own disciples would be a former tax collector?

Verse 11 – And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

The Pharisees are asking the question that should be on *all* of our minds – though not, of course, with the right attitude and motives. The Pharisees were known for their very detailed attention to the letter of the law – to the external and legal requirements of God’s commands. It was true enough that they were certainly not guilty of the kinds of deeds that these tax-collectors and sinners were guilty of! Put a Pharisee next to a tax-collector, and to *any* one of us, the Pharisee would *easily* look like a *saint*. And saints simply don’t keep company (of any kind) with “professional” sinners! *So then why is Jesus?* For the Pharisees, this is an open and close case. Anyone who shares table fellowship with tax-collectors and “professional” sinners (homosexuals, prostitutes, murderers, thieves) is at the very least certainly not worthy of being called “teacher”! The Pharisees have asked the disciples a question, but they mean it rhetorically. It’s more an accusation than a question, because they are already convinced that there is no good answer. “Shame on you for following a man who eats with tax-collectors and sinners!”

Verse 12 – But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

Here is another form of this same proverb from 350 years earlier: “Neither does a physician ... who is capable of giving health practice among those who are well” (quoted in Hagner). If you have the knowledge and abilities to cure people of AIDS, why would you spend all of your time in the part of town where no one has AIDS? And since the Pharisees would have considered themselves to be not just among the well, but among the physicians, Jesus’ answer actually contains an implied question: “Why are you *not* eating with tax-collectors and sinners?”

Now I want to take just a moment to talk about this analogy of the sick and the Physician. On the one hand, this analogy helps us to see that sinners are helpless and pitiable in the midst of their suffering. And their pitiable estate ought to draw forth our compassion even as it did the compassion of Jesus. But on the other hand, we must not press the analogy too far, as though sinners are only sick and not also guilty. Some have complained about why God doesn’t heal all the sick, if indeed it is within His power to do so – and if indeed salvation is according to God’s gracious choice. Benjamin Warfield responds:

“If... men in their *mere misery*, appealing *solely to God’s pity*, lay before the divine mind, it would be inexplicable that he did not save all. The physician who, having the power to treat and cure all his patients, arbitrarily discriminates between them and contents himself with ministering to some of them only, would justly incur the reprobation of men. But may not the judge, having the mere power to release all his criminals, be held back by higher considerations from releasing them all? It may be inexplicable why a physician in the case supposed should not relieve all; while the wonder may well be in the case of the judge rather how he can release any.” (The Plan of Salvation^{*})

And so we need to remember that here in Matthew, the sick and the suffering are also the child abusers and the rapists, the thieves and the murderers, the prostitutes and the homosexuals, the tax collectors and the *sinner*s. Only when we remember *this* can we truly stand in awe of the fact that when Jesus looked at these people, He saw not just their *guilt*, but their *suffering*. He saw them not just as brazen faced lawbreakers, but as people who were pitiable and hurting. And Jesus wants us to see people just like He saw them. But how? How is this possible – for the Pharisees, *or* for us?

Verse 13a – Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”

Mark and Luke don’t include this quotation from the Old Testament, but as the one writing for the Jewish church, Matthew does. Seven hundred years earlier, God had sent the prophet Hosea to condemn Israel for the shedding of innocent blood and the ruthless oppression of the poor and the defenseless. And yet it was the very ones who were guilty of these terrible crimes who were ever so careful to bring their sacrifices to the temple. They were experts in the area of ceremony. When it came to the ritual aspects of God’s law, they were above reproach. But when it came to the moral aspects of God’s law and matters of the heart, they were *no different* than Gentile “sinners”.

- ✓ Hosea 4:1-2 – Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or **STEADFAST LOVE**, and no KNOWLEDGE OF GOD in the land; there is [instead] *swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed*... therefore... my judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire **STEADFAST LOVE** [mercy; LXX] and not sacrifice, the KNOWLEDGE OF GOD rather than burnt offerings.[†]

^{*} Warfield continues: “The love of God is in its exercise necessarily under the control of his righteousness... God in his love saves as many of the guilty race of man as he can get the consent of his whole nature to save. Being God and all that God is, he will not permit even his ineffable love to betray him into any action which is not right. And it is therefore that we praise him and trust him and love him. For he is not part God, a God here and there, with some but not all the attributes which belong to true God: he is God altogether, God through and through, all that God is and all that God [must] be.”

[†] God is not saying here that his people no longer need to bring their sacrifices. This is a Hebrew idiom that means very simply: “Steadfast love is *more important* than sacrifice, and the knowledge of God is *more important* than burnt offerings.”

Now let's stop and ask ourselves a question. We know that in Jesus' day, the people who needed to learn about God's desire for steadfast love and mercy were the Pharisees. But what about in Hosea's day? *Who* exactly were the people who needed to learn about God's desire for steadfast love and mercy in Hosea's day? Well, they were the very ones who were guilty of swearing, and lying, and murder, and stealing, and adultery, and breaking all bounds so that bloodshed followed bloodshed! When God said through Hosea, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice", He was speaking to the tax collectors and the sinners – to the equivalent of "Gentiles" (cf. Hos. 1:9) and prostitutes. He was speaking to liars, and murderers, and thieves, and adulterers. And the Pharisees knew this very well.

So what does Jesus mean when He takes an exhortation originally given to "*tax-collectors and sinners*", and applies it to the Pharisees – the very ones who are actually *complaining* about Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners? Well Jesus is clearly implying that the only difference between the Pharisees and the tax collectors is that the tax collectors sin openly and publicly while the Pharisees try to be more subtle about their sin and mask it with religious ceremony and ritual. The true descendants of the "sinners" in Hosea's day are not necessarily the people sharing a meal with Jesus, but the Pharisees themselves! So when Jesus says, "Go and *learn* what this means", it's not just an expression of righteous anger, it's an earnest invitation for the Pharisees to see that they, too, are *sinners* – on the same order with tax collectors and prostitutes. It's an earnest invitation for the Pharisees to see that they, too, are sick and in need of a physician. And indeed, *one* proof of their continued guilt and sickness is their *refusal* to eat with tax-collectors and sinners.

Verse 13b – For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

In the epistles especially, but also in the Gospels, there is a "call" issued by God that is always perfectly effective in bringing about the desired result (cf. Rom. 4:17; 9:24; Eph. 1:18; 4:1, 4; Phil. 3:14; 1 Thess. 2:12; 4:7; 2 Thess. 1:11).

- ✓ Romans 8:30 – Those whom [God] predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.
- ✓ Romans 9:11 – ...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls...
- ✓ Galatians 1:15 – But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace...
- ✓ 2 Timothy 1:9 – [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.

We see in the first place that this "call" is not just an invitation that may or may not be accepted, but rather a compelling and effectual *summons* that always produces the desired response. And in the second place, we see that this call is not given to just anyone, but only to those who have been graciously and mercifully *chosen* by God – apart from any foreseen works, or even faith.

But there is another kind of “call” in the Scriptures. This call is not so much a *summons* as it is an earnest *invitation*. This call is extended not just to *some* (in particular), but to *many* (in general). And this call may or may not be *rejected* by those to whom it comes.

- ✓ Matthew 22:14 – For many [though not all; cf. Rom. 2:12] are called [invited; NIV; TEV; NCV], but few are chosen.

We see an example of this gracious and earnest invitation that is extended to “*many*” in John 7:37-38 (cf. Mat. 11:28-30 and Mat. 11:27).

- ✓ John 7:37-38 – On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

In the first “call”, we see that according to God’s sovereign good pleasure *alone*, He has righteously decreed that not all sinners should be saved, that not all the guilty should be absolved, and that not all criminals should be released. But in this second “call”, we see that God does not take delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:32). We see that (though this in no way obligates God to save everyone; John 6:37, 44, 65), there is a very real sense in which God earnestly desires the salvation of every man, woman, and child who hears the gospel, and so Christ is truly and freely offered to them in the gospel (cf. Waldron; 1689; p. 122; John 5:30-47). And it is this second “call”, this gracious and earnest invitation to many, that Jesus refers to here in verse 13. So one commentator translates: “I did not come to invite good people; I came for bad people” (Bruner). The New Century Version says: “I did not come to invite good people but to invite sinners” (NCV). Doriani puts it this way: “Jesus did not come to this earth to write ‘A+’ on the moral report cards of all the good boys and girls. He came to call sinners, to invite the bad boys and girls to his gospel feast.” *This* is the good news that we proclaim to our children! Jesus did not come to invite the righteous, because “*none* is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). Jesus came to invite *sinners* (tax collectors, homosexuals, prostitutes, adulterers, child-abusers, rapists, murderers, and thieves), because “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). And *this* is precisely why Jesus shared table fellowship not just with tax collectors, but *even* with the Pharisees (Luke 7:36-50; 11:37-44; 14:1-6). Jesus’ point is not that He came to call those who already see their sin and who are therefore looking for a Savior (as though these sinners are actually more worthy or more deserving of Jesus’ call than the *self*-righteous Pharisees). Jesus’ point is that the people He calls are sinners, because there is no other kind of person to call. So we see that “*no one* is despicable enough by the standards of society [or even by the standards of God’s holy law!] to be outside his concern and invitation” (Hagner).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is necessary to point out that these tax collectors and sinners were not at all Jesus’ “friends” as we might think of friends today. The tax-collectors knew very well who Jesus was. As the meal progressed, there could never have been any doubt in their minds that the ultimate purpose of Jesus was to earnestly exhort them to repentance (cf. Lk. 5:32). And so we must not use this text (as some do) to excuse the fact that in our friendships we are unequally

yoked together with unbelievers. “Do *not* be unequally yoked with unbelievers... go out from their midst, and be *separate* from them, says the Lord” (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

But on the other hand, we must never understand God’s command to be separate in such a way that it hinders us from proclaiming God’s mercy and forgiveness to even the most despicable and abhorrent of sinners. We must never understand God’s command to be separate in such a way that it would keep us from sharing a meal with a child abuser, or a rapist, or a mass murderer, in order that we might open to them the glories of the Gospel. Sometimes, in order to reach the sinner, we will have to be willing to face the charges (by those hypocrites in our churches today) of guilt by association. But listen to Calvin:

“[Jesus] came to quicken the *dead*, to justify the *guilty and condemned*, to wash those who were *polluted and full of uncleanness*, to rescue the *lost* from hell, to clothe with his glory those who were *covered with shame*, to renew to a blessed immortality those who were *debased by disgusting vices*... Now, if we feel disgust at being associated by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper with vile men, and regard our connection with them as a sort of stain upon us, we ought immediately to descend into ourselves, and to search without flattery our own evils. Such an examination will make us willingly allow ourselves to be washed in the same fountain with the most impure, and will hinder us from rejecting the righteousness which he offers *indiscriminately to all* the ungodly” (Calvin).

Martin Luther wrote in one of his letters: “Beware of ever desiring such purity that you do not want to seem to yourself to be a sinner for Christ dwells only in sinners” (quoted in Bruner). When once we have truly “descended into ourselves” and “searched without flattery our own evils”, we will be able to say with Paul and in complete honesty:

✓ 1 Timothy 1:15 – Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

And once we are able to say this, having dinner with a pimp, or a murderer, or a tax collector will not seem difficult to us in the slightest.

It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are *sick*. God desires *mercy*, and not sacrifice. Jesus came not to call the righteous, but *sinners*. So may our zeal for holiness never hinder us from compassionately announcing to *all* sinners (no matter how notorious) the mercy and forgiveness that is available in Christ. Indeed, if you think about it, it was because Jesus did just this very thing that we now have the Gospel of Matthew!

Teaching our Children

- Q.** (Review with your children the similarities between the call of Simon, Andrew, James, and John, and the call of Matthew; Compare Matthew 4:18-20 with Matthew 9:9). What is the one major difference between these two stories?
- A.** In the first story, Jesus called fishermen. In the second story, Jesus called a *tax-collector*!
- Q.** What was so bad about tax collectors?
- A.** Tax collectors used their power to cheat and steal from other people in order that they could get rich. Tax collectors were *famous* for their sins (see page 1 and bottom of page 2).
- Q.** *Why* would Jesus call a *tax collector*? (This question is just to get your children thinking)
- Q.** How did Matthew celebrate his new calling from Jesus?
- A.** Matthew made a great feast and invited lots of other tax-collectors and “professional” sinners to come and eat with Jesus and His disciples.
- Q.** Why would Jesus *eat supper* with tax collectors and sinners (or with thieves and murderers)? (Once again, this question is just to get your children thinking)
- Q.** Compared to a tax collector, how would the Pharisees look?
- A.** The Pharisees would look like very good people! The Pharisees were very careful to look on the outside like they obeyed all of God’s laws.
- Q.** Did the “good” and “righteous” Pharisees ever eat with tax-collectors and sinners?
- A.** No! To the Pharisees, this wouldn’t make any sense at all. This is why the Pharisees condemned Jesus.
- Q.** What did Jesus mean when He said to the Pharisees: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick”?
- A.** If you have the ability to cure people of the fever, why would you spend all of your time in the part of town where no one gets fevers? (Restate this in spiritual terms)
- Q.** What does God desire to see in us *most of all* – far more than any outward obedience to outward rules (like going to church every Sunday and “tithing”)?
- A.** God desires—*most of all*—that we show mercy and compassion to the sinners that are all around us (**Read** Hosea 4:1-2; see page 4).
- Q.** Were the Pharisees showing mercy and compassion?
- A.** No! And this means that they, too, were “professional” sinners, *just like* tax collectors, murderers, and thieves.
- Q.** Fill in the Blank. Jesus finished answering the Pharisees’ question by saying: “I came *not* to call the righteous, but _____” (*sinners*).
- Q.** Why didn’t Jesus come to invite the righteous (the “good boys and girls”)?
- A.** Because “*none* is righteous, no, not one” (there are no “good boys and girls”; Rom. 3:10)
- Q.** Why did Jesus come to invite *sinners* (the bad boys and girls)?
- A.** Because “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (we are *all* “bad”; Rom. 3:23).
- Q.** Is there any sinner anywhere in the world who is so wicked and terrible that God would not desire for him to hear the Gospel, and believe and be saved?
- A.** NO!
- Q.** If there is no sinner who is so wicked and terrible that God would not desire for him to hear the Gospel, what does this mean for *us*?
- A.** We should be willing to spend time together even with the “worst” and “ugliest sinners” in the world in order that they, too, might hear the gospel.

Q. Are we really any better than the tax-collectors? Do we really have any right to feel ashamed to eat with thieves and murderers?

A. No. (Spend some time discussing this answer; then read and *personalize* 1 Timothy 1:15 – see page 7)

- ✓ God does not wait until we are “good” before He offers us His salvation. He “accepts” us and *invites* us to Himself ***while we are still SINNERS!*** This truly is amazing!
- ✓ By God’s grace, may we not choose to reject God’s amazing mercy and love. By God’s grace, may we leave everything to follow after Jesus (just like Matthew, the *tax collector*).
- ✓ And may our new love for God’s *law* never keep us from showing compassion to *every* kind of sinner and lawbreaker—no matter how big and “famous” their sins may be—and inviting them to see the good news of God’s forgiveness.
- ✓ To conclude, read Matthew 9:9-13 with your children (marvel and rejoice!)

Mark 2:13-17

He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.

And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

And as he reclined at table in **his** house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, **for there were many who followed him.**

And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'

For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Luke 5:27-32

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." And **leaving everything**, he rose and followed him.

And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

And the Pharisees and their scribes **grumbled** at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners **to repentance**."