

Text: Matthew 9:9-13

Introduction

A couple of months ago Prince William and Kate Middleton got married. The ceremony was held at historic Westminster Abbey. The reception took place at Buckingham Palace. Royalty, nobility, and celebrities all attended. The wedding was a high class affair. This is after all, the prince of the most famous and scrutinized royal family on earth.

But what if Prince William and his bride would have had different plans? Suppose they went down to Scotland Yard, rounded up a bunch of criminals, and decided to get married and have their reception there. Queen Elizabeth would have been horrified! The royalty deserved to be invited to this wedding, not the criminals.

But can you imagine how surprised the criminals would be to find out they were the guests of honor? They would be ecstatic to be getting this kind of attention! But at the same time wouldn't they feel a little embarrassed and ashamed? They would feel ashamed and unworthy because of the crimes of their past.

Sometimes people today feel the same way about their sins. They feel crushed from the enormity of their sins. How or why would God ever love someone like me? Sometimes people feel the opposite way; they feel so proud of themselves. They think, "God has to save me because I'm such a good and righteous person. I deserve to go to heaven." In the Gospel for today, Jesus shows us that he has a message for both types of people. We see how:

Jesus Reaches Out to Sinners

1. He loves to be with them
2. He loves to reclaim them

Context

People hated tax collectors. Traitor, liar, cheater, extortionist, unclean; these were a few words that people used to describe them. They worked for the despised Romans. They collected more than the law required. They were the lowest of sinners in the eyes of the people. We met one of these tax collectors in the Gospel. Matthew was a tax collector in Capernaum.

Exposition

Jesus chose Matthew to be one of his twelve apostles. To everyone else, Matthew was not the top draft choice. Far from it, Matthew was the last person that the people would have expected Jesus to choose. But Jesus showed love to Matthew in his invitation, "As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him."

Jesus knew Matthew's heart. He needed to hear the gospel. This was not the time for Jesus to condemn Matthew for his sins. Matthew already felt the effect and the weight of his sins. He needed just what Jesus gave him, a simple yet loving invitation.

Imagine the joy and the wonder Matthew experienced when Jesus called him. We know his response, "While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples." Matthew invited Jesus over to his house and threw a great banquet for him. Matthew even invited other sinners and tax collectors to share in his joy. He wanted them to hear what Jesus had to say.

In Jewish culture meals together signified close fellowship. At that time it was unheard of for a religious leader to eat with people like Matthew. People avoided public sinners like the bubonic plague. But Jesus wasn't afraid of them. He wasn't scared that people would view him differently for eating with these bottom feeders of society.

Jesus did what no other religious leader at that time would. He spent time with these public sinners. And they knew they were sinners. Many of them were just like Matthew; they were waiting for an invitation to be saved. Jesus loved being with these people. He showed that throughout his ministry. In Matthew 11 we learn what some people thought of Jesus because of this, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners.'"

Yes, Jesus was a friend to tax collectors and sinners. No else would be! He certainly didn't condone what they did, but he had a message for them no one else had. He offered them a life with God, a life with God that would never end. These people knew they could never get together with God on their own. They knew they needed Jesus.

Application

It's easy for us to feel like Matthew sometimes. We see our sins all around us, and the ones we don't see become pretty clear when we compare ourselves to God's law. God doesn't like them. In fact, he demands a continuous, flawless performance. The Bible describes the exactness that the law demands: James wrote, "For

whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." and Jesus quotes the Old Testament, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is impossible for us to do.

We are completely surrounded by the law. God wrote the moral law on our hearts; he gave us consciences. Moses wrote the moral law in the middle of the law God gave him. Jesus repeated this law. Pastors teach the law; the government enforces the law as reflected in our civil laws. Everywhere we look, the law hits us.

How do you feel after measuring yourself up to the law? Disgust for the things that you have said and done? Fear that you will have to make up for your own sins? Fear that you have crossed a line where you can no longer be forgiven?

Jesus takes away all these fears. He called Matthew, a tax collector, an outcast of society to be one of his twelve apostles, to be one of the four Gospel writers. While Jesus doesn't directly call us like he did Matthew, he does call us through his Word and through his servants.

And Jesus loves to be with us sinners too. He even promises to be with us always in Matthew 28:20, "And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." Jesus comes to us in his Word where his gospel message rings out. He gives us pastors and spiritual leaders to share the gospel and the forgiveness of sins. He authorized the church to forgive sinners of all of their sins. God's grace is free and unlimited, able to save the worst of sinners. No matter whom you are or what you've done, Jesus forgives your sins!

Transition

Jesus showed the people at Matthew's banquet that he was there for them. Some of the sinners at the banquet were some of the worst and most notorious sinners of society. Not everyone thought that Jesus should be mingling with these sinners. One group of religious leaders, the Pharisees, thought Jesus was making himself unclean by eating with such ilk. They didn't understand why Jesus loved to be with these sinners or how Jesus loved to reclaim sinners.

Exposition II

Pharisees loved boasting about themselves. They built themselves up and tore others down. They knew they were good and they wanted everyone to know it. People viewed them as religious celebrities. But the Pharisees didn't like Jesus. He was stealing their thunder. Instead of acting like celebrities they became paparazzi who followed Jesus' every move. They were always trying to find fault with him, "When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'"

Jesus heard the Pharisees attack against him and had something to say, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." And then he had something more: "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

He answered using a law passage from the Old Testament. Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy not sacrifice." And the other half of that verse is, "and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings."

The Pharisees tried to earn God's favor by their good works. They considered themselves worthy and holy. They were arrogant. They mistreated and ignored sinners and tax collectors. Even worse the Pharisees didn't give God the credit that he deserved. They thought, "We're right with God because of our sacrifices and obedience." They didn't acknowledge God's love and mercy in their lives, so they didn't show love to God or to anyone else.

Jesus called the Pharisees out. He hit them hard with the law. He reminded them what God really expected from them. He had to. The Pharisees needed to hear it. Jesus was trying to save them. He loved the Pharisees too. They needed the law message because their sins weren't bothering them. Jesus gave his message in love. He wanted to save the Pharisees just as much as the sinners and tax collectors.

Application II

This condition of the Pharisees was similar to the condition of a man I once knew. Steve was a construction worker. His story was the ideal American dream. He started working when he was eighteen years old for a contractor. He was the grunt, the lowest man on the food chain. His boss loved him because he could count on him to come through for him on time and with quality work.

Eventually Steve was able to gain enough knowledge and skill to start his own company. He had worked his way from the bottom to the top. He knew how to motivate people because he had been in their shoes before. He had the skill and knew every trick of the trade. He was a self-made man. People respected him and looked up to him.

Steve was a reliable member of the church too. Everyone respected him. Steve was head of the building committee and when the time came to build the new school, Steve was there every step of the way. His construction company even put in the concrete for the sidewalks and the parking lot at a discounted price, half of what other contractors had bid.

He was a great family man. Yes, his job took up a lot of his time, but he was always there to watch his boys play on the basketball team Friday nights. He treated his wife with love and respect and he frequently bought her flowers when he came home from work.

On all accounts, Steve was a well-rounded and respected individual. He was known in the community for his great company. The church respected him for his faithfulness and generosity. His family loved him.

It was a sunny, fall day and the leaves had just started to change colors when the pastor got a phone call, "Pastor, come quickly to the hospital, Steve had an accident at work." When the pastor got there he found out that Steve had been carrying a bag of concrete mix up some stairs when his legs went out from under him and he fell down the stairs. The doctors ran test and after test and the final prognosis was not good. It was ALS also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The doctors only gave him a few more years to live and during those years Steve's muscles would rapidly degenerate until paralysis.

Steve stopped coming to church. His wife and kids tried to get him to come along, but he was too upset with God to come. He felt wronged, cheated, and betrayed. He said, "I've never once in my life skipped a church service before this. I've worked hard my whole life and I've given you so much God, and yet this is how you treat me?"

By Christmas, Steve was in a wheelchair. This once proud and strong man was reduced to a chair and he had to wear a brace to hold himself up.

A few weeks after Easter the pastor got a call from Steve's wife. She said, "Pastor, Steve's situation has gotten pretty bad. He can't sit up anymore and he's confined to a bed. He wants you to come see him though." So the pastor got to Steve's house as quick as he could and the sight of Steve lying on his bed, a shadow of his former self, nearly shocked the pastor. The pastor was no stranger to gruesome sights, but this was a man who once stood over six feet tall and was a powerful 225 pounds. Now he weighed less than 150 pounds, his face was gaunt and his eyes were sunk in his face. Steve's voice was coarse and raspy but he thanked the pastor for coming and he said that there was something he wanted him to know. "Pastor," Steve started, "my whole life I thought that I was going to heaven because of all the good things that I had done for God. I thought that everything that I got from God I deserved because of all my hard work. When I first got sick, I couldn't understand how God would allow this to happen to me. I was angry. But now after losing my ability to move, I've had a lot of time to think. Not that I am on my back to make, I realize that there is nothing that I can do to save myself. Without this disease, I would've gone to Hell because before I thought that I was going to heaven for my good deeds. Now I know God has saved me."

God used what happened to Steve as an opportunity to bring him back to faith. It's hard to imagine God could show his love through such a debilitating disease, but Steve saw God's love in his life. God did exactly what it took to reach out to Steve and to bring him back.

Conclusion

Jesus always comes to us in love, reaching out to us and giving us exactly what we need. When our sins and the threats of the law terrorize us, God is there with his sweet gospel truth. He invites us to the wedding banquet in heaven where he assures us that we belong. And when we feel self-righteous, Jesus also has a message for us, "I am the one who has done all the work, trust in me, not in yourself." Be assured that God has exactly what we need. Amen.