

Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 25, 2017

Matthew 9:9-13 (EHV) – ⁹As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector’s booth. He said to him, “Follow me.” Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰As Jesus was reclining at the table in Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were actually there too, eating with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹²When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. ¹³Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Introduction

Think back to the last time you visited your doctor for something other than a regularly scheduled checkup. Chances are, you came away from that visit with some mostly illegible characters printed on a little white slip of paper – probably some sort of antibiotic. Or maybe your doctor has prescribed some other sort of medication for a chronic condition that you have – high cholesterol or blood pressure. Then you spent the rest of your day waiting at Walgreen’s or Shopko or WalMart for your prescription to be filled (or at home, until they called you). The days of “take two aspirin and call me in the morning” are long gone, aren’t they?

I’m neither a strong critic nor a strong advocate of prescription drugs. They have their use, but it definitely seems that they’re becoming more and more a part of our daily routine. There’s literally a drug for everything nowadays. And the cost for those drugs is skyrocketing, and it’s mostly affecting our seniors.

Theme: The Physician Jesus Prescribes Mercy.

So I realize that the prospect of taking yet another medication isn’t all that appealing to you. But that’s exactly what today’s Gospel Lesson contains. In it, **THE PHYSICIAN JESUS PRESCRIBES MERCY. He freely dispenses it to sinners. He eagerly desires to see its effect on sinners.**

Part I: He freely dispenses it to sinners.

Quoting from the Prophet Hosea, Jesus says, **“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’”** And Jesus definitely isn’t just interested in seeing others show mercy. Included in his desire for mercy is a strong desire to show it himself. We see that in the first verse of the text: **“As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector’s booth. He said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Matthew got up and followed him.”** Later on, Jesus will say, **“The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do... I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

Last week’s Gospel Lesson was the conclusion of Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*. It ended with the commentary that the crowds of people were amazed because his teaching style was different from that of the religious teachers of the day – Jesus taught with authority!

With that in mind, several of the following episodes are more than a little out of character. He heals a ceremonially unclean social outcast of his skin disease – and, of all things, touches him to do it! He heals the servant of a Gentile soldier, another less-than-respectable person in the Jewish way of thinking. Third time’s no charm, either! He’d already raised the ire of the teachers that afternoon by announcing the forgiveness of sins to the paralyzed man who’d been lowered down from the rooftop through a makeshift skylight. After leaving

that house, Jesus walks down the streets of Capernaum and comes upon Matthew (a.k.a. Levi) at his tax collector's booth. And if you recall, that job was nowhere to be found on the list of respectable vocations.

Of the four Gospel writers, Mark alone gives us the information that Matthew was the son of Alphaeus. Another of Jesus' disciples was James, son of Alphaeus. And so we have a third set of brothers (Peter and Andrew, James and John) among the called twelve. Was James already a disciple of Jesus at this time? If so, was he the one who directed Jesus to reach out to his brother? Since Capernaum was Jesus' Galilean base of operations, had Jesus run into Matthew before? Did they engage in casual conversation, as we occasionally do with various local store employees and businesspeople?

None of that is overly important in the grand scheme of things. The amazing thing we see in this account, as well as in those preceding, is that the physician Jesus lowers himself to lovingly and freely dispense mercy to sinners.

It all begins with a diagnosis. Although he himself knows no sin, Jesus knows mankind and their spiritual state so clearly. He needs no x-ray machine or MRI instruments or an ultrasound to glean information. With eyes that blaze with all-seeing insight, the disease of sin that has so utterly corrupted our spiritual tissues is laid bare before him. He sees that – like a spiritual cancer – it's spread its way through our spiritual selves. He knows that there's not one single manmade cure; the disease of sin is terminal. And with a super-accurate prognosis, he sees the only outcome – a place in the tomb and a place in hell.

There are times when medical doctors just have to step aside and watch a disease take its toll. All they can do is try to make those patients comfortable until death finally takes them. How different Jesus is! He didn't – he couldn't – simply watch us slip away into eternal death. Where no manmade cure existed, he himself became the cure. He freely dispensed mercy to all sinners by offering himself unto the tomb and unto hell, in spite of the fact that his body had not a single blemish of that sin-disease. His flesh and blood, received anew even in our time, is the soothing balm that removes our guilt before God forever. It was sufficient to redeem even the lowest of the low. It came free of charge, with no co-pay whatsoever!

Transition

Saving faith in Jesus, worked by the Holy Spirit, elicits a response. As the ultimate dispenser of mercy on sinners, Jesus eagerly desires to see its effect on sinners.

Part II: He eagerly desires to see its effect on sinners.

How frustrating for a doctor when a medication fails to have its intended effect! Not nearly as frustrating as it is for the patient, right!? In the same way, how frustrating it must've been for Jesus to see so many people trample upon his precious and life-giving mercy so that it was without any positive effect in their own hearts. **“As Jesus was reclining at the table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners were actually there too, eating with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’”**

Here we see an attitude that was the mirror-opposite of Jesus' own. Where Jesus was delighted to bestow mercy on sinners from any and all social classes, the Pharisees and other religious leaders couldn't fathom the thought. They wouldn't be caught dead in the red light districts of Palestine. They'd never knowingly break bread with a traitorous tax collector. They wrote off anyone who didn't live up to their exemplary standards. They brazenly thanked God that they weren't like “those other sinners.” They took pains to walk around Samaritan soil instead of passing through. In short, they were steeped in self-righteousness.

The trouble for the Pharisees and others like them is that Jesus expects much from those who've been entrusted with much. Of all the people of Israel, they should've been the ones who were "**healthy**" and "**righteous.**" They had the privilege of being immersed in Scripture day in and day out. Humanly speaking, they had the greatest opportunity to see the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy in the person of Jesus Christ. And yet they failed on both counts. They failed to apply the preaching of God's law first to their own hearts. They felt it could in no way condemn as good a people as they considered themselves to be. And then they failed to see Jesus as the promised Savior. They despised and rejected him. They criticized him for his poor choice of company. They sought only his downfall.

Jesus just as eagerly desires to see his mercy have an effect on us. We, too, have the privilege of being in contact with God's law and gospel on a regular basis. The free access we have to his Word and Sacrament is unrivaled anywhere else in the world today. Are we faithful in taking the dosage of medicine that our Savior-Physician has prescribed for us? Or do we neglect the Word by lackadaisical worship? Are the first and third Sundays of each month etched indelibly on our minds as opportunities that simply cannot be passed by? Do we continually, daily, see our need for Jesus' mercy and humbly repent of our wrongdoings? Or do we think of ourselves more highly than we ought – that we've somehow developed an immunity to the sickness of sin? Have we slipped into thinking in terms of upper and lower classes of Christianity (we, of course, being in the upper class)? Do we fail to recognize the real life-threatening danger of the devil, the world, and our own sinful natures?

If so, return your focus to the free outpouring of mercy from your Savior. In love, he called us to salvation. He then also calls us to follow him as disciples and witnesses. His mercy had a very real and lasting effect on Matthew. He hesitated not a moment to leave his tax booth and gather together those who wouldn't be offended to attend a banquet at his home. He knew that the Savior's mercy wasn't limited to him alone, but was for all the world to know and receive. In faith, he accepted the mercy of Jesus, and in faith, he extended the mercy of Jesus. By God's grace, may the great Physician of our souls see that effect on us as well!

Conclusion

Instead of "take two aspirin and call me in the morning," Physician Jesus says, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**" His prescription for us sinners is his mercy – mercy freely given and mercy to share. Amen.