

## ***Keeping In Mind: Matthew 9:9-17***

### ***Preface:***

Well, all.

We're back in this sort-of series looking a handful of things I want to share before Advent—some passages (like today) some topics, discussion on practices and principles. Just stuff I want to leave in our minds prior to Advent and Christma. Because I won't be in the position to share this stuff with us after that.

### ***Introduction:***

Two different scenes make up the passage of Matthew that we're looking at today. We're going to walk through them. And as we're walking through Matthew, let's remember that we're following a string of situations in which Jesus' authority is being proven to whoever wants to pay attention. He's on a ministry tour, going around, doing the stuff that people expected the Messiah to do. And after today's passage he's going to just keep doing that stuff.

So. We'll walk through this small passage that was read to us. We'll see Jesus challenging the expectations people have about what he should or shouldn't be doing with himself. We'll get to wonder, "Is what he's doing appropriate or inappropriate? And why?"

Let's first pray.

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Jesus Calls Matthew:***

Let's go with Jesus:

***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.***

We don't know why Matthew followed Jesus.

We do know that he's not a dope; he's not someone who's easily duped. We know that from this work of art and truth that is this Gospel. And we know that because not anyone could pull off being a tax collector. Remember, a tax collector was a special sort of traitor for your typical Jewish villager. He's a guy who traded solidarity with your people, God's People, for collaboration with Rome, for safety from their conscription and their worst violence, traded solidarity for the promise of profit--because if you're a tax collector, you're skimming off the top, it's just the way it works.

Matthew is calculating, and he's savvy. He's got to be savvy; he has to take just enough to keep him rolling and well-off, but not chased out of town and just enough to pay the Romans off without getting taken out by them. If he wasn't savvy and calculating, he couldn't be a tax collector.

There's something crazy in this clever, calculating, collaborator just following Jesus. As far as we know from his job, what Matthew is a disciple of, a follower of, is cash and comfort. But Jesus says "follow me" and Matthew gets up and goes.

And if all we knew about Matthew was this scene, we could

be like, well, he wrote the Gospel! Of course he's going to write himself in as an awesome guy...that's kind of what you'd expect a tax collector would do.

But we have more to this, right?

### ***Matthew Has A Party:***

**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?"**

Matthew agrees to be Jesus' disciple, and whatever else that means to him at that moment, and whatever his motives for doing so, he practices authentic hospitality. He throws a party.

He has Jesus and his disciples over, and his friends, too: sinning outsiders and some of the other tax collectors around. Of course these are his friends. This makes sense to me: Who else are you going to be friends with when you're acting as a representative of the occupying army to all your neighbors, when you've shaken down the relatives of all your neighbors, and when the Pharisees are going to shake down anyone who would be friendly to you if it occurred to them to be friendly, for old time's sake or something. If Mathew is going to have a party, these are the people who he can invite to come.

You're a sinner. You're out; You're a risk, contagious. The Pharisees knew this, and would have made sure Matthew

knew it, too. But if people are already dirty, have already been made outsiders, then it's easy to hang with them. No one has anything to prove anymore. This is why the most radical solidarity is rarely in communities of prestige and comfort, but in communities that those with prestige and comfort would never be a part of.

Plus, maybe Matthew and his tax collector buddies can talk about work, which is, you know, at least something to talk about. So Matthew invites his friends, and his friends come.

Jesus, his already-following disciples, Matthew's friends--tax collectors and outsiders, sinners who didn't conform to the Pharisees' standards. They're eating together, gathered around a table on an outdoor patio, doing what you do when you eat: Talking, listening, passing food around, accidentally grabbing for the same thing at the same time, laughing in spite of themselves at a joke they just heard, or on purpose because of a joke they just told that they think is hilarious. If they were reverently and worshipfully listening to Jesus, considering repentance, we aren't told about it, but you can imagine whatever you want.

### ***Party Crashers:***

But now and then, they're also probably glancing at the Pharisees, who are just off the patio, watching them. Because that's what the Pharisees are doing. Watching them eat and judging them. Maybe they're making funny, Pharisee-centered put-downs and laughing? Who knows.

And the Pharisees, loud enough for everyone to hear, ask some of those disciples who have been following Jesus for awhile, Peter and his family--and remember, everyone knows

everyone here, right? This is no metropolis. These are adults who more than likely played together growing up, before life took them down this career and that one--the nameless Pharisees just off the patio ask the nameless disciples, up there eating with bad company, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

It's a brilliant question. It condemns the ones they ask, Jesus, and the tax collectors and sinners all in just ten words. Not so shabby, you know? "Look at you all."

But, frankly, it's a reasonable question to ask.

Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? I mean, these are people who are, as far as the Pharisees could see, actively ignoring the way of life God set out for his people. The tax collectors are collaborating with the enemy of God's People, Rome; the sinners are sinners, putting themselves outside the bounds of God's blessings. And this teacher, who we know is the Messiah, but the Pharisees don't--to them it's just a guy claiming to speak for God in a way that they know is wrong, this teacher, well--why would anyone who is claiming to speak for God go to those who aren't even waiting for God? Why would someone who claims to speak for God go to those who aren't waiting for God to speak?

They aren't even trying to keep the house tidy for when God shows up, and the Pharisees, if they did anything, kept a tidy religious house.

It's a reasonable question. Jesus hears them—he's meant to—and he answers.

## ***Go & Learn:***

**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.”**

Here’s what we don’t see: We don’t see Jesus sneering at the Pharisees. We don’t see him calling them names or publicly shaming the Pharisees. I mean, we add these things, mentally. We put condemnation into his voice when we read what he says. But it’s not there, not here at least.

It’s almost, almost as if he gets how reasonable their question is. Of course you’d expect someone speaking for God to go to those who have been waiting on God. But: That expectation’s wrong. It’s simply wrong.

In saying “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners,” Jesus is not only messing with their expectations about who God should show attention to.

He’s not only subverting their expectations, but he’s also letting them know that those expectations are wrong. The ones who need taught are the ones who don’t know anything. The ones who need healed are the sick, not the healthy. Jesus is telling them their expectations are wrong.

And he does it in a super Pharisee-friendly way, which again, is a compassionate thing to do, a way that we’d appreciate. He’s pointing them back to Scripture.

He quotes from Hosea, a book we've talked about before that uses a powerful symbol of marital betrayal to talk about the way Israel has broken covenant with God, turned away from God to worship all sorts of pagan not-gods. It's a book about the way God is going to give to Israel what they're behaviors prove they really want: To be saved by the world's power, not God's, even though that power will turn on them. And it's a book that ends in promises of restoration, of God coming through.

And in the context of Hosea, to say "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," was to remind the Israelites that all the sacrifices they are making all the time to all these empty pagan idols is doubly-wrong, because that's not even what God wants: What God wants is for his people to show mercy. It's a passage in which God is pointing out how inappropriate the Israelites worship is, given the situation they find themselves in.

### ***Challenging Expectations:***

Do you see what's happening here? The Pharisees show up with their wrong expectations, believing what Jesus is doing is inappropriate, for a teacher of God. Jesus tells them that their expectations are wrong. He points them back to a passage in Scripture in which God himself made clear all Israel's expectations about what God wanted were wrong. And the only thing that we can leave with, if we're the disciples, and the tax collectors, and the sinners, the only conclusion we can make is that God must want us! God must want to be with us.

See, in the end, their expectations were wrong, too: because of course, they had been ostracized by God's People, taught

that God didn't want ot be with them. But God does. Jesus, the bearer of God's wisdom, character, love, does. It's love-borne mercy that's driving him.

For all we know, in this moment, the Pharisees understood what Jesus was trying to say. They had Scripture memorized, after all. They were clever. Jesus calls Matthew to follow him, but he tells the Pharisees to go away. And I wonder if these Pharisees--at least the ones crashing the party--if they understood as they stepped away, what Jesus was trying to reveal to them.

John's disciples didn't.

### ***How Many People Are Going To Interrupt This Thing?***

**14 Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"**

Without knowing it, Matthew's thrown a lunch and learn, apparently. Or one of those free hotel conference meals where you think you're getting dinner, but you're getting a lecture and h'ors d'oeuvres. I bet Matthew was making that "I'm so sorry" face to all his friends.

Because now John's disciples show up, and decide that if Jesus answered the Pharisees, and they weren't even asking him a question, then, hey, open mic time! Because John's disciples know they're better than Pharisees, *at least*.

We realize something here: One of the first lessons Matthew learned in following Jesus is that the boundaries between a



public and a private life are lost. Matthew knows this; he's written a Gospel, he leads a congregation, we can see the way his life was disrupted. But this is, as far as the story goes, the evening of day one, and Matthew's private patio has already turned into a public space.

So John's disciples, those who follow John, not Jesus--live the way John teaches them to live, not the way Jesus teaches his disciples to live—they ask Jesus this question: “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”

### ***Motives:***

We don't know their motives. Maybe they genuinely want an answer, for their own theological curiosity?

We know from other places in the New Testament that even if John is completely on board with Jesus, his disciples have a harder time with the, oh, celebrity transition that's happening, the move from John to Jesus in the public eye. So let's imagine that John's disciples aren't just nice curious fellas, but antagonistic, here.

We often think we're right if other people adopt our way of doing something. We often think we're right if other people adopt our way of doing something. It's a pleasure; it's an affirmation. And we also take comfort in doing things the way that others do.

A few of us are contrarian by nature or by wounding, and if most people do things one way, we'll figure out a way to do it differently. And our little congregation may have a higher proportion of contrarians than most? We could find out right

now by how many of us disagree with me.

But it's validating and comforting when people's behaviors match our own. And people are constantly finding validation and affirmation and direction from how much the way they live match the way those around them live. There would be no Joneses to keep up with if it wasn't true, and everyone bands together with others like them if they can. And we all buy into this, both when it comes to what it means to be a Christian and what it means to live in our neighborhoods and work at our jobs and do and buy all the things we do and buy in the places that we do and buy them. Peer pressure and pop culture are part of what it means to be human, no matter where or when you live. We talked about the perils in this last week.

Deeper than this, we long to be impressive and have influence in people's lives, and it's a joy and satisfaction if and when people act like us. Being mimicked is its own reward. That our way is the "high way"--the right way, the best way--feels good.

I think John's disciples, even as they stand the right distance away from the Pharisees, are asking for the same reason as the Pharisees ask. They're sticking it to Jesus, trying to point out his failure as a teacher as they stand on the patio, and look around at all these sinners, tax collectors, and religious failures drinking down and eating up.

So Jesus answers. "Let me answer your question, with a question."

***Jesus Answers:***

**15 Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.”**

Again, expectations. Jesus returns to this idea of expectations. John’s disciples’ expectations, just like the Pharisees’ expectations, are wrong. What they think is appropriate isn’t appropriate. And his response points this out.

The appropriate response to what he’s doing, to who he is, is a party, not a wake; a feast, not a fast. There should be celebration now. And in alluding to a time when “the bridegroom will be taken from them,” Jesus alludes to his death. That’ll bring fasting.

And the early Church, every week, replayed the Holy Week, you know? They fasted every Friday in memory of the cross, rejoiced every Sunday in celebration of Jesus’ resurrection and anticipation of their own. Christians still fast, and we all, I really think, ought to even now. But fasting has to do with mourning, with repenting, with sadness or regret. Jesus is telling John’s disciples that they’re evaluating things incorrectly, and their timing is off. His disciples won’t fast because it’s simply inappropriate for them to; they’ve got to feast for as long as they have him nearby.

But he says more than this, too:

***Common Sense:***

**16 “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. 17 Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”**

Jesus takes two common things, things everyone on the patio and off it would know all about, and lays them out there. And this is clever. You can disagree about what Hosea might have meant when he said this or that, but when it comes to the common sense stuff that Jesus is laying out here, no one is going to disagree with him, sinner, tax collector, disciple, nobody.

He brings up patches and wineskins, and in each case, demands that we remember how these things work, and how inappropriate it would be if we fiddled with the equation.

Is it appropriate to patch old clothes with patches that will certainly shrink as soon as they're washed, or certainly get stretched out as you go about your business? No. It's not. You'll have to patch the patch and anyone who sees you will be, like, what you're doing will be like, "Why is that person a numbskull?" Because it's common knowledge, it's a given, you use shrunk cloth for a patch.

And if you pour new, unfermented wine into old leather wineskins, ones that are inflexible and won't stretch anymore, then, as the wine ferments and gives off gas, and all your wineskins explode because they aren't stretchy, everyone who hears about it is going to ask "What did he or

she expect would happen?” Because everyone knows, you pour new wine in new wineskins, which are still flexible, and can stretch as the wine ferments and expands the leather wineskin bag.

Jesus uses these “common knowledge” examples because everyone knows them. Everyone knows that there’s a right and wrong way to do these common things, and you can’t expect the wrong way to fit with the right way, you can’t expect an inappropriate action to work out properly. If you do, then you’re not living in the real world, the world the rest of us are living in.

Certain things call for certain things; certain situations call for us to take certain action, make certain choices.

And what we realize is that over and over today Jesus is trying to make the point that the Pharisees and John’s Disciples, they are seeing the situation at hand incorrectly. They’ve strayed from common sense. Not only are their expectations incorrect, but their behavior is inappropriate, given what’s really going on.

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### ***Five Feet Off The Patio, In The Dark:***

I think it’s striking how, five feet off the patio, in the dark, all the people in this scene would have looked exactly the same to us. The Sinners, the Tax Collectors, John’s Disciples, the Pharisees, they’d all look the same to us, and yet, to each other, their differences were insurmountable.

There were lines that they couldn't cross, ways of living, expectations about what's appropriate and inappropriate, how relevant God was for living, and how to live for God if he was considered relevant at all. Each group was the "other," not "us" but "them," and they were wrong.

This has challenged me since I first saw it.

Who, from five feet away in the dusk of evening looks just like me, yet I would say is nothing like me. What slight differences, differences that largely unseen from the outside, make me think that it is inappropriate for me to go to them?

I think it's probably other middle-class, middle-age white people who think differently politically, economically, theologically. Who hold different ideas of what's "right" when it comes to trade policy, potty humor, or guns.

Those are probably the ones I ought to be most ready to show mercy to, rather than demand sacrifice from, and yet: I don't want to go to those people. They drive me nuts, and I often think they are whacko, or that they just don't realize as much about God as I do, or...you know, insert any other generically unChristian, prideful posture here.

And yet...which among us would say that's good? It's shameful.

When we read today's passage, who do we identify with? The sinners, the tax collectors, the Pharisees, the disciples of John? The truth is that to identify with any of them is to excuse ourselves from the costly--at least to the boundaries we nurture between ourselves and others--yet appropriate

demand to identify with Christ and act like he did.

See, a conclusion to this message that would be easier to give would go something like this: Who are the sinners and tax collectors around you? Who is most like them in our society; go to them. Jesus went to them!

And that's a fine application. But it's not the one I want to make. By and large, Smoky Row, you are compassionate to the stranger, kind to the downtrodden, concerned for the oppressed, and generous to the one in need. And these aren't just types of people; we could name names, each of us, of those whom we have metaphorically or literally partied with, feasted with, because they were the ones most like these ones Jesus showed mercy to. I love it. You're awesome.

So instead: Who is just like you--you singular, each one of us--who is, from five feet away in the dark, just like us, but who we would protest until the sun comes up that we're different from them, because we know they just don't get it the way we get it. That is, correctly.

I wonder if, for those of us who are fine with society's outcasts, then that's the one—that person who's just like us, except wrong—who we need to show mercy to.

I think what's appropriate for us is to go to them, when all of the society we keep--politically, economically, theologically--would say don't.

And what we ought to expect is that in going to them, we'll discover that God loves them too, and wants to use us to bless them, wants us to be the agents of mercy that we, his

privileged children, were made to be.

Who is it you can't stomach the idea of eating with? Because they are just so incorrect in their beliefs about...whatever? Whose view of the world just seems so fundamentally flawed to you? Is it appropriate, then, to fast from them or feast with them? What might Jesus' example, God's Spirit, and Scripture's witness call you to do, then? And call us, in the end, to keep doing?