

Windows on the Word: The Call of Matthew

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 9:9-13

Sin never seems more sinful to us than when we recognize it in the wrongdoing of someone else. A song by Hope College graduate and Academy Award-Winning musician Sufjan Stevens focuses a laser beam on the sick and sorry state of human sinners. In it, Stevens laments the true story of John Wayne Gacy Jr., a broken person who committed truly heinous violence. The song is musically melancholy. Its lyrics are disturbing. It grabs you and does not let go. After crying out against all the harm done by Gacy, after showing the horror of it to listeners, inviting them to despise and mourn it too, Stevens springs a surprise ending: “In my best behavior/I am really just like him/Look beneath the floorboards/for the secrets I have hid.” And as a listener you want to cry out, NO WAY! No way are you like that guy. Are you, Sufjan? No way am I like that guy, either. Are we?

Stevens makes clear in interviews that he’s not confessing to some terrible crime. He’s speaking in a particularly arresting way about the capacity and potential for evil that cuts down the heart of every human being. Some listeners are deeply offended by the thought of comparing themselves with a monstrous criminal such as Gacy. “I didn’t do *those* kinds of things. I’m not in *that* category.” Others hear in the song an invitation to reflection at the depth of human sin not just beyond them, but also in them. “Could it be, but for the grace of God, there go I? How much do I need saving?!” This morning’s Bible passage asks us to identify with a sinner too: Matthew the tax collector.

So far Matthew’s gospel has introduced some unsavory characters: in Chapter 8 Jesus encounters a man with leprosy, a Roman centurion, and a couple of men oppressed by demons. And Jesus has healed them—body and soul. And now, Matthew shows us a Jesus who moves even closer to these types of people. Jesus goes one rung further down the social ladder, and he does it not just in passing but by actually keeping company with outcasts.

In Chapter 9, we find Jesus at home base in Capernaum, along the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. And as he’s going about his life in the village he encounters a man named Matthew doing just what he does every day. Sitting at the toll booth, collecting sales tax on products coming through the area for trade.

Today we might rank a visit with an IRS auditor right up there with visiting a dentist for a root canal. Sorry, auditors and dental friends. But tax collectors in first-century Jewish society were truly a despised lot. In a class among thieves and murderers. Traitors to their own people. Working for the Roman authorities. Padding their own portfolios from the accounts of their fellow citizens. To his fellow Jews, Matthew the tax collector is a lying, cheating, dirty rotten scoundrel.

Does Matthew have to slink around town and lower his eyes to avoid the dirty looks that come his way? Can he feel the hatred, or is his soul too scarred? We have precious little detail about Matthew himself. But that allows us to focus on what Jesus does.

Jesus steps up to the toll booth. He comes empty handed—no goods to be taxed, and no coins to contribute. He’s there with something more, something better: an invitation. “Matthew, follow me,” For a beat no one knows what will happen. But taking a breath and shaking out his tunic, Matthew rises to his feet. Hangs the “closed” sign on the toll booth window. Steps away from the life he has known to enter into the company of Jesus. Next thing you know; he’s invited all of his friends to spend time with Jesus too. He’s hosting meals for Jesus with others who are outcasts like him. Jesus among this questionable crowd attracts the notice of the Pharisees. How could any rabbi worth his salt put up with these people?

One of the Pharisees comes to Peter. “You and the others would be so much better off learning in the footsteps of another teacher. I’m not so sure about Jesus’ moral compass. Didn’t his synagogue leader teach him Psalm 1—that we don’t “walk in step with the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers?” Doesn’t he know one bad apple spoils the whole bunch?” Anyone with strong moral sensibilities could be rightly offended that someone teaching, preaching, and healing in God’s name would spend time with such a crowd. They could worry that Jesus is dragging God’s holy reputation down.

But the whole point of the story in our window, the story in Matthew’s gospel, is that Jesus calls those who are sick! Jesus invites the afflicted, the wounded. Those totally incapable of beating back the illness of sin. He says

so himself. “Those who are healthy don’t need a physician, but those who are sick do...I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Grace in Text: Jesus comes to call undeserving sinners.

In a letter to his friend and fellow theologian George Spalatin, Martin Luther wrote, “Beware of ever desiring in yourself such purity that you do not want to seem to yourself to be a sinner, for Christ dwells only in sinners.” Are you Matthew? Am I? The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that on our own we are incapable of any good that can save us, that faced with temptation on our own we are too weak to hold our own even for a moment.

Our fallenness doesn’t mean we’re as bad as we possibly could be. Thankfully most of us do *not* commit heinous crimes, can and do keep our commitments, genuinely desire and act in the best interest of others. But in our ordinary, day-to-day lives our sin and the sin of others touches everything, sickens everything, weakens everything. That wide-reaching depravity in us and around us spotlights all the more the grace of Jesus. 2 Timothy 1:9: [Jesus] has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time....”

And so when Matthew the tax collector is called to follow Jesus, it’s grace. When Matthew the tax collector scrambles to his feet, grace raises him to a new life. Matthew has a mini-resurrection—really. The same Greek root for Matthew’s rising to his feet also can refer to rising from the dead. And so Matthew rises to new life with Jesus here, now. And in that life of relationship to Jesus, the outcasts are received, the broken are made whole, and the sinners are not made nicer; they’re made new. What the Pharisees don’t understand is that when Matthew introduces Jesus to his outcast friends, their proximity doesn’t contaminate or diminish *Jesus*—it cleans up and elevates *his companions*.

As I was thinking about that this week, I remembered an invitation from my early adult life that helps me picture, by way of analogy, the beauty of Jesus’ invitation to weak and wounded sinners like us. As a young college student I was invited to attend a very nice dinner with another student or two, some professors, and some influential Christian writers and editors—Lauren Winner. Andy Crouch. John Wilson. We went out to a nice restaurant and all fit around one table. I had no cultural capital to offer this group. I wasn’t published. I couldn’t contribute to the dinner conversation. I didn’t even look the part: I had to say “no thank you” to the wine—I was underage. I was there only because of an invitation. The invitation of my professor, Ed Ericson. Ed died about five years ago. He was the sort of professor who taught all of his students with his whole life, and he did it for a long time, so he might not even remember that night. But I do. Because the invitation lifted me up. It gave me a window into how people who loved God and loved words might shape their lives. It invited me to wonder about my own life and loves.

That invitation is a picture for me of the kindness and the goodness of God. The God who extends invitations to tax collectors and sinners. To people who have no people. To people who have no reason to be invited to the table. People whose only qualification is to respond, with God’s help, to God’s “Follow me” in Christ. People who are so blessed by being included that they then continue to spread that invitation to others with their words and with their lives. There are really two invitations in this short passage: Jesus’ call to Matthew, which is clear; and Jesus’ less obvious invitation to the Pharisees.

Jesus tells the Pharisees to “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” He holds up that small phrase from Hosea to interpret the whole Old Testament law. Jesus isn’t saying keeping the law is bad. Keeping the law simply can’t go deep enough into the problem. If the law-keeper’s heart-and-mindset go against the core of God’s covenant-keeping mercy, the Pharisees and serious law-keeping folks like them have missed the forest for the trees.

The Pharisees need to see that they, *too*, need healing; they *too* need a doctor; they *too*, are among the sick. They, too, need an invitation. So Jesus tells them to “go and learn.” To Matthew, Jesus issues a direct invitation: “Follow me:” Join the ranks of my learners by spending time with me. I will bring you new life that spreads far and wide and deep.

And to the serious law-keepers like the Pharisees Jesus issues the invitation to “go and learn.” To see your need. Learn from me through your first language, the Scriptures. See the law and prophets you cherish teaching about the heart of God. Hear your need for me again, for the first time. Of course, both Matthew *and* the Pharisees need Jesus. The call of Matthew is incredibly good news for all of us. If Jesus could call even *that* guy, well--then his goodness and grace can extend to us too!

When you feel the weight of sins past and present, Jesus comes to you and says, “Follow me. By my death and resurrection, you are mine, and I am making you new.” And Jesus’ word of instruction to the Pharisees is a moment of reckoning anyone who might have short memories about our condition apart from the grace of Christ.

Jesus holds a mirror up to our need. “Do you remember how much you need me? Do you know my heart? I call you into new life too.” We are all Matthew. And Jesus summons us to rise and follow in a new life. A life that asks us to abandon things big and small that keep us from him—the sin we know all too well.

And we are all Pharisees, who need Jesus to hold up a mirror to the sin we’re unaware of so that we can follow him in increasingly transformed ways. Jesus invites all of us to join him around the table, making us ready for the Wedding Supper of the Lamb in the new creation. In the Ragamuffin Gospel, Brennan Manning writes this: “Because salvation is by grace through faith, I believe that among the countless number of people standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands...I shall see the prostitute from the Kit-Kat Ranch in Carson City, Nevada, who tearfully told me that she could find no other employment to support her two-year-old son. I shall see the woman who had an abortion and is haunted by guilt and remorse but did the best she could faced with grueling alternatives; the businessman besieged by debt who sold his integrity in a series of desperate transactions; the insecure clergyman addicted to being liked, who never challenged his people from the pulpit and longed for unconditional love...

‘But how?’ we ask. Then the voice says, ‘They have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ‘There they are. There **we** are—the multitude who so wanted to be faithful, who at times got defeated, soiled by life, and bested by trials, wearing the bloodied garments of life’s tribulations, but through it all clung to faith.’”

So when you look up at the stained glass picture of Matthew in this church, say to yourself: Jesus calls me. And Jesus is inviting me every day into the new life that he came to bring to all. Thanks be to God.

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