

Mercy for Sinners

Matthew 9:9-17
Halifax: 30 January 2005

Introduction

Today, in Matthew 9:9-17, we come to a passage that speaks to the core of all that you believe if you are a true Christian—

- namely, that
 - **God greatly desires to show mercy to sinners!**
- It is a wonderful truth, there is none like it...
 - It is a truth that makes Christians sing each Lord's Day.
 - It is a truth that has completely changed our whole destiny so that rather than heading for a crisis eternity in Hell we are headed instead for bliss in Heaven!
 - It is a truth that God wants us to declare to each other and to all the world:
 - The God who made heaven and earth desires to show mercy to sinners!

In Matthew 9:13, Jesus advises the Pharisees to:

- "Go and learn what this means:
 - *"I desire mercy and not sacrifice."*
- The Pharisees knew very well that these words were quoted from Hosea the prophet, from the very scriptures they claimed to fully trust.
 - They also knew that in Hosea, God is dealing with His rebellious sinful people with whom He has established His covenant.
 - Israel is compared to an adulterous woman who has broken the covenant of marriage and gone after other lovers.
 - And God is compared with a faithful husband who is ever ready to show mercy to her, and who **will** show mercy to her despite her adultery.
 - He is presented as a God who greatly desires mercy.

But to understand what He means by this,

- **It is important to understand what is meant by "mercy."**
- A. As it is used in Hosea 6:6, the word **mercy** speaks in particular of faithful covenant love.
- The word **mercy** translates the Hebrew word **hesed**.
 - It is also translated "steadfast love" and "loving kindness" in other places.

- **Hesed** is such a rich word in the Old Testament that it cannot be adequately understood by merely translating it into an English or Greek word...
 - It can only be understood by looking at how it is used...
- **Hesed** is used to speak of the faithful covenant love between God and His people that He desires to maintain.
 - In the covenant, both God and His people undertake to show **hesed** in ways that are that are appropriate to each.
 - 1) God shows **hesed** to His people by forgiving their sins, blessing them in all their ways, and loving them as a faithful devoted husband.
 - In this context it is often translated “mercy” because God’s doing of all these things for His people involves mercy.
 - 2) God’s people show **hesed** to Him when they keep respond to Him with loyal devotion,
 - loving Him as God and their God,
 - trusting in Him alone for their blessing,
 - and obeying Him as a faithful bride.
- In Hosea, when God says that He *desires* **hesed** or mercy,
 - He is saying that He desires to live with His people in this faithful covenant love.
 - He desires to take them to Himself and love them as a husband, and He desires for them to respond as a faithful devoted bride—
 - God is presented as going out of His way to dwell in this faithful covenant love with His people...
 - He is willing to do all that it takes to establish this relationship, even if that means He must die for them.
 - That is how much He desires hesed!
 - And of course,
 - what He says here of Israel pertains to the whole church!
 - He has established His covenant with us through Christ...
 - And He delights to live in covenant love with us!
 - He desires mercy (hesed) and not sacrifice!

B. But what exactly is being contrasted here?

- By **sacrifice**,
 - He speaks of the entire system of what we might call “covenant renewal.”
1. You see, when the people of the Old Testament offered sacrifices,
 - God was declaring His acceptance of them through Jesus Christ who was promised in those sacrifices.
 - Jesus Christ was represented by the priests and by the offerings as the One through whom God’s people would all be reconciled to Him.
 - The people assembled together for worship before God’s at the temple,
 - and through the priests God declared His covenant mercy to them and they declared their covenant love to Him.
 - In this way they regularly renewed their covenant with Him,
 - God declaring His love and acceptance of them through the sacrifices, and they pledging their trust and faithfulness to Him.
 2. In the New Testament, we do the very same thing, but in a different way because now Jesus has come.
 - Our worship is called a sacrifice of praise.
 - The form is different because we no longer have priests and bloody sacrifices now that Jesus has come into the world and offered Himself for us...
 - But we do have covenant renewal.
 - Each week, God calls us to assemble together to renew the covenant.
 - In our worship, His saving love is declared to us in the gospel,
 - He declares that He is reconciled to us through Jesus Christ...
 - And we declare our commitment to Him through Christ and offer ourselves to Him as His bride with great rejoicing and thanksgiving.
 - Each week, He declares to us that He is our God and we are His people,
 - And respond, “I am yours and you are mine.”
 3. But God is not pleased with **mere** sacrifice—
 - It is a wonderful thing that He calls us to renew our covenant with Him...
 - But it is a very empty and wicked thing if we only go through the motions of the renewal service (of the sacrifice of praise) without the love!
 - Too often, God’s people become like a silly woman who loves weddings,
 - but does not live in the covenant promises of marriage!

- She likes the dresses and the flowers and the party and the music...
- She goes through the motions of declaring her love and hearing her husband declare his love,
 - but then she commits adultery.
- Even in the covenant renewal service itself, she is not sincere,
 - Even as the words of promise are on her lips, adultery in her heart...
 - Her promises are empty because she is full of other lovers.
- As God says of His adulterous people,
 - “They draw near with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.”

TRANS> Now you can see why God says,

- “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”
- The only purpose for the sacrifice is to bring us into the relationship of mercy and keep us there.
 - God doesn’t want the ceremony and the promises only without the love.
 - He wants the **hesed**, the mercy, the covenant love, to be lived out in a glorious relationship between He and His spouse.
 - “He desires mercy and not sacrifice.”

Jesus quotes these words to the Pharisees in Matthew 9 as a rebuke to them.

- In verse 13, He says,
 - “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’”

A. When He says, “**Go and learn what this means:**”

1. He is using language that the Pharisees were very used to hearing.
 - They would say,
 - “Go and learn what this means,”
 - to chide those who did not know something that they should have known.
2. This use was similar to Jesus’ comment to Nicodemus about the New Birth when He said,
 - “Are you a teacher in Israel and do not know these things?”
 - It was very cutting to those who prided themselves in their knowledge.

3. But Jesus stings them with these words because of the way they responded when He called Matthew to be His disciple and afterward ate with Matthew and his friends.
- The Pharisees asked His disciples a very foolish question that showed how far they were from God...
 - They asked Jesus' disciples:
 - v. 11: "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"
 - This question shows that they were completely out of touch with God's purposes for His people.
 - They were completely out of touch with the fact that God desires to live in covenant love with His people... that He desires mercy.

B. You see, Matthew was someone who had fallen far away from God.

- He was a clear example of adulterous Israel who had forsaken God's covenant.
 - As a tax collector, he had snuggled up to the Romans in order to get rich at the expense of his own fellow Israelites.
 - The Romans would sell tax collecting franchises to nationals in the lands they occupied...
 - The tax collectors were required to pay a certain amount to Rome, and whatever else they collected over and above that was theirs to keep.
 - They had the backing of the Roman military and were more or less given a license to extort money from their brethren.
- There were two types of tax collectors...
 - First, there were the **gabbi** who collected taxes on land, property, and income...
 - the taxes they collected were more or less regulated and were not terribly exorbitant...
 - Then there were the **mokhes**.
 - They collected import duties, toll way fees, boat docking fees, business license fees.
 - They were the most despised of the tax collectors because they had almost unlimited latitude in their taxing powers...
 - They would come up to a man bringing in his boat and charge him for docking his boat, for the fish he caught and for the boat itself...
 - They were even given permission to search his personal effects to see if there was anything else to tax.

- We know that Matthew was of this second sort because verse 9 says that he was sitting in the tax office—
 - The “tax office” was like a custom’s house we have at the border.
 - Matthews was probably situated in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee or on the highway that ran from Syria to Egypt.
- But whatever the case, he was greatly despised by his fellow Israelites...
 - As a tax collector,
 - He would have been excommunicated and considered no different than a murderer or an adulterer.
 - The Jewish religious leaders had declared that tax collectors were unclean... just like swine...
 - and that anyone who so much as entered their house would also become unclean.
 - As a tax collector, Matthew was indeed guilty of spiritual adultery.
 - He had forsaken God’s covenant for the riches of Rome.

C. So you can see why it was an outrageous thing for Jesus to call this man to be His disciple...

- And not only that, but then to go into his house and feast with him and his fellow tax collectors and sinners!
 - Matthew, perhaps in modesty, doesn’t mention that he had put on this feast,
 - but the other gospels tell us that he did...
 - probably to celebrate the new life he was called into as Jesus disciple and to introduce his friends to the one who had shown mercy to him.
 - But to the Pharisees, Jesus’ actions were unthinkable!
 - How could He, who claimed to have a righteousness that exceeded their own, associate with such wretched people as this tax collector?
 - It was outrageous that He should even enter his home...
 - and even worse that He should eat with such swine and disreputable persons!
- And so it is from this vantage point that the Pharisees asked Jesus’ disciples their foolish question:
 - “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”
 - It was really a rhetorical question—they didn’t really expect an answer...

- It was meant more as a rebuke and a criticism...
 - But Jesus hears the question and gives them an answer...
 - An answer that makes them look very foolish...

- Verse 12 & 13 say:
 - Matthew 9:12-13: When He heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous but sinners, to repentance.”
 - With these words, Jesus speaks of three things:
 - 1) First, the need of these sinners—
 - He is with these tax collectors and sinners as a physician of their souls because they desperately need salvation...
 - He is not associating with these sinners to consort with them, but to heal them.
 - 2) Second, God’s desire for mercy.
 - Jesus’ Father desires to live in a blessed relationship of covenant love with His people as He declared in Hosea...
 - Jesus is going out to bring sinners into this relationship.
 - 3) Third, His own commission as the Messiah:
 - He did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.
 - That was His job.
 - That was the calling He had from the Father—being sent to redeem sinners.

The stupidity of the Pharisee’s question lies in the fact that they missed the whole purpose for the Messiah’s coming!

- Their own Scriptures and covenant rituals (the sacrifices and all) declared plainly that the Messiah must come to save Israel from her sins.
- All those rituals together with God’s word should have informed the Pharisees that the whole nation was guilty of spiritual adultery!
 - It was not just Matthew and His friends that were unclean!
 - It was not just for them that the Messiah was needed!
 - It was for every last one of God’s covenant people!
 - They all needed to be saved from their sins, they were all sick, and the Messiah was promised to come to deliver them.

- How was it that these men could go through all their rituals that told them over and over that they needed to be cleansed,
 - that blood must be shed to atone for their sin...
 - that God's grace was the only basis by which they could have any happy connection to Him...
 - How could they go through those rituals year after year and read all those promises from God's word and miss the point that the Messiah was coming to save sinners?

- If they had been honest before God about their own sins...
 - They would have been glad to see Christ extending mercy to Matthew, this notorious sinner!
 - They would have been glad because they would have said,
 - "Look, the Messiah has come and He is saving sinners!"
 - "He has come to save us from all of our adulteries."
 - "Come, let us rejoice and find salvation in Him."

- But they were not honest...
 - They had come to rest in their covenant renewal rituals and missed the very relationship that those rituals were calling them to live in...
 - Their relationship with God was only in form, but not in substance.
 - So instead of drawing encouragement when God's grace was displayed in the calling of Matthew,
 - they raised criticism!
 - All they could say is,
 - "What is Jesus doing with those sinners?"

- You see, their problem was that they did not consider themselves to be sinners...
 - They thought they were righteous,
 - but Jesus is telling them that He did not come from the pure regions of heaven to this sinful earth to congratulate all the righteous people and gather them to Himself...
 - He came to save sinners...
 - And if they do not realise that they are sinners just like these tax collectors and their friends,
 - then they have nothing to do with the God of Israel who establishes His covenant with sinners.

- The whole basis of His relationship is one of covenant mercy through Jesus Christ.
 - For Jesus, there really wasn't much difference between the Pharisees and the Tax collectors...
 - They were all sinners who were desperately sick and who needed salvation.
 - The great condescension for Him as far as associating with what was unclean was in coming into this sinful world...
 - not in eating with tax collectors.
 - Surely they were unclean,
 - but so were all the other human beings with whom He associated.
 - He had come to bring salvation and to call them all to repentance.
 - What was Jesus doing with sinners?
 - He was here to save them... of course!
- But what about you?
 - Do you ask this same question as the Pharisees?
 - Oh I know you don't ask it in exactly the same way...
 - Surely most people in this generation are quite proud of the fact that they are not at all like the Pharisees!
 - "We are very tolerant!"
 - "We accept everyone and treat everyone with equality."
 - That is the boast of our society.
- But do you know that our society is really very much like the Pharisees in another way.
 - We are just like the Pharisees because we don't think we need to be saved!
 - We think we are acceptable to God apart from Jesus!
 - The only difference between us and the Pharisees is the fact that they thought they were the **only** ones that were accepted and we want to think **everybody** (or at least, almost everybody) is accepted.
 - True, ours is not such an elitist, snobbish, sort of righteousness...
 - But on the other hand is it a very debased sort of righteousness...

- because we act as if the pure, holy God who made the universe is not offended with sin at all—
 - The Pharisees looked down on other sinners as inferior to themselves...
 - But our generation looks down on God and debased Him!
 - Of course, the Pharisees debased God too by supposing He could accept them without Christ,
 - but we debase God even more by claiming that He can accept almost anyone without Christ!
- But the message of the cross contradicts our society!
 - The message of the cross is that God is highly offended with human sinfulness!
 - In fact, He is gloriously offended—it is His glory to be offended because He is holy and cannot accept sin.
 - All that contradicts what is glorious and beautiful and true, He despises...
 - You can't honestly read the Bible and miss that point!
 - You can flatter yourself all day that you are acceptable to God, just like the Pharisees did...
 - And you can join in the mutual flattery of our society that we are all pretty good people and that God accepts us all...
 - but you are just as far from a true covenant relationship with God as the Pharisees were.
 - You have missed the message of God just as much as they did.
- When you honestly look at the cross you see Jesus going to Hell for us!
 - Not just what we call "Hell" in our careless way of speaking,
 - but you see Him suffering the wrath and curse of His Father for us.
 - The basis of the covenant relationship that God desires to live in with His people is Jesus Christ, offered for our sins on the cross.
 - Your sin is an awful thing and it demands either eternity in Hell for You, or Jesus the eternal one suffering the pains of Hell on the cross.
 - There is no other basis by which God can accept you.
- But if you are happy with yourself and think nobody really needs to go to Hell on your account,
 - then you have missed the whole reason Jesus came...

- Why does He have concourse with sinners?
 - 1) Because He is a physician who came to heal the sick...and we are desperately sick...
 - 2) Because His Father desires to live in covenant mercy with us—and Jesus must go to the cross to make a way for that...
 - 3) Because His commission is to call sinners to repentance... and all who come to God are sinners who need to repent.

- The great marvel is not that Jesus ate with tax collectors,
 - The great marvel is that He came to this sinful human race to save His people from their sins...
 - and that He did that when He knew that saving them meant He must bear their iniquities on the cross!

My friends, be sure that you do not miss this like the Pharisees did!

- A. The calling of sinners to live with God in covenant love is a marvellous thing!
 1. His call comes to you right where you are, just as it came to Matthew...
 - a. There He was, sitting in the tax office and Jesus says, “Follow me.”
 - You see, with Jesus, you don’t have to clean yourself up before you can be His disciple!
 - His call comes to you right where you are...
 - He can do the cleansing because His very office is to cleanse sinners.
 - All you have to do is desire to be cleansed and come to Him for it.
 - b. The Pharisees thought the Messiah would go about gathering together all the clean people,
 - But He didn’t come for that...
 - He knew there were not clean people to be found!
 - He came to make all the dirty people clean.
 - And He will make you clean if you will come to Him.
 2. Yes, His call comes to you right where you are, but it does not leave you where you are!
 - a. It is a call to repentance!
 - It is a call into a relationship of covenant love with God.

- It brings you out of what you were and makes everything new because now you are associated with God on the basis of Christ.
- b. Matthew did not remain the same after Jesus' call came to Him...
- Verse 9 says he arose and followed Jesus!
 - When He left the tax office, but He left it all behind—
 - As far as material sacrifices go, Matthew gave up more than any of the other disciples!
 - But instead of looking at as a time of mourning his losses, he looked at it as a time of celebration and rejoicing.
 - He rose up immediately and followed Jesus.
 - The call of Jesus is that powerful...
 - It brings you away from what you were and brings you into the joy of His cleansing.
 - I certainly don't mean that you have no sins after the call comes...
 - But you do have a Saviour who cleanses you from your sins.
 - As long as you live, you will not be righteous in yourself, but will need to abide in this dear Saviour.
3. This calling of Matthew is a huge encouragement that you don't have to work up some kind of self-righteousness to be accepted by God...
- He desires to live in a relationship of grace with you...
 - A relationship in which He shows mercy to cleanse you and save you.
 - Jesus says, "follow me" and all you have to do is rise and follow Him.

B. Don't miss the significance of what it means to have Jesus come!

1. It is so easy to get caught up in the sacrifice of praise and miss **hesed**.
 - a. Do you not struggle with it?
 - Do you not find that you come to the worship service where you renew your covenant with God...
 - Where He meets with us and tells us of His love for us and His commitment to us and we tell Him of our love for Him...
 - where He tells us that we are accepted in Christ and we give thanks for Christ's saving work and confess our faith in Him and sing praises to His name...

- where He gives us His gracious counsel to tell us how to live anew in His image and promises to nourish us in His grace and where we repent and promise to follow...
 - In short where we declare our covenant love to each other...
- Do you not find that you come to do this each week and that very often instead of really entering into this covenant love...entering into the hesed...
 - you only offer the sacrifice?
 - You only go through the covenant renewal ceremony and your heart remains cold?
- b. We are just doing worship...
- but we are not truly approaching God through Jesus Christ.
 - We are forgetful of the mercy of Christ through which we are brought into favour with our God.
2. This problem is illustrated for us by John the Baptist's disciples in verse 14.
- a. I don't think these disciples were insincere like the Pharisees,
- but they ask a question that shows how they were caught up in the "sacrifice" of fasting with hesed.
 - It would seem that the Pharisees may have stirred them up to ask Jesus this question:
 - v. 14 says: "Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?'"
- b. John the Baptist, as you know, was a very austere man.
- He lived in the wilderness, wore coarse clothing, abstained from wine and pleasant food, eating locusts and wild honey.
- 1) This was exactly what was appropriate to his particular calling.
- He was sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah.
 - His was a ministry of repentance in to prepare for His coming.
 - Everyone needed to mourn over their sins and cry out to God to send the Messiah to save.
- 2) This was the proper posture for God's people at that time—
- So John taught his disciples to fast and pray for the Messiah to come.
 - The Pharisees and other Jews fasted regularly (the custom was twice a week), praying and yearning for the Christ.

- This fasting and praying was part of the sacrifice of praise at that time as God held out the promise of Messiah to them and as they responded with yearning.
 - It was the right thing to do at that time...
- c. But how they expose the emptiness of their fasting when they come and ask Jesus why His disciples do not fast!
- 1) Jesus asks them a very obvious question:
 - “Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?”
 - Do you see what He is getting at?
 - They were fasting and praying that the Messiah would come to save them...
 - Now He has come!
 - He is there proclaiming His kingdom, casting out demons, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, forgiving sinners!
 - 2) They should have been rejoicing, but they were still fasting!
 - They had missed the point!
 - Why were they afflicting themselves and mourning that the Messiah would come when He was right there in front of them!
 - Had John not pointed to them and said,
 - “That’s the One I have told you about!”
 - “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”
 - Wake up guys!
 - He is here!
 - 3) Do you see how meaningless the “sacrifice” of fasting had become?
 - a) They were like a woman whose husband is lost at sea...
 - Everyday she goes out to weep on the beach, longing for his return.
 - Then after many days, he returns—
 - but still, each day, the woman goes out on the beach to weep.
 - Stop it woman! It is time to rejoice. Your husband has returned.
 - What is this empty display of love and concern?
 - You have the ritual but where is the love?

b) Do you remember Anna the prophetess?

- She was not like that!
 - She was a sincere worshipper!
 - She spend much time fasting and praying for the Messiah to come...
 - Luke tells us:
 - Luke 2:36-37: Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman *was* a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served *God* with fastings and prayers night and day.
 - But did this godly woman keep fasting when she saw that Jesus had come?
 - No, she celebrated!
 - Luke 2:38: And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.
 - Her sacrifice of worship was not devoid of hesed!

3. Jesus explains that His disciples will fast after He goes away...

- v. 15 (second half) “but the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.”
 - a. Already He is anticipating the cross when He will be cut off.
 - When that day comes, it would inappropriate for them **not** to fast—just as inappropriate as it would be for them to fast now that He is with them.
 - You see, this is the point!
 - We aren’t to just go through rituals as if that makes us acceptable to God!
 - He desires for us to live in covenant faithfulness with Him—in covenant love before His face!
 - We are fasting this Wednesday because we have good reason to seek God’s face.
 - But today we do not fast because fasting is not appropriate on the Lord’s Day—
 - This is the day we remember our Lord’s resurrection that signalled His completed work for our salvation...

- His acceptance by God as a sacrifice to take away our sins!
- The Lord's Day is not for fasting, but for celebration and rejoicing!
 - Let us have a heart in our worship.
 - That is what the Lord from us!
 - A heart that responds to His saving grace.
 - That is faith... if faith is not there... if you do not approach God through the Messiah...
 - you might as well not even bother with worship!
 - God desires hesed, not sacrifice.

b. Jesus sums up His point with two very far-reaching illustrations!

1) In verse 16 He explains that when patching up old clothes, you don't put new, un-shrunk cloth on an old garment or it will tear an even bigger hole in the garment when it shrinks.

- By this He shows that the whole way of worship is going to change now that He has come!
- There will be shift from Old Testament shadows that anticipate His coming to New Testament remembrance of His saving work.
 - Worship must be changed from the bottom up!
 - Jesus is not coming to reform that old system of OT rituals, but He is going to bring in a whole new worship...
 - The Sabbath will give way to the Lord's Day...
 - The Sacrifice will give way to the preaching of the gospel and the Lord's Supper...
 - Bloody circumcision will give way to bloodless baptism.
 - The new thing that God has done in sending Him can be stuck on to the old system.

2) The second illustration is to the same purpose...

- The new wine of the gospel cannot be contained in the old wine skins of Old Testament worship.
 - The new wine will bring new worship.
 - As the book of Hebrews says,
 - "For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change in the law."

- Christ is our new priest, so all the old service is replaced by the new.

Conclusion—And what is the point for us?

- The point is, be sure that when come to offer your sacrifice of praise to God,
 - you do not simply go through the ceremony without renewing your faith in Jesus Christ and your love for God through Him.
 - God declares that you are connected to Him through nothing else but Jesus Christ,
 - this One who has come to show mercy to sinners.
 - If you are to be connected to God in His covenant,
 - You must come to Jesus Christ as a sinner to be saved by Him.
 - That is what He came to do.
 - You can go through the ritual of worship and miss the point.
 - But your God desires mercy and not sacrifice.
 - It is His great delight to be related in covenant love to you through His Son...
 - Be sure that this also is your delight.