

Mercy, Not Sacrifice

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] We are reading this passage this morning. We're gonna be looking at Matthew chapter nine and then the reading from Hosea that Evan read a moment ago. And we do have our elementary age kids in here, so I'd like to welcome you.

And hopefully as you came in, you received one of these packets. And I invite you to use this to kind of follow along. The reading that you just heard from Matthew nine is actually in here. Along with some questions and activities, you can use this. If you're anything like me, whenever I sit and listen to a sermon, I need something to do with my hands.

I fidget a lot. And so I need to be scribbling or drawing or taking notes or something in order to focus. And so if you're like me, use this. And so this is not only for kids, but also for grownups if you need help in focusing.

We're gonna be looking at Matthew chapter nine primarily. At this point in Matthew's gospel, we're beginning to see that Jesus is not just another religious leader. We're beginning to get a sense in Matthew's gospel that Jesus is not just a social reformer.

[1 : 13] Jesus is, it's beginning to be clear at this point in Matthew's gospel that Jesus is doing something entirely new. He's not just starting a new religion. He's not just amending an existing religion.

But it's starting to become clear that Jesus is subverting all religion. He's subverting the mechanisms that drive religion itself. And we see this in his encounter with a man named Matthew and then a meal that they share at the home of Matthew.

And if we understand what this passage tells us, what we see here is that Jesus is establishing a new kind of spiritual community that blows apart all existing categories.

And what this shows us is the reason why the gospel alone has the power not only to heal individuals, but it actually has the power to heal the social fabric of society, which is something that we all desperately need.

Those of us in here, we desperately want that. Those of us, all of the people out around this building all want that. We all want that kind of world. This shows us why the gospel alone has the power to give us that kind of world.

[2 : 24] So what we're gonna see is this, a new social order that is made possible by a new spiritual foundation. So we'll look at it in that order, a new social order, and then what makes it possible, a new spiritual foundation.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for your presence with us. And we know that apart from your grace, your word falls on rock, and that what we need is for your Holy Spirit to till up the soil of our hearts to make it receptive to your word.

And that we pray that you would plant your word in us, and that it would take root and grow, and that that new life would grow up into our lives. Lord, that you would pour your life into our lives through your word.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So first of all, a new social order. Let's ask this question just to get started. What does a meal have to do with the social order?

What could this possibly have to do with the social order? We need a little context here. In the ancient world, table fellowship was a very big deal. Because table fellowship had a symbolic power.

[3 : 34] It reinforced the lines of inclusion and exclusion in society. And all of those lines were running through society. And meals were a big way that people in the ancient world symbolized where those lines were drawn.

So there were strong social boundaries in place that determined which kinds of people it was acceptable to eat with. Eating with the right kinds of people could raise your status in the social

hierarchy.

Eating with the wrong kinds of people could lower your status in the social hierarchy. Now, in our culture, for a lot of us, meals don't have that same level of significance.

We have become accustomed to eating meals in our car while we're driving somewhere. They're just not as significant. But the lines of inclusion and exclusion are still very much in place and arguably stronger than ever.

We have an innate tendency as human beings to divide the world into two basic groups of people. People like me, the kind of good, acceptable, reasonable people, and then the other people.

[4 : 41] People not like me. People who I'm suspicious of and don't regard as highly and don't prefer to spend my time with and in some senses find to be offensive and unlikable.

So two groups of people, people like me and everyone else. And this really has to do with how our brains are wired. Remember in Harry Potter, there's the sorting hat, right? Where kids come to Hogwarts and the first thing that happens is they're brought up front and they put the sorting hat on them.

And the sorting hat just takes a minute or two. And just after a minute or two, it can tell which group that child belongs in. And then the child is sent off to spend the rest of their formative years with this group they've been assigned to.

Human beings all sort of have a kind of internal sorting hat. Our brains are actually wired to operate that way. We have an internal sorting hat. And so our brains tend to do these activities all the time.

We tend, for instance, to see people not as individuals, but we're actually wired to see people as part of a group. We see people as members of a group. And our brains have evolved to sort people into those two basic groups, us and them.

[5 : 53] And our brains are also wired to do this using the least amount of energy possible. So you have an internal sorting hat that has as its sole job to sort people into groups using the least amount of time and energy possible.

And this actually increases when we feel stress, when we feel fear, when we feel anxiety. The sorting hat kind of goes into overdrive because it's essentially a survival mechanism.

If you can determine very quickly whether someone is a friend or an enemy, your chances of survival are going to go up, right? And your sorting hat is dramatically influenced by all kinds of things.

Your upbringing, your education, your life experiences, all manner of social and cultural factors. But the point is, when you meet somebody for the first time, you automatically put on your sorting hat and you automatically begin to categorize them.

And most of the time, we're not even aware that we're doing it. It's not a conscious thing that's happening. But your brain goes to work looking for signals to help it determine what group that person belongs to.

[7 : 02] So we look at their appearance. We look at their clothing, things like their shoes, their watch. Are they put together? Do they look disheveled? We listen to their accent.

We look at their posture, their eye contact, their behavior, their word choice, their cultural references. And all of those things are cues that our sorting hat is using to categorize that person. Right? So in the ancient world, table fellowship was a clear indicator of group identity. That helped you sort somebody really quickly. Oh, that's that person's group. Right?

But we rely on other symbols. Right? So we rely on looking at what people post online, for instance. You read a couple of tweets from somebody's account and you can probably categorize them.

Or at least you try to. We look at their word choices. We look at their cultural references. A lot of people wear symbols that act as indicators to self-identify as part of a group.

[8 : 03] So a MAGA hat or a pride flag or a BLM t-shirt or something like that. You're wearing a kind of symbol that is self-identifying. I want you to see me as a part of this group. Right?

And so there are all these kinds of ways that we do it. And based off these cues, we immediately start making assumptions about these people that we encounter for the first time. We're trying to determine what are their values?

What are their beliefs? But ultimately, there's the only question that really matters for our sorting hat is this. Is this person like me? Are they one of the good people?

Or are they not like me? Or are they an other kind of person? And here's the thing. Usually within a few seconds, your brain delivers the verdict and it moves on. Because as we said, it's trying to do

this as efficiently as possible.

And our natural tendency is to move away from people who we identify as the other and to gravitate toward people we identify as being like me.

[9 : 03] And this impulse, I would argue, this impulse sits behind religions that sort people into good people and bad people.

It sits behind political polarization. It sits behind race and class divisions in our society. Behind all of those things, you will find this in-group, out-group, like me, not like me, sorting hat activity driving things.

So let's ask this. That's a little bit of a context here. What would the sorting hat say about someone like Matthew? Matthew was a tax collector.

What does that mean? Well, Rome had conquered much of the known world. By this point, they were the occupying force in Palestine and they required all of their subjects to pay taxes.

So they required the Jews in Palestine to pay taxes. And in order to collect taxes, they would hire the locals. They would hire local Jews to collect taxes from other Jews.

[10 : 07] And in order to collect the taxes, these Jews would have to go around to their fellow neighbors and demand that they pay what they owed. But here's the real nasty part of the business.

The incentive for the tax collectors was this. They would say, the Roman officials would say, after you've collected what we need, anything extra that you're able to collect, you can keep, and that's your commission.

So, of course, what does this incentivize them to do? Well, it incentivizes them to collect a lot more money than was actually required. So they're incentivizing Jews to extort their own people.

And so tax collectors got rich, literally, from the oppression and injustice perpetrated against their own people. Matthew is someone who makes a living by working for the oppressors and extorting money from his fellow Jews.

So he's, not only is there a kind of systemic injustice happening, but he's knowingly getting rich because of it. So most Jews would have seen Matthew and immediately the sorting hat would kick in and start sounding the alarm.

[11 : 15] This man is a traitor against God's people. He's a traitor against God. He is unclean because he spends all of his time with Gentiles. He's worse than the Romans. He's evil.

Matthew likely did not have many friends. But, Jesus comes along and Jesus sees Matthew. And a respectable Jewish rabbi seeing somebody like Matthew with the sorting hat would say, you need to head to the other side of the street.

But Jesus moves directly toward him. He goes right up to Matthew and looks at him and he says, I want you to follow me. And it says, Matthew immediately gets up and goes and follows Jesus.

And that evening, Jesus has dinner at Matthew's house. We know that from the other Gospels. And Matthew invites the only friends he has who are Matthew's friends.

Well, other tax collectors. Right? The only kind of people who are going to hang out with somebody like Matthew are other people who do the same job. So they all hang out with each other because they don't have any other friends. And an assortment of other people that are just identified as sinners.

[12 : 24] Now that, in this context, that means just notoriously sinful people. People who, everybody knows, that's just a dirty, rotten, awful person. And so all of these people come and they're having dinner with Jesus.

And the religious leaders are horrified. Why on earth would a respectable Jewish rabbi like Jesus eat with unclean people like that? Because as we said earlier, in their world, there were good people, the morally faithful people, the clean people.

And then there were the unclean, dirty, evil people. And associating with unclean people would make you unclean. So if you're a clean and respectable member of society, just standing with an unclean person and having a conversation, that would taint you and make you unclean.

So they're horrified. But what we see here is that Jesus is very clearly establishing a new social order. This table is a microcosm.

It's the slightest glimmer of the kind of world that God is building. With Jesus, people who would otherwise not even speak with one another are coming together around the same table.

[13 : 42] And this, my friends, is exactly the kind of world that we need. A new kind of community where all of the old lines of division between insider and outsider are broken down.

This is the kind of world that many people long for, religious, non-religious. This is the kind of world that many people devote their lives to trying to build. So what makes this kind of thing possible? That's the question this passage really wants to answer. So we see a new social order, but what makes it possible? It's this new spiritual foundation that Jesus brings.

What do I mean by foundation? Well, everybody has a foundation. Everybody has a place that we look to to get our sense of worth and value and identity. How do I know that I'm okay in the world? Whatever I look to for that, that's my foundation. And there are really only two options down deep, two kinds of foundations. And the first type of foundation that people build their lives on is the foundation that's sort of the default for most of humanity.

[14:47] This is the one that we're naturally wired to go to, which is the foundation of what we might call moral performance. In other words, the moral performance foundation says, the foundation of my identity or the way that I know I'm a good person is because of what I do.

It's because of the things that I do in the world, the way I live. So if you're a traditional religious kind of person like the Pharisees, you might say, well, what's my foundation?

Well, I know that I'm a righteous person because I read the scriptures faithfully. I pray every day. I go to worship services regularly. I obey God's law. I keep myself clean.

Good people go to heaven when they die. I'm a good person. So with the moral performance narrative, your sense of righteousness or rightness comes from the fact that you're a devoted, morally upright person.

But that's not the only kind of moral performance foundation you can have. This is going to change based on your beliefs, right? So you can have a non-religious, secular, progressive person, and they might have a moral performance foundation, but it's defined very differently.

[15:57] They might say, well, I know I'm a good person because I believe in things like tolerance and inclusion. I'm very open-minded and I think that everybody should live their own truth. And in that case, you still have a sense of righteousness, but that righteousness comes from a different set of variables, right?

It comes from the fact that you believe in tolerance and inclusion and you think of yourself as open-minded. The point I want to make is that even though these groups look completely different on the surface, underneath they're actually all operating according to the same principle, which is a foundation of moral performance.

I'm the traditional religious framework and the secular progressive framework. He's subverting the mechanism that drives both of those foundations. He's turning the entire thing upside down.

And we recognize that because of this exchange with the Pharisees. When the Pharisees ask, why would Jesus associate with sinners and tax collectors? Look at what Jesus says. He says, like a rabbi would say, go and learn what this means.

And then he quotes Hosea. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Now, is he saying that sacrifice is no good? No, no, no, no. The main concern in the book of Hosea is that God's people have become totally focused on moral performance.

[17:22] In other words, they've become totally focused on external religious rituals. As long as they observe the rituals and do the sacrifices like the Bible tells them, then they're going to be right with God.

And Hosea is basically saying they've forgotten what it's all about. They've forgotten the heart of God. So we might rephrase it this way. God is saying, I desire mercy, not moral performance.

I desire mercy, not moral performance. We say, okay, well, what does that mean? What do we mean by God's mercy? God's mercy, put another way, is God's eternal desire, because it comes out of his very nature, his eternal desire to give people what they didn't earn, what they don't deserve, what they could never repay.

It is God's eternal nature to give people what they didn't earn, don't deserve, and could never repay. See, the moral performance narrative says, I'm a good, upright person, and God surely considers me one of the good guys because of that.

Right? On a curve, I'm probably in at least the upper third of good people. Right? But Jesus says, deep down, no one is okay. All human beings, as he says here, are sick because of sin.

[18:46] And he represents himself in all of the gospels as the great physician who has come to heal humanity of this sickness. But the point he's making here is that only people who know they're sick are gonna come to the physician.

Only people who know they need mercy are going to ask and cry out for forgiveness. And this is why we said at the beginning that Jesus came to subvert all religion.

Religion divides people into good people and bad people based on what we do. Traditional religions have one way of doing this. The modern secular religion of political activism has other ways of doing this.

But down deep, the moral performance narrative, if you build your life on that foundation, one way or another, depending on your values, you're gonna be dividing the world into the good people and the bad people.

Jesus throws the entire paradigm of good and bad out the window. Jesus' community is not based on moral performance at all. It's based on mercy.

[19 : 52] It's based on mercy. It's a new spiritual foundation to build your life on. According to Jesus, the fundamental difference between human beings is not based on what we do.

It's based on whether or not we know we need God's mercy. It's based on whether or not we know that fundamentally we're not okay. That there is something deeply wrong in the human condition. And that we need something outside of ourselves in order to fix it. Right? So at the heart of God's mercy is God's love. In fact, in the Old Testament, the word that is often translated as mercy can actually also be translated as steadfast love.

Chesed. So the same word, God's steadfast love, means God's mercy. That's why God is merciful. And because of that, this offers a hope unlike anything else in the world.

Because religious traditionalists will say, if you want to be accepted, you have to change. If you want to be accepted, you have to change. You have to get your life together. You have to start living by God's law.

[21 : 03] And then we will accept you into our community. And that's a kind of judgmentalism that offers no hope because it crushes people. It's like saying, in order to come to the physician, you have to be well.

In order to be served at this restaurant, you have to have already eaten. Right? In order to come and wash in this shower, you have to already be clean.

It offers no hope. On the other hand, the kind of secular progressive view says, we will accept you as you are, come one, come all. And how dare you say that anyone needs to change?

How dare you suggest that anyone needs to change? But I think deep down, we know that that's a kind of shallow sentimentalism that really doesn't offer any hope because deep down, we all know we need to change.

If human beings didn't need to change in some fundamental way, then why is society so broken? Why is there so much poverty and injustice and violence and racism if we don't need to change?

[22 : 08] And it's easy to think that the other person needs to change. But if we're honest, do we really believe that? And what we see with Jesus is that because of the love and mercy of Jesus, the gospel is able to say both of those things at the same time in a way that's only possible because of mercy.

Another way of putting it is this. Jesus loves us so much that he always takes us as we are, but he never leaves us as we are. He always takes us as we are, but he never leaves us as we are.

And all of that is summed up in two words in this passage where we see mercy on full display. Follow me. Because at the same time, it is saying both.

On the one hand, Jesus says to Matthew, follow me. And that is an invitation to be accepted as we are. You don't need to get your act together.

You don't need to go spend a year pulling your life together and then apply to be my follower. I want you to stand up and come with me right now and from this moment forward before there's been any visible change in your life, you're one of mine.

[23 : 20] You belong to me. You'll no longer be known as a traitor to your people. You'll no longer be known as an exploiter of the poor. From now on, you're gonna be known as my follower.

You're gonna be associated with me. You're gonna be defined entirely by your association with my new community as my disciple. It's a new identity for you. In fact, you know, he has two names and one theory is that Levi was his sort of pre-conversion name and that Jesus may have given him the name Matthew to clarify this new sense of identity.

The Pharisees thought that uncleanness was contagious. They thought that to be spiritually dirty, that that was contagious and if I'm a clean person and I associate with an unclean person, I'm

gonna catch it like catching COVID and so they practiced social distancing.

They stayed away from all of the unclean people. Right? But with Jesus, it's the opposite. With Jesus, holiness is contagious. Cleanliness is contagious.

The most sort of wretched person in the eyes of the Pharisees, the most unclean person imaginable, just by associating with Jesus by faith is made clean.

[24 : 39] Jesus' holiness, his righteousness, his cleanness is transferred onto that person simply by associating with Jesus in faith, believing that Jesus is who he says he is.

Believing that Jesus can do what he says he can do. Holiness is contagious. So on the one hand, follow me. He says, come as you are. I accept you as you are and just by being with me, you're going to be made holy.

But then on the other hand, Jesus loves us so much that he takes us as we are but he loves us so much that he doesn't leave us as we are. On the other hand, he says, follow me, which means a call to a radically different way of living.

Leave your old life behind. He doesn't continue to collect taxes. He leaves his business. Make everything secondary to me. Hold fast to me. Make the focus of your daily life me.

Walk with me. Become like me. It's a call to transformation. And he's not just saying, you know, these parts are okay but these parts need to change. He's saying, by follow me, he's saying, everything about you needs to be rebuilt from the foundations up.

[25 : 46] But that's gonna happen by following me. So this is how Jesus establishes a new social order built on a new spiritual foundation. Right?

When the foundation of your life is moral performance, you will always tend to divide the world into good people and bad people, insiders and outsiders. You will always tend to prefer the company of people like you and you will avoid and look down on and condemn people who are less like you. But when the foundation of your life is mercy, it changes the entire way that you see other human beings. You will become more and more the kind of person who is compelled not to avoid those unlike you but to move toward them intentionally.

To move toward those who are outside the camp, who are outside the circle, who are on the margins. to move toward the people that other people in your group might want to avoid.

And the reason is because you know that there was a time when you were that person and instead of avoiding you, Jesus came into your life and he called you and he said, follow me.

[26 : 58] And you've experienced that love that says, I'm going to accept you as you are but I'm not going to leave you as you are. You're going to become the kind of person who's able to both love and accept people as they are but also the kind of person who's able to strive to become more like Jesus and encourage others to do that.

You're going to be able to talk honestly and openly about your moral failings. And you're going to be the kind of person that other people feel comfortable doing that with because your life is built on a foundation of mercy. And I know I can share that kind of thing with you and you're not going to sort me out of your group because we both recognize that we're sick and we're both going to the same doctor to get well.

God's mercy makes it possible for there to be a community where anyone can belong as they are and yet everyone is striving to become what they were created to be. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your mercy. we pray that what now may just be words would become something else.

They would become that whatever of this is from you, that this would become flesh in us. That the soil that you have tilled up would receive the truth and the promise of your mercy.

[28 : 18] That whatever there is in our lives, whatever foundation we have built on our own morality, whatever that may be, I pray that that would be that you would use the jackhammer of the Holy Spirit to tear that out and that you would build a new foundation of mercy in us that we might become a people defined by your mercy.

We pray this for our good and that we might be the kind of salt and light in the world that you call us to be. We pray your blessing on those in this room and all those outside these doors, Lord, that all would come to know your love and your mercy.

We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.