

Are you fine?

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[0 : 00] One of the most common lies we tell ourselves and tell other people in our daily lives is one of the shortest phrases we utter. These are these words.

I'm fine. And we say these words all the time. I'm fine. You're walking along and somebody asks you how you doing? I'm fine. How are you? I'm fine.

We go into autopilot. Now that may have nothing to do with reality. Right? In reality we might be exhausted. We might be anxious. We might be ashamed. We might be terribly lonely.

We might be bitter. Spiritually numb. Barely holding things together. But somebody says how you doing? I'm fine. How are you? I'm fine. We might say I'm fine. I'm busy.

But I'm fine. Right? Of course it doesn't make sense to share everything with everybody we pass on the street. Nobody has time for that. Frankly, it would be awkward.

[0 : 58] The problem though is not just that we are habitually saying to people I'm fine. The real danger is that I think it's easy for us to come to believe that on some level.

We can come to believe actually I'm fine. I'm okay. Relative to other people, I'm fine. When it comes to God, I'm fine. And what we're going to see this morning is that God loves us too much to let us hide behind that word forever.

God loves us too much. In this passage, Jesus says something pretty remarkable. He refers to himself as a physician. And what we're going to see this morning is that the gospel, contrary to popular belief, is not God's advice for healthy people.

The gospel is God's medicine for the sick. It is medicine for the sick. So what I'm going to do is summarize the encounter that we read about in Matthew. And then we're going to look at more of what it means that Jesus is a physician and that the gospel is medicine for the sick.

Let's pray. Lord, Heavenly Father, thank you for your presence with us this morning. And we pray that by your grace, as we open your word, as we read your word, it would open and read and illuminate us.

[2 : 15] And that we would come to recognize you in these words, recognize our need for you, and that ultimately we would encounter you. And it's in the name of your son, Jesus, that we pray.

Amen. So Matthew chapter 9 begins with Jesus walking by. He sees a man named Matthew sitting in a tax booth. He's like a toll collector, collecting money, taxes on goods that are passing through Capernaum.

And in the ancient Jewish world, a tax collector or a toll collector like this was often viewed as a traitor. Because this is a Jewish person who is working within the Roman system.

This is a Jewish man who is collecting money from his own people on behalf of an occupying power. So he's working with the oppressors.

And people like this were often associated with greed and corruption and compromise and betrayal. So this is not the kind of person that any normal reputable Jew would go up and associate with.

[3 : 23] They would be seen as unclean, if not abjectly evil. But Jesus approaches Matthew and he calls him to leave his tax booth and to follow him as his disciple.

And Matthew says, yes. And then later we see Jesus at Matthew's house and Matthew's throwing a big party. And Matthew has invited all of his friends.

And the local religious leaders see this happening and they are scandalized. Why would any self-respecting rabbi like Jesus be eating at the same table with sinners and tax collectors?

The very worst kind of people. Jesus catches wind of their mutterings and their murmurings. And here's what he says. 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.

[4 : 27] And from this moment on, the entire course of Matthew's life changes. He leaves his life of collecting taxes and tolls behind. He becomes a disciple of Jesus.

He follows him for the next several years. Eventually he becomes an apostle who is there when the Holy Spirit pours out on God's people at Pentecost.

And Matthew is one of the people who helps launch the church. And he writes the very gospel that we are reading now. The Pharisees, however, the ones who are grumbling and looking at this party and complaining and are scandalized and offended.

The Pharisees remain unchanged. They remain disconnected from God. And they remain unhealed. So what does this teach us about the healing that Jesus brings?

And here's what we're going to see. In order to experience the kind of healing that Jesus offers, the first thing we have to do is to stop pretending.

[5 : 33] To stop pretending that everything is fine. Jesus tells the Pharisees to go and reflect on the meaning of this verse. He's kind of like saying, you need to go and read your Bible again.

And in order to understand what Jesus is saying, we should also go and reflect on the words that he points us to. And so he's pointing them to a verse in Hosea. He says, you need to go reread Hosea 6.

In verse 1 of Hosea 6, God's people say this. They say, come, let us return to the Lord. Now, those are beautiful words. And in Hosea, they sound like the right thing to say.

They sound very spiritual. Come, let us return to the Lord. They sound like people who are finally ready to return to God. But look how God answers in a little bit later in chapter 6.

God says this. And you can imagine, I mean, so many people who are parents have said this. What can I do with you? What am I supposed to do with you? He says, your love, you say that you want to return to me, but your love is like the morning mist.

[6 : 37] Like the early dew that disappears. Right? Beautiful words. Morning dew looks beautiful when you see it and the sun is sparkling on it. It looks like a bunch of diamonds on the grass.

But then like that, it's gone. It evaporates. So the problem in Hosea is the problem of superficial religion. It's people who appear very pious and spiritual and devoted on the outside, but they have no real love for God in their hearts.

And so a little bit later when God says, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, he means I desire genuine love and devotion, not empty religious rituals.

Keep your fancy words. Keep your long, fancy prayers. Keep all of your external acts of devotion. I don't need that. He says in another place in Psalm chapter 50, he says, I don't need your sacrifices. He's like, it's not like I'm hungry. He's like, I own all the cattle on a thousand hills. I don't need your sacrifices. What I want is your heart. It's the same thing here in Hosea.

[7 : 41] And you know, it's worth us reflecting. It's so easy, especially for people like me, wearing a collar up here, up front. It's so easy for people like us to hide behind religion, to hide behind external religion.

It's so easy for us to fill up our lives with religious activity. You know, you can be very involved in a church and still be very far from the heart of God.

And the key really, friends, the key is mercy. The key is whether or not we have experienced mercy. Without fail, the people who most deeply love God, the people whose love is not like the morning mist, but the people whose love is deep and genuine and lasting, are also the people who have most powerfully experienced God's mercy.

Without fail. People who have experienced God's willingness to forgive us and love us in ways that we didn't earn, that we don't deserve, that we can't repay.

And friends, churches everywhere are filled with people who sing songs about mercy, who pray prayers about mercy, who preach sermons about mercy, but who don't actually believe they need mercy themselves.

[9 : 05] Maybe other people need mercy, but not me. I'm fine. For the most part, I'm fine. On average, compared to most people out there, I'm doing pretty well.

Maybe I'm in the upper quartile of people, comparatively speaking, right? And this is the problem with the Pharisees and the reason that they remain far from God.

This is where gospel healing begins. With the honest admission, we are not fine. We are not well. You know, in the addiction recovery world, fine is an acronym.

It stands for freaked out, insecure, neurotic, and emotional. So when people say I'm fine, they say, oh, I get what you're saying, right? Now, I would say, when we say that the first step of healing in Christ is to admit that we need it, is to admit that we're not fine.

I would say, actually, that most people today that I know would actually not very strongly identify with the Pharisees and their morality. Most people would probably say, I'll readily admit that I'm not okay.

[10:16] I'll readily admit that I'm not well. Because we live in a very therapeutic culture. And it's sort of part of our culture to be very conversant about the ways that we're not okay.

We probably actually have more ways of talking about our problems than any previous generation. We have an incredible vocabulary for describing it. So people casually throw around terms like trauma and gaslighting and personality disorders and toxic relationships and holding space.

Right? These are words that used to be confined to the therapist's office. And now they are part of pop culture. You hear them in the most casual conversations on the Metro.

Right? The issue is that the majority of people say, it's fine for us to have all of this language. The problem is that the majority of people tend to use words like this to describe the things that have been done to them.

You often hear somebody say, oh, this person was so gaslighting me. I have yet to hear somebody say, I feel really bad for gaslighting that person the other day.

[11:28] I've never yet heard somebody say that. Right? So the majority of people are describing themselves as victims. And it's very common in our culture to sort of blame if your life is not on track.

If things are going wrong in your life. To sort of blame that on other people and circumstances. The only reason that I did this. And the only reason my life is like this is because of this person or these circumstances.

And so it's very common to hear people blame that. Oh, it was my toxic parents and upbringing.

And it was my narcissistic ex. It was so clearly. Yeah. It's obviously a narcissist.

Or they, or they blame oppressive social norms or religion or society. Now, listen, I want to make this point. It's kind of a nuanced point I'm trying to make here. So hang with me.

I am not minimizing the fact that bad things happen. So please don't go tell people that's what I'm saying. Many people really have been mistreated. Many people have been abused.

[12:26] Many people have been betrayed, have been neglected, have been harmed, have had really painful, hard childhoods. Right? And so I want you to hear me say this. Scripture takes that very seriously.

The church needs to take that very seriously. There are a lot of people who are walking wounded. Right? They've really been hurt. Here's the danger. And here's kind of the nuanced point I want to make.

There is a real need for healing and there's real damage that's been done. The danger is when my woundedness becomes an identity that exempts me from repentance.

I want to say that again. The danger is when I allow my woundedness, real ways that I've been hurt, to become my identity and define me in a way that then exempts me from the need to repent.

And this can become, in my opinion, a strange mirror of the Pharisees. Because the Pharisees say, well, I don't need to repent because of my righteousness.

[13:28] But somebody who has allowed themselves to be defined by their pain or the ways that they have been wronged might say, I don't need to repent because of my woundedness.

Right? But it's the same thing. The Pharisees tend to divide the world into good people and bad people. But victims tend to divide the world into victims and perpetrators.

Scripture says the only division that matters is this. There are those who know they need God's mercy and those who don't. The fact is we all ignore God and live in the world that he created as though he doesn't exist.

And whether or not wrong has been committed against you doesn't change that fact. Right? There are two truths that equal, that coexist. Harm has been done to you, but you have also lived in a way that has harmed your relationship with God.

Both are true. And so we all need mercy. And so what we need to see here in this text is that Jesus came not to call those who try to justify themselves, whether by morality or by injury.

[14:41] He came to call sinners, people who know they need mercy. So gospel healing begins here. Stop pretending.

Whether we're hiding behind our morality, where we're hiding behind our injury or something else. The first step, you know, this is why every addiction recovery program there is that is worth its salt, begins with step one, which is admitting that you're powerless against the things that have come to control and enslave you.

And that you need something outside of yourself in order to get free. It begins there. The next thing that we need in order to experience this kind of healing is to be willing to come to Jesus.

Now that's a little misleading because if you see what happens in this passage, Jesus is actually the one who comes to us. And I want to recognize what's really happening here. Jesus approaches Matthew while he's sitting in his tax booth.

He says, yeah, okay. As I said, he's serving as a toll collector, collecting tolls on trade goods. But this toll booth represents far more than that.

[15:51] Okay. Matthew is not just sitting in a toll booth. Matthew is sitting in the very symbol of his shame. And the reason that he's an outcast in his society.

This booth is symbolic. It represents so much more. This booth represents his false security. It represents his financial success at the expense of others.

It represents his moral compromise. It represents broken relationships. It represents his alienation from God and the people of God. So this booth is powerfully symbolic.

And Jesus walks right up to him in that place, right? The place of his shame. I just want you to reflect on that.

Because this booth could mean so many things, right? We all probably have some version of this tax booth in our lives, right? Imagine Jesus walking right up to us.

[16:54] While we're sitting there on our laptop in the dark, looking at pornography at one o'clock in the morning. And Jesus walks right up to you.

And you snap the laptop shut. But it's too late. Because he knows what's going on. Imagine Jesus walking up right as you are throwing up after drinking too much yet again.

After you promised it would never happen again. Imagine Jesus walking up right as you are texting hurtful words to somebody that you're angry at. And right as you hit send, you're right, Jesus walks up on you.

Imagine Jesus walking up right as you are scrolling through someone else's life and feeling envy and self-pity that your life isn't like their life. Or imagine Jesus walking up right in the midst of a conversation where you are blatantly lying in order to protect your self-image.

Imagine Jesus walking up right in the midst of you rehearsing an old resentment and fantasizing about getting revenge. Imagine Jesus walking up right as you're going to be a person who's going to be a person who's going to be a person who's going to be a person.

[18:06] Imagine Jesus walking up right as you snap and yell at your kids. Imagine Jesus entering into that space. See, Jesus is the kind of being, the kind of person who comes into the actual places where we are sick.

He doesn't stand off at a distance and say, well, I'm going to wait for you to clean yourself up. Get yourself together. And then, and then, and we'll meet over here.

He's the kind of person who enters into that place of deepest shame. Not the cleaned up places or the respectable places. He enters into the places that we would be utterly horrified if anybody saw.

Right? The place where shame is saying to us, if anybody knew that this was happening right now, if anybody knew that you were thinking this or doing this, they would run far, far away from you.

Those are the places that Jesus gravitates toward.

But here's the thing. Jesus doesn't come to excuse the sin. Oh, it's not a big deal. Nor does he come to condemn it.

[19:10] Say, I can't believe you're doing that again after you said you wouldn't. Right? He enters into those spaces so that he can invite us to come to him.

So that he can call us to himself. So that he can pour his mercy into those wounds in our lives. And so that he can offer to heal us.

And I want you to understand, Matthew is not the only example of this. There are so many people. And I know some of you, I know your stories. This is exactly your story.

Right? This is my story. There are countless saints who have encountered Jesus right in the middle of their sin and shame. I think of the Apostle Paul encountering Jesus on the way to persecute Christians.

And Jesus is there on the road blocking his path. Right? I think of John Newton. Who met Jesus on his slave ship. Right?

[20 : 06] As a slaver. I think of the modern author, Anne Lamott. In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, she describes a time in her life following an abortion where it was a period of heavy drinking and drug use and physical collapse.

And she is starting to hemorrhage. And she's filled with anger at God and anger at the world. And in the middle of it all, she begins to sense Jesus drawing near.

And Jesus pursues her relentlessly. And whatever else she is dealing with, how much she tries to get away from it, she senses Christ pursuing her until she finds herself giving in, collapsing, and ultimately coming to faith in him.

Changes the course of her life. See, this is how Jesus works. He comes to the very place of sickness and shame. And there he says, follow me.

Come out of that tax booth. So gospel healing begins when we stop pretending that we are fine.

And then the next step is for us to come to Jesus.

[21 : 18] But hopefully it's clear we never have far to go when we decide to do that because chances are Jesus is already pursuing us. He's already here at this very minute.

And then last but not least, Jesus invites us to stop pretending to come to him and also to heal together. To heal together.

The image at the end of this passage of all of these sinners and tax collectors gathered around the dinner table with Jesus. What a beautiful preview of the church. It's such a beautiful preview of the church.

Not a room full of impressive people who are congratulating ourselves on our spiritual health and accomplishments. But rabble, you know, a table full of sick people.

A table surrounded by outcasts, right? Who have found the physician. And they're there because they know they need him. And notice, Jesus doesn't call Matthew merely into this private religious experience.

[22 : 23] Now it's going to be you and me, Matthew. Us together. And we're going to, and you're going to change. And it's going to be, you're going to pray to me every morning. And we're going to do this. He calls Matthew into a community of disciples.

From this point forward, Matthew is always connected to and part of a community of disciples. And he does the same with us. To be a Christian is to belong to the people Jesus is healing.

There is no category in the New Testament for an isolated Christian living apart from the body of Christ. Given how frequently Jesus and Paul, Paul uses the image of a body to describe Christians in the church.

An isolated Christian living apart from a church community would be like an amputated limb. Right? It's dying. It's decaying. It has no chance.

It's disconnected from the body. And we need to really reflect on this. I mean, why does this matter so much? Well, I mean, I would say this actually comes back to how we think about sin and our condition.

[23 : 31] A lot of us grew up in the Western Protestant tradition. And in that tradition, sin is often talked about as primarily rule breaking. You know, it's a legal problem requiring pardon.

You need to be justified. Or it's a debt that needs to be paid on your behalf. And again, nuanced point here. I'm not saying those are wrong.

They're in the Bible, but they're insufficient. Because if we think about sin only in terms of a courtroom, a legal courtroom or debt. Right?

What does that mean? What does it mean to get saved? Well, getting saved is just about getting off the hook. It's about having that debt paid by Jesus. And that I think can, and I've seen this, that can produce a kind of spirituality that says, well, now that the debt has been paid, now that I've been forgiven, it's all good.

Right? That's all there is to it. Right? I mean, Jesus paid the debt. He paid it all. And if that's the case, if Jesus has kind of picked up the tab for my sin, why would I need to go to church?

[24 : 39] It makes church this kind of optional thing where I'm off the hook. I'm good with God. I can pray. I can read my Bible. I can listen to the sermons online. Why would I need to go to church? It's kind of an optional add on.

But in the Bible, sin is not just rule breaking. It is also like a sickness of the soul. Sin is something that disorders our desires.

It corrupts our love. It enslaves our will. It darkens our mind and our thinking. It alienates us from God. And once we begin to understand sin in this way, I think it kind of changes how we see everything else.

It makes sense of why Jesus would refer to himself as a physician. Right? Because if Jesus is the great physician who makes healing possible, then salvation isn't just getting off the hook and being forgiven.

Salvation is actually about being healed and restored through communion with God. And what does that make the church? Well, the church is like the hospital.

[25 : 41] The church is rehab. Right? So all of the things that we do together. Worship we're doing this morning. The sacraments in particular. The Eucharist that we receive here at this table.

Repentance. Confession. The seasons where we fast together. Our times of prayer. All of these are forms of spiritual medicine.

They rehabilitate us. They bring healing to our mind, to our soul, to our body. Right? So the church is a community of healing.

And I would strongly encourage us as we imagine our future together as Church of the Advent, that we imagine our community as a community of healing. What would it mean for us to be a community of healing here for ourselves and for others in D.C.?

We're not here just as a service provider, just to entertain people, just to offer thoughts for you to reflect on later in your week or a bit of inspiration. But this is a hospital.

[26 : 47] That means we have to become the kind of church where people don't have to pretend to be further along than they are. Some people come to church full of faith and some come barely believing or not believing at all.

Some come rejoicing and some come ashamed. Some come to church with long ingrained habits of sin that they are still fighting. Some come wounded by things that they never chose that happened to them.

Some come having made a terrible mess of their lives. But the church is not a museum for the spiritually impressive. It's a hospital for sinners who need to be healed by Jesus.

So we need to resist the temptation to treat church like a place where we perform and we put our best face forward. And we need to treat it like a place where we are coming expecting to encounter Christ and to be healed by him.

And that means we need to come together even when we feel weak. It means you need to come and receive the Eucharist and be hungry. Right?

[27 : 58] Believing and knowing that God actually brings healing into our lives through that. We need to come and practice confession honestly. We need to see the disciplines like fasting not as optional but as a part of the rigorous rehabilitation of our souls.

You need to be willing to cry out for help and ask for prayer before it's too late, before things fall apart. And you need to be willing to let other people into your life, into your crisis before that secret becomes unmanageable.

So you need to be a part of a small group. You need to have developed spiritual friendships outside of Sunday to sustain you. All of these are part of what it means to be a hospital.

And we need to recognize that true healing takes time. It takes a long time. So we need to be extraordinarily patient with one another. And allow ourselves to create the space where different people can be at different stages of that journey.

And it's okay. As we sang, we all belong. Right? So when the next time somebody asks, how are you? Maybe you should say, I'm fine.

[29 : 12] Right? But maybe not. Maybe the honest answer is not, I'm fine. Maybe a more honest answer would be, well, I know I need mercy. And the good news is that Jesus doesn't turn away from people who need mercy.

That's why he's here. His healing is available to all people who stop pretending. Who are willing to come to him, who want to heal and heal together. Because as we said at the beginning, the gospel

is not advice for healthy people.

It's medicine for the sick. And Christ is the great position. Let's pray. Lord, may it be so. I know I need your healing. I know I need your mercy. And that's true of everyone here. And Lord, we pray that as we sing together, as we confess our faith together, as we pray, as we gather around your table, like these people that we see at Matthew's house, as we gather for this feast, that we pray for this feast.

At your table. Lord, we pray that we would receive in that feast your very presence, your life, your love, and your mercy.

We pray this in your name, that you might be glorified through us. Amen.