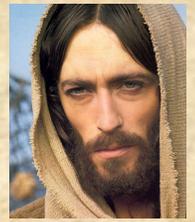


MERCY NOT SACRIFICE

Sunday of St. Matthew Apostle, Evangelist (9-26-10)
Rev. Steven D. Spencer – Pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church, Salem, OR



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."**

Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen!

If you open up a Sunday paper you're likely to see a section called Help Wanted Ads. Today in our text we see the Lord calling Matthew into a new career path. If that were an ad it might read something like this: **"Son of God is seeking disciples. Among those who follow, twelve will accompany Him for three years of intensive training and study. Eleven of them will then be sent into the world to make disciples of all nations; and they will suffer great hardship, even death, along the way. Pay: the treasures of heaven, earthly reward, a changed life. There's no need to apply: He will select. Don't bother trying to call; He'll call you."**

In our text, Jesus has a choice between two very different people. On the one hand, there's Matthew a tax collector—a government employee who sends the bills and counts the coins. In his spare time, Matthew hangs around with other tax collectors, those notorious "sinners," a sordid bunch that doesn't even pretend they're trying to earn God's favor. In contrast to Matthew are the Pharisees, a group of seriously religious men who have spent years studying of the Scriptures. They are constantly talking the talk and walking the walk of trying to gain God's favor by their godliness. If Jesus selects a Pharisee, He has a man who is already disciplined and well schooled.

The qualifications for discipleship are clear to anyone who reads the Old Testament and hears its message by faith: **"The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit" (Ps. 34:18)**. Or, as we say in the liturgy from time to time, **"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17)**. Jesus puts it this way in the Gospel lesson today, **"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13)**. Yes, the Lord's Word makes the choice quite clear.

The Lord picks Matthew then He goes and eats a meal with Matthew and all his "sinful" friends. The Pharisees are appalled; they're outraged: "If this is the Savior, how could He do such a thing?" You see, this is part of the thought process of a Pharisees and also of many Christians who think they are saved by what they do and the company they keep.

I think we often miss the obvious when we are reading the Scriptures. The Pharisees see and comprehend how incredibly awe-inspiring the teaching of Jesus is. Time and again they comment on how He teaches with great authority, they see the miracles He does, the Old Testament Passages He quotes. This makes Jesus a noble and well-respected teacher. Never once do the Pharisees question Jesus title of Rabbi. But in our passage today we see where the heart of the problem truly lay. The Pharisees want Jesus to be on their team, but being on someone's team means playing by their rules. When Jesus refuses to be on their team, and play by their rules, they decide to treat Him as the enemy.

The Pharisees have another problem, a doctrinal one. They think that they can earn God's favor by doing His will. Therefore, God loves those who do His will more than others. Or, to put it another way: Those who keep God's laws are a lot more saved than those who don't even try. The Pharisees are experts at keeping the Law; in fact, they've even added to it. The Lord commands His people to

rest on the Sabbath; the Pharisees can tell you how many steps you can take before you're no longer resting. Naturally, if you are choosing a worker for religious job a devout Pharisee is a better choice than a tax collector of dubious character.

But regardless, Jesus still picks Matthew; and the Pharisees' reaction follows their chain of thought. For one thing, they despise Matthew. Matthew's a tax collector - a publican - a sinner. His office was in Capernaum, which was the hub for Far Eastern trade. Caravans would pass through the city on the way to the coast. Each caravan was taxed; Matthew was in a sense a custom's officer. No one in Matthew's day liked paying taxes; but then do you? A tax collector made his living by collecting a surcharge on the taxes due. Some of the tax collectors beat and abused those they collected from. They did this without fear for the Roman government would protect them. These men were seen as the worst of all sinners, leaching off of society. This isn't the type of person you would tend to hire to run your family business, yet Jesus did. Jesus just isn't playing by the Pharisees' rule book.

Back when I was a vicar I ran into a fellow college classmate that I hadn't seen for more than 20 years. We began chatting about the ministry and funny things that had happened. He told me how proud he was to finally graduate and get to wear his clergy collar everywhere. It was a badge of importance to him. It set him apart from everyone else and he wanted everyone else to know it. He admitted it was all an EGO trip. He decided that he would visit every Sunday School class at his new parish. They would know He was the pastor. With chest puffed out he walked into the preschool room (you know those kids 3 and 4 years of age) to talk to them about God. As he sat down a young girl asked if she could sit on his lap. He nodded head and continued talking. She kept staring at the collar around his neck. Finally in a moment of silence she pointed to it and said "boo-boo." Implying that it was a large bandage. He chuckled and said, no, no it's a collar. He took off the collar to show her. As he did he noticed printed inside of it the directions for the care of the collar. He pointed to the words and asked her if she could read. To his surprise she nodded her head. Okay then he responded read it to me. She looked at the collar, then looked at the pastor, she looked at the collar then looked at the pastor and said, "kills fleas and ticks for up to 6 months." Talk about being humbled!

The Pharisees are like that, they despise Jesus. They are puffed up in their own righteousness. It's not so much the snub, the fact He didn't pick one of them. No, the problem-as they see it is, (✠) He's working against them. They've worked out their own plan of salvation, and in their plan is they will offer their good works to God as a pleasing sacrifice to gain His favor. But if Jesus eats with sinners instead of them, He's not a savior who agrees to use their plan. He has mercy on those whom they despise, and He's offering aid and comfort to the enemy. He's a threat because He undermines **their** entire confession of faith. How dare He do such a thing?

Jesus explains to the Pharisees: ***"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but only those who are sick."*** Imagine a doctor who says he will only see people in perfect health: "Here! Come into my office! Lie back and let me run a few tests and maybe perform surgery. You're perfectly healthy, but I'm going to cure you!" Such an absurd idea, isn't it? Healthy people don't need to be cured: They're already free from disease.

Yet we witness the opposite much too often: One who is sick who refuses to admit his illness. Rather than see a doctor who can help, he or she maintains, "I don't need a doctor, because I am not sick! Doctors aren't for healthy people, and I am perfectly healthy." It's silly, but some won't admit they are sick, even when it's clear to all around them. And here's an important point: No matter how much positive thinking they put into it, no matter how fervently they believe that they're not ill, they still are. Denial doesn't change a thing.

So, we have the illustration of the doctor. Doctors don't help healthy people who don't need them. Doctors can't help people who won't admit they are sick. Doctors can only help those who confess that they are in need of medical attention.

And so we have the Savior. He has come to save sinners, people who are terminally ill with sin. He's not going to die for holy, sinless, righteous people. For one thing, there just aren't any – other than Jesus. For another, sinless people wouldn't need Him to die to take away their sins.

Jesus is going to die for sinners: He is going to the cross to die for the sins of the world. But while He dies for all, not all will be saved. Why? Because of that sin that the Pharisees represent: Many will say, "Well and good that Jesus died for sinners: They need it. But I'm not sinful, at least not so much that He needs to die to set me straight with God. I'm not that sick, so I don't need such desperate measures to heal me." But wishing so doesn't make it so. Many insist that they are not sick at all with sin; and many maintain that they are good because they maintain a positive attitude. But one cannot wish away sin anymore than one can wish away leprosy; one needs to be healed of the disease or die. The Pharisees think they've got it all figured out, but doing so they've only created a god of their own making.

Jesus says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," quoting what His Father said through Hosea centuries before. Many will seek to get to heaven by offering a sacrifice of good works, good thoughts, good words, because they believe they just aren't so sinful: "Look Lord, look see what I've done! I've done good things! Thus, I'm not sinful! Therefore I don't need anyone to save me! Your Son didn't have to die for me! I'm making it on my own!" You see that's what your saying when you don't acknowledge how truly sinful you are. You're saying your works are your sacrifices and you've done everything necessary to be saved.

But the Lord doesn't desire sacrifices; in fact, they offend Him. When someone declares to God, "I'm good enough to make it on my own," their saying, "You sacrificed Your Son for no good reason, because I can save myself!" This robs the Son of His glory and offends the Father greatly.

What does the Lord desire? He desires to have mercy. It is why He sacrificed His Son, judging Him on the cross in your place. He has given His Son the punishment that we deserve so that He can give us what we don't deserve: GRACE! For the sake of Jesus, God the Father declares: "Your works don't save you for they cannot. My Son has saved you. He has lived for you and He has died for you; and I have raised Him from the dead to give you life. I will not save you because of your efforts; but I will have mercy upon you and forgive you for My Son's sake." This is what He means when He declares, **"I desire mercy, not sacrifice"**- "I desire to have mercy on you for the sake of Jesus, because your works and sacrifices don't get the job done."

All of this is why Jesus calls Matthew, not one of the Pharisees. The Pharisees don't want Him and His mercy, even though they dearly need Him. As long as they trust in their own sacrificial efforts, they have no need for the Sacrifice Personified.

This understanding of mercy is so important especially for us today. As we are gather here this morning to worship our Lord; we sang, in the Kyrie "Lord, have mercy." This is an important confession of faith. By those words of the liturgy, we confess that we are not here to impress God by our works and sacrifices; we are here because we cannot save ourselves. So we confess who we are so that the Lord may have mercy upon us, to save us solely by His work of Grace.

Rejoice in this as well: As we sang, "Lord have mercy," it is not that we are trying to persuade Him, to talk Him into it. We are agreeing with Him, that this is what He comes to do; He is here not to measure our sacrifices, but to have mercy upon us.

For our Lord is slow to anger and His mercy endures forever. And because He has had mercy upon us, you can be certain of this: That all your sins are forgiven because of the work He (†) has done. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, - Amen and amen.

The peace of God which, surpasses all comprehension keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus - Amen