

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." (Matthew 9:9-13)*

Jesus Calls An Outcast

Once when I was in grade school, a child – the son of our pastor actually – brought candy with his lunch to share. He gave a piece of candy to every child in the room, except for one. That child asked if he could have a piece, too. Immediately some of the other kids started saying that it was rude for him to ask for a piece of candy when he hadn't been offered one. The funny thing is, I don't remember anybody saying one word about how rude it was to give everyone in the class a piece of candy except this one child. That child felt like an outcast. We live in a sinful world. At every level of society, there are outcasts. Every office, every plant, every school and club has them. Obviously, it's unpleasant to be an outcast. But what keeps the rest of us from befriending that outcast? Sometimes, that person – or that group of people – does things that drive others away. But many times there are consequences to reaching out to a person like that. Rather than helping the outcast become a part of the group, you yourself become an outcast. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus did something that few of us are willing to do. He chose Matthew to be an apostles. **Jesus called an outcast.**

I.

Matthew was a tax collector. If you've spent any time reading the gospels, you know that Jewish society considered being a tax collector was synonymous with being a sinner. Why did they hate tax collectors so much? It wasn't like the modern American hatred of paying taxes, which is about how much money gets taken out of our paycheck. This was different. Israel was ruled by a foreign power, the Roman Empire. The tax collectors took money from local people and sent it back to Rome to pay for the Roman legions that occupied their country. A tax collector worked for the enemy. And an enemy that the Jews considered to be unclean. They worshipped false gods. It was horrible to think of a Jewish person, a person who born under God's covenant, turning traitor and helping Gentiles rule the chosen people. Furthermore the tax collectors had a reputation for padding the bills. If Rome said, "Collect two drachmas" they might collect four and keep the difference. It didn't do any good to argue, because they had those Roman legions backing them up.

It would've been hard for Jesus to choose a more unpopular disciple and future church leader than a known tax collector. If Jesus had lived today, his handlers would've insisted on vetting Jesus' list of possible apostles and guys like Matthew would never have made it. Choosing a man like Matthew, a man that everybody hated, was guaranteed to cause controversy. So why did he do it? Why did he make his own life harder by antagonizing people like the Pharisees? Why did he give them an easy target by calling a man with this kind of a reputation into the ministry of his church – and into such a prominent position? Jesus doesn't care what people think. The ministry of his church is not about winning friends and influencing people. It's not a popularity contest. Jesus had a much deeper purpose: grace.

Calling Matthew was pure grace. Do you know what grace means? Grace means God's undeserved love. It's not the love that a husband has for his wife. It's not the love that parents feel when they see their children for the first time. It's not the love that comes from years of shared experience or from having a great deal in common or from enjoying each other's company. Grace is love that chooses to love a person who should be hated. What did Matthew deserve? He probably was a thief and a cheat. He probably turned his back on the law of Moses – the law that God himself had given to the Jewish people. Matthew was a sinner. He deserved nothing from God but death and hell.

But Jesus offered him forgiveness and life. That's grace. Saving Matthew from spiritual destruction is grace all by itself. But then God gave him one more gift, one more grace: out of all the people who hung on Jesus' every word, he chose this sinner, this tax collector, this traitor and cheat and he called him into the holy

ministry. Not just as an ordinary parish pastor. Jesus called him to be an apostle, a founder of the Christian Church. He called him to write one of the four gospels. He called him to play a special role that would touch almost every believer of the New Testament era, because we've all heard his gospel. We all lean on what God told us through Matthew.

That grace of God chose a man like Matthew and washed his sins away. It found a man who was running away from God and turned him around so that he was running toward God. It used him for the good of the entire Christian Church. My friends, think what that same grace of God can do for you and me! We're sinners, just as much as Matthew was. Now, maybe you thought I was going to say that Matthew was worse than we are. But that wouldn't be true. Every one of us was born a sinner. Born thoroughly and completely corrupted. The best we can think and feel and say and do is ruined by the sin in our hearts. Maybe we aren't openly defying the faith today, but every one of us can point to moments when that sin showed itself in our words and our deeds – when we treated others as outcasts or failed to stand up for them, when we trampled the feelings of people we love, when we were hard hearted and refused to forgive. All those sins are horrible and they condemn us. But they are only symptoms of the disease that has infected our hearts. We are evil from birth and we commit evil our whole lives long, even when we think we're doing good. We deserve nothing but death and hell.

But God's grace found us too. Jesus came down from heaven to die because we treat others so badly. He washed away every heartless word and every evil deed. He cleansed us from every time we failed to stand up for those who needed us to. He suffered the death and hell we owe, because our hearts and minds, our souls and bodies, are totally and completely contaminated by sin. Then he rose to announce that we are clean. That we are free. That we are forgiven. Death and hell are not our destiny. In fact, if Jesus comes back quickly enough, we won't die at all. Even if we do die physically, we will immediately join our Savior in heaven. We will wait there for the resurrection, when Jesus will return and call us from the grave and give us a new and perfect world.

God's grace reaches out to us every day of our lives here. He calls some of us to serve as pastors or teachers. But all of us have a role to play in the ministry of the gospel. We support it with our offerings and our prayers, and when we do that God considers that we share in all that our pastors and teachers do. Every father and mother shares in the ministry because God has called you to teach your children the truths of his word. That is a rich and wonderful blessing because when we teach our children to know the Lord, we ourselves are bathing in God's grace. And all of us, by the way we live and by the words we speak, are a part of sharing the gospel with the world. Rather than considering that a burden, know that it is God's love that gives us that privilege of being witnesses to his grace. All that, you can see in Matthew. **Jesus called an outcast. That made a bold statement about God's grace.**

II.

God's love was willing to erase Matthew's sinful past. Is ours? Not in the sense that we wink at sin or say that people have a right to live in sin, but rather that we, as the people of God, rejoice when God forgives people we know are sinners. Are we willing to do that? The Pharisees weren't. The Pharisees were the church going people of their day. They were the people that took the law of Moses seriously. They felt they were more righteous than other people – just look at all the did! When Jesus went to Matthew's house after calling him and ate a meal to celebrate Matthew's new life, the Pharisees were horrified. They couldn't believe a rabbi would do something like that.

There is always a temptation for church going people to fall into this kind of pride and sin. This text is not about racism or looking down on people with less money than we have. It's about looking down on people who live more sinful lives than we do – or at least who seem to be more sinful because they're more open about their sins. Matthew and the other tax collectors were open sinners. But Jesus did not look down his nose at those people. He reached out to them and called them to repent. He did it in love. That, my friends, is where we struggle. It's hard for us to reach out in love to people who live sinful lifestyles. We love to look down on other people. We love to compare their lives to ours and pat ourselves on the back because we don't live like they do. It's easy to condemn people who've been divorced multiple times, who abuse alcohol and do drugs, who practice horrible sins like abortion and homosexuality. It's easy for us to feel superior and nothing else – no mercy, no compassion, no desire to call those people to repent and live.

Sadly – and perhaps a little paradoxically – at the same time it’s easy for us to make excuses for sin. Some people say we should accept all those sinners without condemning their sin, because Jesus accepted everybody – just look at Matthew! That would be a misuse of this text. Jesus dealt in love with everyone. But there was never a more forceful preacher of the need to repent of our sins than Jesus was. Jesus loved his Father too much to pretend like sin didn’t matter. And he loved the people around him too much to ignore their sin. He loved them and he called them to repent.

Jesus said to the Pharisees: **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 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 a spiritual doctor as much as anyone who ever lived. But they didn’t believe it. They were like a person dying of cancer who keeps telling himself it’s just a bad cold. There’s an old saying, “Admitting you have a problem is the first step to a cure.” Only when we know we’re spiritually dead do we know we need Jesus.

So Jesus tried to show them all that was wrong with their hearts by quoting from the Old Testament. The Pharisees loved all those rituals and sacrifices which came from the law of Moses. And God had commanded them all. Yet God said that he desired mercy, not sacrifice. God wanted people to come to him in repentance and receive his mercy instead of thinking that their coming to church, their offerings, their work and service earned them something. People who think they aren’t sinners are always going to reject God’s grace and forgiveness through Jesus.

Jesus called Matthew to prick their consciences – and the conscience of every person who thinks they’re in good shape because they go to church, of every person who thinks that God will let them into heaven because they’ve been good people. Every one of us needs to understand that we’re not good in God’s sight, not on our own. Every time we look down our noses at sinners instead of looking at them with compassion as people God wants to save, we’re showing the human tendency to believe that we’re good enough. We’re showing how desperately we need a Savior.

Jesus is that Savior. He died for all our sin, even our superior attitudes and our lack of mercy. He rose and gave us eternal life. He comes to us, in the ministry of every pastor and teacher he has called to force us to see our need and then to comfort us with the sweet tidings: your sins are paid for. That’s what Jesus wants us to see in Matthew. **Jesus called an outcast. That provokes an uncomfortable question about our hearts.**

It’s never easy to recognize the blackness in ourselves. But we need to see it. Only then, can we understand who the true outcast is. That little boy in the Lutheran school classroom thirty plus years ago was not an outcast, even though he felt like one, because he was bought and paid for with the blood of Christ. Jesus had claimed him as his own through baptism. The real outcast is the person who does not yet know the grace Jesus brings. That person is dead in sin and will not live until Jesus gives him new life. You and I were all once dead. We were all outcasts from eternal life. But now, Jesus has brought us in and made us his. We will live with him forever. Live now like you know that. Amen.