

A Friend of Sinners

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Date: 31 October 2021

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 9, starting at verse 9. As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, Follow me. And he rose and followed him.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came, and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

But when he heard it, he said, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means.

I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?

And Jesus said to them, Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

[1 : 18] No one puts a piece of untrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither the new wine put into an old wineskin.

If it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.

Well, if you want to open up to Matthew 9, I'll keep it open. That'll be helpful. Make sure what I'm saying is true. Well, if you were to picture the final goal that God is moving all human history towards, so heaven on earth, in other words, what would you picture?

What's it look like? Scripture gives us a lot of pictures that develop certain aspects of what we can look forward to. One of them is a great wedding banquet, a feast.

Why? Because it's a great gathering, and it's full of celebration. That's what it's marked by. Why is it full of celebration? Because of the permanent covenant union between two people who have given themselves for each other in love.

[2 : 44] Isaiah 62 verse 5 picks this up. So this is the Lord speaking to his people. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you.

And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. It's quite an emotion-filled image.

God's quite the romantic. Heaven on earth will be so great because after all of human history of every one of us chasing after other lovers, thinking we'll find life in them, finally we'll be united with the God, the lover of our souls, forever, at peace, in faithfulness.

And it's a time marked by celebration. It's a banquet. It's a great gathering. So Jews of Jesus' day would speak of the time of the Messiah as being like a wedding banquet, and blessed is anyone who's invited to that party.

We've already heard Jesus use this picture in chapter 8, but surprisingly not using it for a Jewish person, but the oppressor of Jewish people, a Roman centurion who expresses such faith, just taking Jesus' word at face value.

- [4 : 08] Jesus says in chapter 8, verse 11, I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.
- It's this banquet. It's this reclining. It's this wedding celebration. In our passage this morning, we've got two paragraphs, and the first one I think we warm to.
- It's Jesus lowering himself, eating with tax collectors and sinners. And then the second paragraph is about fasting and something to do with garments and wine, putting it in new wineskins, and we're not quite sure what to do with it.
- I think what unites these two paragraphs is this picture of the wedding banquet. This is the goal of Jesus' mission.
- This is the end point. This is what God wants to achieve, this wedding banquet. This is what Jesus' mission is about. So I think that's what unites our passage this morning.
- [5 : 16] The main obstacle to achieving this union between God and people is our sinfulness. We all know this, or hopefully we know this.
- For Jesus to make this wedding banquet a reality, his mission must first remove the problem, the thing that breaks the fellowship, which is a lack of faithfulness, a lack of love for the Lord.
- So let's get into the text. Who will have a seat at this heavenly wedding celebration? I think we get a glimpse of heaven in verses 9 and 10.
- I don't think it's just a little moralistic story of lowering yourself and identifying with the lowest in society. I think it's much more than that. I think it's a picture of heaven.
- Here is Jesus sitting with people like Matthew. Above all your aspirations in life, I'm not sure what you're looking forward to this week, what you're looking forward to this month, in the new year, what is your greatest aspiration?
- [6 : 30] It should be having a place at this table, at this wedding banquet that Scripture talks about. Do you want to arrive at the door and read the table list and find your name?
- That should be our greatest desire, to be invited at this wedding banquet. Don't you love those seemingly rare times? Oh, I find them rare, where you're with friends, you're with family, maybe at Christmastime coming up.
- Or as Christmas, hopefully, is not stress and fighting, but you know those rare times where you're just lounging around? Maybe you're in the living room and the coffee table is just full of food and some are just sprawled out on the floor, some are on the lounge.
- No one's pretending. There's no pretense in the room. There's no personal agendas. There's no tension. There's just peace. There's just enjoying each other's company.
- There's laughter. There's food and drink. Some people need to loosen their belt. They've just eaten too much. You know that picture of just being together?
- [7 : 44] It's what we're looking forward to at Christmastime. I think that's kind of the picture we've got here. But instead of Christmastime, we've got Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh, relaxing, reclining at table in the house, totally at peace, eating and drinking and celebrating, no pretense.
- Where is he? Is he in Jerusalem, the religiously pure place? No, he's not. He's in Capernaum. The people who have mixed their devotion with the world, they're not devoted to God.
- They're mixed up in the world. Worse than that, he's at Matthew's house. What's he doing there? This is a sinner. Other sinners would go, well, that's a bad guy. Now, I don't know if you've watched the TV show The Chosen.
- I think the show picks up well how much Matthew would have been hated. This guy, you read it in Mark and Luke, the same story.

His name there is Levi. So it's the same person, two different names. He's a sinner. Levi, he comes from the descendants of the Levites. He should have been devoted to the temple.

[9 : 10] But he's not. What's he doing? He's devoted to being a tax collector. He's serving those who are subjugating God's people. He would have been so hated.

And there was no corruption commission to stop Matthew from skimming off the top of the taxes for his own benefit.

He was stealing, robbing from his own people, devoted to himself rather than devoted to God. And Jesus, seeing Matthew at the tax booth, notice that Jesus is the one who takes the initiative here.

I think it's similar to what we were reading last week with the healing of the paralyzed man. Matthew is paralyzed in his devotion to himself.

He's sitting and Jesus says, follow me. And he rose. I think it's similar to the paralyzed man. The command of Jesus makes him follow. He leaves his world behind him and puts all his trust in Jesus to give him life.

[10 : 21] So, Jesus is sitting at Matthew's house. The worst of sinners, devoted to himself. And he goes to Matthew's house.

And he's reclining. He's celebrating with them. He's at peace with them. And many other sinners come and take their place at the table. This is the picture of heaven.

Relax together around the table. It's a glimpse of the everlasting wedding feast to come. I think it's a beautiful picture.

It's the thing that's moved me most this week. That Jesus wants to recline with me. Totally at peace. He knows my sin.

He's not pretending here. He knows our sin. But this is the goal. To be at peace together in the kingdom forever. So, do you think you're too sick for God?

[11 : 27] Too unworthy to be invited to sit at the table? Too unworthy to be invited to sit at the table? Then I'd encourage you to soak in this picture. Jesus is the friend of sinners.

In fact, he only wants sinners as his friends. More than a friend, as we're tied up in the second paragraph as well, he's the groom of sinners.

Even for those who everyone else has given up hope for, even for those who have given up hope for themselves, Jesus has come for those very people.

So, whenever you're feeling full of guilt and shame, remember, you're not too sick for the doctor. If you feel drawn to the almost unbelievable just acceptance that Jesus has, then don't wait until you feel better to come to him.

Your place, your acceptance with him isn't because you're a great patient. It's because he's a great doctor. Don't wait until you are better before you come to him.

[12 : 41] He's a friend of sinners, the worst of sinners. You're never too sick to come to him. There is a place at his table. You are invited. Come as you are.

He won't leave you as you are. Fellowship with him will change you. You won't stay as you are, but come as you are. Whenever you're plagued with guilt, feeling unworthy to open his word, unworthy to pray, unworthy maybe to walk into church, you're too dirty to be among holy people like us.

Whenever we're thinking those wrong thoughts, Jesus is the friend of sinners. It's fellowship with him that will renew your hope that one day your sin will totally be gone and there will be that full peace.

It's fellowship with him that will actually remind us of why sin is so awful in the first place because it breaks that fellowship. It robs us of that fellowship.

It may not break it completely, but it robs us of enjoying that fellowship. And fellowship with him will make us boast in his grace towards us, not in our own ability or goodness.

[13 : 56] So come to him. You are never too sick to come to him. And notice in this passage, who doesn't want a place at the table.

It's the righteous Pharisees. I think we might be attracted to this story for the wrong reasons today. I think we might be cheering Jesus on that he's sticking it to the establishment.

Go, Jesus. Align yourself with the minority, with the oppressed. Stick it to the establishment. Stick it to those who have all the power. Taking down the oppressors.

Defending the marginalized. But Jesus doesn't rebuke the Pharisees for being religious leaders. He doesn't rebuke them for that, the fact that they did have social influence and power.

That's not their problem. If we hear Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees properly, it's going to help us understand our own sin properly.

[14 : 56] I think we always get back into that thinking of sin is bad behavior. I think we're just inclined to think that way. But sin is much, much deeper than that.

So let's hear... Jesus does have a go at the Pharisees. Don't get me wrong, but let's hear what the problem is and not jump to our modern conclusions. To do that, I want to first appreciate the Pharisees.

You don't hear that in every sermon. We love to hate Pharisees. But consider Matthew. Matthew was devoted to himself, greed at the expense of his people, not serving God.

He was not even trying to love God. And then you've got Pharisees who were totally devoted to keeping God's law and the Jewish tradition. Totally devoted.

Let me just give you two examples that are probably going to make us all feel a bit uncomfortable because it puts us to shame with how devoted they were. Consider their giving. How much did they give?

[16 : 01] The Old Testament commanded tithing 10% of all produce to the Lord to thank him, acknowledge him as the giver of all things and to give to the work of his temple, of his kingdom work.

The New Testament tithing is changed. It's not the law anymore, but it's kind of expanded. In 2 Corinthians 8, it's out of the joy that we have in Christ that we give in our poverty.

It's not 10%. It should be more than that. It should be coming from a heart of joy in the Lord. In chapter 23 of Matthew, now the full context there, we won't go into it.

Jesus is again rebuking the Pharisees, but notice the good part of what they do, how devoted they were. They would tithe even their herbs in the garden. Not just their main income, but the herbs, the mint, the dill, the cumin.

Did I say that right? I always get cumin. It's like us on the way to church, we find a dollar coin and we go to the bank and break it so that we can give the 10 cents.

[17 : 07] It's that precise in making sure they keep the law. Well, what about their missionary zeal?

We're called at the end of Matthew's Gospel to join Jesus in his mission to the world, to the lost. We do that ourselves as we are light in wherever God has planted us, but also by supporting the church in sending out gospel workers.

In chapter 23 again, we're told the Pharisees were willing to travel across seas and land to make one disciple. Would we be willing to give up a large portion of our life and income to make one follower of Jesus?

The Pharisees would. Well, not of Jesus, of their own brand. These were devoted people. So the question I've had in thinking about this passage is, why did Jesus come to call sinners and not the righteous?

At least the Pharisees were trying. Matthew wasn't even trying. We need to understand why Jesus quotes Hosea in verse 13.

[18 : 24] Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. This is the rebuke. This is their problem.

Now, what does he mean? At face value, that's quite a confusing sentence. Does it mean that God never wanted those animal sacrifices commanded in the Old Testament?

That doesn't really make sense because God commanded it. It was a pleasing aroma to him when people did it properly. So what does this mean?

Well, let's go back to Hosea and see what the problem was in his day. Do you remember the prophet Hosea? I think he's one of the most memorable because he's the one who's instructed to marry an adulterous woman.

And their marriage was to be a living parable of the relationship between the Lord and his people. And like Hosea's wife, Israel had gone after other lovers.

[19 : 28] Instead of finding their life in God, their bread, and their safety, their security, they go after other gods to get those things. Spiritually adulterous.

And in chapter 6 of Hosea, on the surface, there was still plenty of religion going on, plenty of good behaviour still going on on the surface, but inside, they were chasing other lovers.

They weren't trusting the Lord to give them life. And so Hosea 6, your love is like, your love for the Lord, your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.

I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. In other words, the Lord isn't pleased with externally good behaviour if inwardly a person is giving themselves to another lover.

It would be like a wife who flirts and flirts with other men. I'm stealing this from Matt Hand who did a youth talk on jealousy on Friday night that God's a jealous God. Someone who flirts and flirts but then thinks her husband should be pleased that she takes care of the laundry.

[20 : 49] It's not about the behaviour. Where's your affection? Where's your devotion? Where's... That belongs to me, says the Lord.

I want steadfast love. It belongs to him as our creator, our saviour. This is a sharp rebuke of the Pharisees.

Yes, on the surface, in your behaviour, you are good, or you seem good, but inwardly, you do not love God. You're not... You're going after something else.

And for the Pharisees, I think we saw in chapter 6 where they'll do their religion to be seen by others. It's probably their love of status and glory in the community.

Could be something different for you and I. So where do we see in this passage that shows the condition of the Pharisee's heart? I think it's in that loaded question to the disciples.

[21 : 50] We all know when someone asks a question but really they're making a statement. I think of a dad saying to a teenage daughter, are you really going to wear that?

That is not a question. That's a statement. That's an accusation. Listen to their question, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

They're not wanting to learn. If they wanted to learn, they'd probably do what John's disciples do and go to Jesus himself. They're talking to the disciples, not to Jesus. Their question is an accusation.

Your teacher is unholy, befriending people like this, associating with people like this. Notice what the Pharisees don't do.

They're not attracted to Jesus' compassion. They're disgusted by it. They aren't even intrigued by it and want to find out more.

[22 : 51] They don't ask for a seat at this table. Let me put it this way. They are so devoted to God that when they see God's mercy, they're repelled by it.

Their behaviour might look good, but they don't love the mission of Jesus. They don't love his mercy.

Even in Hosea's day, the heart of God is seen as he pursues his people. It says in Hosea 2, I will betroth you to me forever.

I will betroth you to me in righteousness, in justice, in steadfast love, in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord. Here is Jesus showing this same grace.

And the Pharisees, they don't like it. They don't like it, what they see. They think they're too good to want any part of it.

[23 : 58] They don't realise how sick they are. Jesus isn't saying here that there's two categories of people, sick and healthy, righteous, and sinners.

He's not saying there's two categories. There's only one category. Everyone's sick. They've all got the same sickness. Some are going to show it by doing whatever they want, like Matthew.

Others are going to show it religiously by being good people. Same sickness if you don't love the mercy of Jesus. What he's saying is they had the wrong understanding of his mission.

Christ didn't come for good people. He came for bad, people. There's no such thing as good people. My principal at school growing up used to say this phrase that puzzled me for years, only bad people go to heaven.

It puzzled me for years. God's heart has always been for the lost. He always wants to relate based on mercy. And this helps us understand what the sickness Jesus came to deal with is.

[25 : 10] It's not primarily bad behaviour. It will show itself in bad behaviour but the real root sickness is not loving God, his character, his mercy. That's sin.

Not loving his mercy and going after other lovers. teeth. I heard an interview by a dentist once that one of the major problems with people with their teeth is they only go to the dentist if they've got pain.

There's a problem with that because sometimes if you leave that pain too long it can get so corroded in the nerve in the teeth that the pain stops and you think you don't have a problem.

outwardly you've still got the teeth but they don't come soon enough. You don't realise how deep it is there's no pain. It made me think of sin but sometimes we think it's just behaviour that is what God wants it's not.

We can get not even realise that we don't love Jesus' mercy. Don't realise how sick we are. So do you think you're too healthy for God?

[26 : 24] Some of us are going to be here this morning thinking we're too sick for God but maybe others of us are thinking we're too healthy. We don't really need his mercy or maybe we did back then in our life but we're okay now.

Or I think this pandemic we've gone through and we're still going through has exposed our values. We've had to make choices stark choices about what is more valuable.

We've got to order our values during this time. I think we're left with a question of what would we want Jesus to do at the moment?

Would we want him to put our life back the way it was? Maybe a little bit better than it was before the pandemic? Or is our greatest desire that we grow in deeper enjoyment of fellowship with God ourselves and that God would use us in bringing others into that fellowship that we enjoy?

I've got to admit to you this very week there's something I'm looking forward to in January that I got excited about and I'm spending time with some unbelieving friends next week and I'm like oh okay yeah let's do that.

[27 : 43] it just the excitement wasn't proper proportion. Are we happy to leave people as they are as long as they're socially decent people?

Or do we see sin the heart that doesn't want to know God as the main evil in our lives and in the lives of our family and friends? maybe we think ourselves maybe we think others are too good to need his mercy it's not their main need but Jesus is the friend of sinners he's come for fellowship with sinners and then we come to that third section the second paragraph we've still got to deal with the question of John's disciples from verse 14 onwards it seems to be a sincere desire to understand what is Jesus about what is his mission about I think this section helps us clarify why devotion to God will look completely different to the Jewish law why does Jesus change everything with all this eating and drinking reclining with sinners does

Jesus and his disciples take God's law seriously do they take sin seriously why aren't they fasting and repenting of sin longing for God's kingdom of righteousness to come how can they party when sin is still so prevalent sin and Jesus makes himself the answer and the wedding guests mourn as long as the bride groom is with them imagine turning up to a wedding reception and going let's start let's celebrate I'm here who can say that only the bride and groom only the main show Jesus is saying I'm the reason everything is about to change you can't just add me in to God's law into your old way of thinking of how to relate to God I'm going to change everything something new is coming or is here the goal of God's goal of history that fellowship that wedding banquet has begun because the groom has turned up it's a claim to be the anticipated king

God's it doesn't it it doesn't seem right to be the cows on a man's norm of the christian it doesn't seem right is he just pushing sin to the side he's not I think it's I think we get a hint of how seriously Jesus takes sin in verse 15 the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them before there can be a wedding there must be an execution there will be a sacrifice it's just not the animal sacrifices of old sacrifices of old. It'll be the groom himself. There will be a temple. It's just not the temple of old. I'm going to be the meeting place. The groom is here. That picture is no longer needed. The real thing, the groom is here. So it won't do to just add Jesus to the old ways of being devoted to God. He's more than that. The goal is here. We need new clothes for the wedding. We need new wine put in new expressions, new wine skins, new ways of showing devotion to God. We're not told precisely in this passage what that new form of worship will be, so we need the rest of the New Testament to teach us that. But what we are told is Jesus changes everything. That great wedding day has arrived. Sin is dealt with. It's taken away. That's what his mission is about. Completely dealing with sin. I think we are given one hint as to what devotion to God is going to look like now the groom is here. So if it's not obeying the laws of old, what does it look like to show devotion to God? I think it's captured by that call of Matthew, follow me. Follow me. It's just got to be all about him in other words. He's the new wine. And if Jesus' mission, if what

Jesus is on about is showing mercy, calling, reclining with sinners, then following him must at least mean we join him in that. We love him, love his mercy and want to share that mercy with others. The peace and fellowship we richly enjoy, knowing we are fully accepted.

[33 : 22] Do we want that for our children? Do we want that for our extended family? Do we want it for our friends? Do we want it for that person we have only one conversation with randomly down the street? Do we want it for people on the other side of the world who will never meet?

Do we want that reclining with Jesus, at peace with him, knowing our sin is completely dealt with? We're called to follow him in that mission, reclining with sinners, sharing his call.

The wedding banquet has begun. We're enjoying it already by grace, by faith in him. One day soon. Just think, if all here this morning who have faith in Jesus, we will be seated there one day in his presence. Excuse the expression, but loosening our belt because we can't quite take in how much feasting there will be. We will be there one day. Do we want others with Jesus? So, my sinful brothers and sisters, seeing this glimpse of that everlasting wedding banquet, isn't it such good news that Jesus is the friend of sinners? You're never too sick for him.

But be convicted deeply if you ever feel like you've arrived. If you feel like, in this situation, I don't need his mercy. We need to be convicted by that. And let's follow him on his mission.

Let's recline with sinners. Will you pray with me? Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, I just pray that you would press that image into our hearts so that it becomes the greatest longing, the greatest joy, that we will be seated with you, fully at peace with you, enjoying your company in that great eternal wedding banquet.

[35 : 57] Lord, please fill our heart with that goal because that is your goal. And Lord, I pray that you would help us just rejoice in your mercy, that we would worship you for that, that we would relate all of our lives to your mercy, that everything we receive is because of that. Everything we have to look forward to is because of that. So, Lord, yeah, make us look forward to that great day when we're seated with you. Thank you that our sin is already dealt with. I pray that you would motivate us with your same love for the lost, just as you pursued us. In Jesus' name. Amen.