

I Only Want the Sick

Matthew 9:9-13 (NIV)

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 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."

Hopefully I'm not going too far out on a limb today by thinking that most of you consider me to be an upstanding guy. Yes, you know that I'm a sinner, but I'm not that bad, right? I'm a man of God, after all, someone trying to live a life in service to our Creator.

What if I confessed to you today something dark and secret from my past? What if I told you that I murdered a man – premeditated, not out of self-defense, that I killed someone because I was angry at what they were doing? What if I shared with you one of my past activities was persecuting Christians, actually working against the Church? What if I came clean I told you that in a previous occupation I used to be a tax agent who purposefully overcharged clients when they filed and kept the extra money for myself? If I had done these things, if this was really my past, would you listen to me preach? Would you even allow me to be up here?

Reputation – who you are, who people perceive you to be – determines your credibility. It takes years to build up a good reputation, good credibility, and with just one action, one sentence, sometimes even just one word, it can all come crashing down. You lose all credibility, are ostracized and outcast. For preachers, God himself puts down a requirement that they must have a good reputation, even with people outside of the Church. So, certainly a murderer, a persecutor of Christians, a greedy underhanded tax agent cannot be men of God. They don't have the reputation necessary to be preachers, church leaders. God would not entrust his Word to such people.

We say that, and it makes sense. These sins are too grievous, too outrageous, too hideous, too ugly to ever get past and listen to the man. That's why God would only choose the morally upright people of good standing to be his ministers. We're a church. We have to look holy. We can't be seen fraternizing with sinners. We are above that. But is that true? Look for a moment at the people God actually chose to be his followers, his ministers, his leaders.

From our first reading, God calls Moses to be his representative and to lead his people, the Israelites, out of their slavery in Egypt. But do you know what Moses had done? Moses saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite. He took matters into his own hands and killed that Egyptian. He tried to bury the evidence in the sand, but people found out. He fled before he could be arrested and face trial.

In our second reading, Paul, the author of that very letter, confesses who he is and what he has done. He was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. He arrested Christians and put them on death row. He actively tried to destroy Christianity. He confesses that he is the worst of sinners. Two chapters later, Paul would write that ministers of God must have a good reputation with outsiders.

Then there's Matthew in our Gospel reading. Matthew is a tax collector working for the Roman Empire to gather taxes from people. However, these tax agents upcharge and keep the extra. Everyone knew that the tax collectors were taking more than they should and were getting rich from it. It was so well known that the Jewish religious leaders ostracized all tax collectors, banned them from the synagogue, from church. They wouldn't even associate with tax collectors because they were so dishonest, so sinful.

Wouldn't you ban me from church if I was a former murderer, a persecutor of the church, a greedy and dishonest tax agent? "You're too sinful to be our pastor, to serve God in this way." We say that, but is Christianity, being a follower of Christ, a proclaimer of Christ, only for the morally elite, for the squeaky clean, for the goodie-two-shoes of the world? Well, I don't know that I would actually say that, but at the same time you and I wrestle with the idea of having a former murderer, persecutor, or dishonest preacher. Would we still listen to him? Would we ever accept him? Do we have a bit of Christian elitism in us, that we don't consciously admit it but by our gut feelings we think that Christians should not be people with sordid backgrounds and shady pasts?

What do you see when you look at me? Now, I try to look good for you. I shave on Sunday mornings, trim my beard, put gel in my hair, polish my shoes, wear nice dress clothes all for you. I make sure that my robe is cleaned and ironed for you. I try to look

good...for you. But what's underneath all of this? Who am I? What do you not see of my life? Have I ever murdered someone? I may not have actually shed blood like Moses did, but God tells me that anyone who hates his brother or sister, his fellow human being, is a murderer. I'm guilty. My hands are red. I am a murderer. Have I ever outright persecuted Christians like Paul, locked them up on death row for their beliefs? No, but I know the things I've done and said that have hurt Christians, put them down, failed to support them in living for Christ. Have I ever lied to collect more money than what was owed like Matthew the tax collector? Not that I can recall, but I have been greedy. I have taken things that aren't mine. I have been stingy to give of what is mine so that I may have more. I am an ugly sinner. I make myself sick with the knowledge of my sins, and I know that I will die because of my sins.

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Is it a picture of absolute health? Do you look *good*? Or do you turn away from that mirror quickly because even though on the outside you look good, you know what lurks underneath? When you stop and reflect on your life, do your past actions haunt you? Do memories and thoughts flash through your mind that you would rather die than ever let anyone know? When you stop and really look at yourself, does it make you sick the things you have done?

Matthew knew what people thought of him. He wasn't welcomed in church. Moses could imagine what people thought of him: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11) Paul was sick to his stomach as he confessed that he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent man, the worst of sinners.

Yet this is exactly why Jesus called them. Jesus did not call Matthew, Moses, and Paul because they were morally upright healthy picture-perfect people. He called them because they were sick with the disease of sin. That's who Jesus came for. Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (verse 12, 13b)

It may be a cliché saying, but the Church is not a museum for saints; it is a hospital for sinners. The Church is made up of people coming together in the name of Christ, but we are not morally elite, even though sometimes we are tempted to think we are. We don't come together as the Church because we have no problems, because we are spiritually healthy, but because we are spiritually sick and need a cure to this disease of sin. We have come here because we have looked in that mirror and it made us sick with what we saw in our past, in us. God's Word has diagnosed us. We are sick with sin. We need medicine. We need a doctor. We need Jesus, the Great Physician.

God has seen the same as what we have seen in ourselves. He knows our ailments. He knows our past. He knows every dirty, dark thing that we have ever tried to hide. In spite of it all, he comes to us like he did to Matthew, to Moses, to Paul. Jesus knew that the religious leaders shunned Matthew and would have nothing to do with him because Matthew wasn't spiritually healthy enough according to them to attend their church. They had condemned Matthew to hell, shut him out. Yet Jesus called him, called him to follow him, to be his disciple. Jesus knew what Paul had done, how he had hunted down Christians and persecuted them. Yet, he showed Paul patience, mercy (not treating him as he deserved to be treated), and grace (loving him even though he deserved no love from God). He did this to show all of us that there is no one too sick with sin, that there is no one beyond God's healing, beyond his cure of mercy and grace, that there is no sin too great for God to forgive and eradicate. God chose Moses to lead his people out of Egypt despite his criminal record as a murderer. By doing so, God showed Moses and his people and all the Egyptians that it's not about us and our character that will make God choose us to be one of his followers. It is entirely on God to cure us of our sin. He takes the time and attention to show us mercy, to treat our disease of sin, to care for us, to heal us, to cure us.

God is not looking for the best rule followers to be his disciples. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," he says. (verse 13) He is looking for the unhealthy, the law-breakers, those sick with sin. As we look in the mirror of God's Word, we know that this is us. He is looking for us to cure us. He is the cure. He is the antibody to sin. He was perfect for us in a sin-sick world. He sacrificed himself to cure the disease of sin. Even though I was terminally sick with sin, Jesus has cured me. I stand before you as a sinner, but I also stand before you cured of my sin, made healthy and whole and righteous before God. He has cured you. Jesus, the Great Physician, has made you well.

Now he calls people like Matthew, Moses, Paul, you and me, to share him as the cure. Last December I was invited to come to one of our member's last radiation treatments for cancer. The clinic had a tradition that when the treatments were over, they rang a bell and celebrated because the treatments had been successful. Your treatments against the disease of sin have also been effective. It's time to celebrate. Throw a party like Matthew. Invite people over. Tell them that you stand before them cured of the disease of sin. Refer them to your doctor, to Jesus, because he seeks those sick with sin – us – so that he can heal us all. Amen.