

July 3, 2011  
Pentecost 3

*"Jesus Wants to Show Mercy Even to Me"*

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### **MATTHEW 9:9-13**

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*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. <sup>10</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" <sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

A few years ago a man was arrested for cheating people out of billions of dollars in investments. His name is Bernie Madoff. He lived in the lap of luxury with the money he stole from others. He once lived in an expensive New York apartment worth millions, now he lives in prison cell. He once wore designer clothes now he wears a prison jumpsuit.

At the time of Jesus there was a man named Levi who made his money by collecting taxes for the Romans. He used his position of power to charge more taxes than the Romans required so he could keep part of the money for himself. Like Bernie Madoff He lived in a nice home and wore fancy clothes. He found a way to to justify to himself that it was OK to steal money from others just to create a better life for himself. Jesus called this man named Levi to come and follow him. We know him as one of Jesus' disciples with the new name of Matthew. Under inspiration of the Holy Spirit Matthew wrote the first book of the New Testament.

What do I want to get out of this sermon on this beautiful weekend in July as we celebrate the freedom we have in his country? I want to realize more fully how amazing it is that Jesus in his mercy would ever want a sinner like me. If Jesus called for Matthew to come and follow him, I know there is mercy for me and mercy for you as well. It has been said, "Jesus saves the guttermost to the uttermost." That was true in the life of Matthew and it is also true in your life and mine.

#### **Jesus calls the guttermost**

"As Jesus went on from there, he saw man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth." Matthew was sitting at the tax collector's booth when Jesus came to him. He is not just sitting at the tax collector's booth. He is sitting in the gutter of sin. People see his fancy clothes. They see his gold rings. He is the guy with the large house down the street. He is the man without a conscience. He reaches a low point in life where he justifies stealing money from others because the extra money in his pocket soothes his guilty conscience. He knows he can find no peace with God because of his sin, but he can find some temporary peace in his money.

Matthew's original name was Levi. The Hebrew name "Levi" means "joined" or "connected."

He was sure connected to making money in the wrong way just as Bernie Madoff made off with lots of money in the wrong way. But then after Jesus came to him and showed him mercy, his name was changed to Matthew which means, "The gift of God."

Jesus said "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, and sexual immorality, theft, false testimony and slander." I am born into this world connected to a sinful nature that tells me to take the biggest piece of the candy bar for myself and give the smallest piece to my brother or sister. Do you remember that time you took the biggest piece for yourself? What made this even worst was the way you tried to justify what you were doing with thoughts that you were the oldest, or you worked harder, or your brother wouldn't care if you took the biggest people. There was some point in Matthew's life and Bernie Madoff's life where they made excuses for themselves and justified what they were doing, even though it was wrong in the eyes of the community and also in the eyes of God.

I want to read to a few excerpts from Martin Luther's *Large Catechism* where he expounds on how stealing from others is such a large part of our sinful nature and the world in which we live. "So if all the thieves who did not want to be known as thieves were to be hanged on the gallows, the world would soon be devastated. There would be a lack of executioners and gallows." He goes on to say how people steal from their employers when they fail to put in a good days work. Have you ever worked with someone who spends way too much time gossiping instead of working at their job? Luther describes the people who overcharge for services. Or those who drive a hard bargain in buying and selling and the swivel chair robbers. Have you ever seen the old Norman Rockwell painting where a butcher is putting the thumb on the scale to make the meat weigh more, and on the other side of the scale the woman has her thumb under the scale to make it weigh less? In every case of greed and stealing, the person reaches a point where they justify what they are doing wrong and that makes the sin doubly evil.

Jesus came to Matthew as he was sitting at the table. There he was with his list of names of people who needed to pay the taxes. And there he was with his box full of money, part of it went to the Romans and part of that money was going into his own pocket. It is not easy to handle money. How am I going to spend the pay check I received or the money in the bank account? Jesus said "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Will I justify spending money foolishly with all sorts of foolish excuses? Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner.

### **Jesus raises them to the uttermost**

Jesus had a plan for Matthew, the nasty, bad, evil minded, selfish, self centered, cruel hearted tax collector. Jesus came to his booth and said, "Follow me." Did Matthew have some earlier contact with Jesus? Was he in the crowd when Jesus said, "No one can serve God and money?" Was his conscience bothering him because he heard Jesus say, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you?" We are not sure what previous contact Matthew had with Jesus as he collected the taxes where Jesus was teaching and preaching near Capernaum. What we do know for sure is that the words of Jesus have great power. As Jesus said, "My words are spirit and they are life." The word "Follow me" were a call for Matthew to find forgiveness for all his past sin of cheating and stealing. The guttermost would be used by Jesus for the uttermost.

It says that Matthew got up and followed him. He left his table where he was collecting taxes. He left his life of cheating others. The man who was once joined to his stolen money becomes a man who is joined to Jesus. Later in life Matthew would hear Jesus say, "I am the vine and you are branches. You are already clean because of the Word I have spoken to you. If a man remains in me, he will bear much fruit." "Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me. Died that I might live on high, Lives that I might never die. As the branch is to the vine, I am his and he is mine."

OK, Matthew now it is time to use some of that money you have for the Lord. Matthew invites Jesus over to his house, that nice expensive house, to join him for dinner. He also invites other tax collectors and sinner to join him for dinner so they can sit down and listen to what Jesus has to say. When you have people over to your house for dinner or a Fourth of July BBQ it is not just the food that makes the time special. You enjoy being with friends and family because it is a time to talk and enjoy conversation with each other.

Notice it says that "many" tax collectors came and ate with Jesus and his disciples. Every religion in the world says when you come to your god and seek his blessing, you need to bring something to the table with you or your god will not accept you. With Jesus it is different. He invites us to sit down with him. He spares no words as he shows us how our sin has put us under God's eternal wrath and punishment. In love and mercy he reaches us to us and shows us that He is the Christ, he one who has did everything necessary to make full payment for every past sin.

Bernie Madoff sits in prison paying for his sins of the stealing and cheating others. How many years will go by before he can walk out of the prison doors having paid his debt to society? Will it help him get off the hook if he can make restitution to people who lost their money through him? Bernie Madoff grew up with the Jewish belief that you can atone for your sins by following Old Testament laws. The Jewish people believe that on the day of atonement, you can call some and ask their forgiveness for some past sin and this will count towards being accepted by God. All the great sacrifices of Old Testament law were never given by God to atone for sin. They were intended to point to great sacrifice Jesus would offer as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The Pharisees were upset with Jesus for eating with publicans and sinners. The asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" I don't know how these Pharisees found out that Jesus was eating with tax collectors in the home of Matthew, but I am sure they had their spies who were always ready to sound the alarm when they saw Jesus hanging around people who sinners. Jesus used this moment to teach one of the most important truths of Scripture. "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 doctor is in. The door is open. You don't need your insurance card. You don't need Medicare. You don't need your check book. Jesus wants you to come to him as you are. I know you are not a very pretty sight as you walk into his door. What the prophet Isaiah said of rebellious Israel applies to every rebellious son and daughter of Adam: "Your whole head is injured, your whole heart is afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness-only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil." God's Old Testament people thought they could take a few sacrifices to the temple to pay for their sin including the sin

of worshipping Baal. Our sacrifices and good deeds cannot atone for one small sin of selfishness. They are like little Band Aids that cannot cure heart disease or cancer or diabetes. "Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to the cross I cling." Jesus invites you to sit down with him. He offers you his body and blood with bread and wine. He offers you his mercy, his sacrifice that makes you whole and clean before your God. He takes the gutter most and raises them to the utter most. That's the story of Matthew's life. That's the story of your life and mine. Jesus wants to show mercy, even to a person like me. Amen.