

Righteous or Sinner?

Matthew 9:9-13

Narrowminded. Smug. Self-righteous. Here are the Pharisees on parade again, passing judgment on people like Matthew. Aren't they terrible?

But hold on a minute. Would a guy like Matthew be first on the list of our dinner guests? He was, after all, a publican, a tax collector. And as we approach April 15, calculating the amount we owe Uncle Sam, and especially as we remember stories about various IRS officials engaging in political persecution and even corruption, we might be tempted to think that the Pharisees weren't completely off base.

And that's because in those days, tax collectors weren't just biased bureaucrats. Remember, the whole land of Judea was under the control of Imperial Rome, a foreign power with a foreign faith. The Jews thus naturally saw publicans as lackeys of their oppressors. And since Mark and Luke tell us that this particular publican, Matthew, also went by the very Jewish name of Levi, he would have been seen as nothing less than a traitor to his own people.

But it was even worse than that, for publicans profited off of the misery of others. For example, they often levied customs duties not only on the goods carried, but on the axles and wheels and pack animals too. They routinely charged more tax than was authorized, and pocketed the profit. They also showed favoritism, lowering the dues of people they liked, and raising them on their enemies. Lord Acton's famous axiom fit Judean publicans perfectly: Power tends to corrupt the people that hold it.

So, was it really narrowminded for the Pharisees to object to the actions of such corrupt public officials? Were they unreasonably arrogant when they considered Jews who served the Roman government to be traitors? Were they really being judgmental when they wondered out loud if Jesus should be accepting the hospitality of someone whose wealth was the result of ill-gotten gains?

For how do we feel about corruption among public officials? It isn't exactly foreign to us, either on the Federal or the local level. Is it somehow unchristian to desire honest government by minimizing the involvement of crooks? Do any of us want people like that to hold public office? Didn't the Pharisees have a point?

And if the Pharisees were right about the publicans, what about the rest of the so-called sinners that are mentioned in verses 10 and 11? No, we don't know exactly what sorts of things these people had been doing, but whatever it was, it was at least somewhat scandalous.

So, what sorts of folks might cause a similar scandal among us today? What kind of people would make us feel uncomfortable if they were to sit with us in worship? Perhaps the perpetually scowling young men who hide behind hoodies in the middle of July and who walk around town with their trousers at half-mast? Or how about the able-bodied fellows who, instead of trying to work for a living, are only looking for the next dose of crack or meth, the sorts of folks who frequent the wrong sorts of nightclubs on Friday night and are more likely to spend the rest of the weekend in jail than in worship?

No, it doesn't matter how broadminded we are or how tolerant we imagine ourselves to be. Every society has classes of people that we look down on. We might call them publicans and sinners, or we might call them corrupt politicians and crackheads. But in every society, there are some places nice people just don't go, some people with whom nice people just don't associate.

But let's push this point a little further. For if we consider some people to be on the bottom of the ladder, doesn't that imply that we consider ourselves to be somewhat higher up? And why would we think that? Do we think we are better just because we don't take advantage of other people or steal public funds? Do we think we are better just because we don't use illegal drugs or get into fights in juke joints?

Do we, however subconsciously, congratulate ourselves on working hard to support ourselves and our families? Do we take pride in the fact that we come to church, washed and dressed in our Sunday best? And as we get older, are we ever tempted to rest on our laurels, to think back with satisfaction on all the good deeds we've done? Are we Presbyterians perhaps a bit closer to the Pharisees than we might like to think?

If so, we need to listen to what Jesus said to them in verses 12 and 13: “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

And that’s the important question for all of us, isn’t it? How do we see our spiritual health today? Do we consider ourselves to be basically righteous? Do we compare ourselves favorably to others, imagining that being socially respectable somehow makes us more acceptable in the eyes of God?

Oh, we might confess that we could stand a bit of improvement. We might admit that we need to cut down on a few bad habits or resolve to cultivate some better ones. A little more prayer, a little more Bible study, a little more time volunteering at the local crisis pregnancy center or soup kitchen – that should do the trick.

But if that’s all we think we need, if we think we are basically spiritually healthy, we need to watch out. For remember what Jesus said – He didn’t come to call the righteous, the smug, the self-satisfied.

In fact, whom did Jesus call in this passage to follow Him? It wasn’t one of the Pharisees – it was Matthew, that cheating, thieving sell-out. With whom did Jesus sit down to dinner in this passage? It wasn’t with the Pharisees – it was with sinners, with those whom polite society considered, for whatever reason, to be unacceptable. Those are the people Jesus came to call.

Now, to be sure, Jesus didn’t intend to join these people in their sin or leave these people in their sin. In fact, nowhere in this passage does Jesus say that He approves of Matthew’s thieving ways. And Jesus didn’t allow Matthew to remain in his tax office, oppressing the people. His call to Matthew demanded a complete change of life, a decision to leave sin behind and to follow Jesus.

In the same way, most of the Greek manuscripts of verse 13 agree with Luke’s account and with the King James translation, when it says that Jesus came to call sinners *to repentance*. Repentance, after all, is a daily choice – putting aside the self and all that appeals to it, and putting our trust completely in God, obeying His commands even when they don’t make sense, doing His will even when it doesn’t feel right. Nowhere in the Bible does Jesus say that He calls us to remain in our sins.

But nowhere in the Bible does it say that, in and of ourselves we are basically good, either. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that all we need is a little polishing up around the edges. And nowhere in the Bible does it say that any of us are capable of saving ourselves through our own efforts. For if we could, why did Jesus have to go to the cross?

No, we need to face the truth, the hard truth: there isn’t anyone who is righteous – those Pharisees were kidding themselves about that, just as many of us do sometimes. But the good news is that Jesus did go to cross in order that He might call all kinds of sinners to Himself, whether scandalous sinners like Matthew and his dinner guests or socially acceptable sinners like the Pharisees – and like us.

And we might want to end this sermon right here, remembering our need for humility, and celebrating Christ’s welcome for those of us who are willing to admit we are sinners. But here’s the catch – if we want to avail ourselves of Jesus’ welcome, if we want to answer Jesus’ call, if we want to sit down with Him and share table fellowship with Him, then who else are we expecting to be around that table? After all, as our responsive reading reminds us this morning, we aren’t just called to love Jesus – we are called to love one another as well.

And if we would truly be followers of Jesus, our love for others will call us to go just as far outside of our comfort zone as His love pushed Him out of His. For remember – Jesus was perfectly pure, perfectly sinless. But He chose to leave the ivory palaces, the perfect righteousness of Heaven in order to associate with sinners like us. For Jesus, no one was too good to need a savior, and no one was too bad to die for.

So, what about us? Of course we know we need to follow Matthew’s example, giving up whatever active sin there may be in our lives. Of course we know we need to seek personal holiness, and a closer relationship with God. But in today’s passage, Jesus makes it clear that drawing close to Him means drawing close to sinners as well, sharing the good news with them – not at arm’s length, but in an atmosphere of acceptance and love.

For what did John tell us in our responsive reading this morning? “He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”

So, let's think again about those sorts of sinners that we find especially objectionable: the corrupt politicians, the street thugs, the welfare cheats, the crackheads. If Jesus died for sinners like us, He died for sinners like them too. And so if Jesus could sit down in Matthew's house with publicans and sinners, can't we reach out to sinners like them, too? And if we, the Body of Christ, don't reach out and accept them and welcome them, how else do we think they will ever come to know the love and forgiveness of Christ that we have come to know?

Rosaria Butterfield had this sort of experience. She was a professor at Syracuse University who made no attempt to hide her hatred of Christ and Christians. "Stupid. Pointless. Menacing." That's what she thought about us. She was a follower of Freud, Marx and Darwin, who called herself a "heathen who got to overhear the prayers of many people at gay pride marches and in front of Planned Parenthood." In short, she believed in and actively stood for so many of the things that conservative evangelicals find objectionable. She was someone the Pharisees of Jesus' day would certainly have called a "sinner."

Well, one day she published a critique of the Promise Keepers, a Christian movement that calls men to be faithful to their marriage vows. And as a result she got a lot of what she called "hate mail." But there was one letter from a Reformed Presbyterian pastor, Ken Smith, that was different. She said "it wasn't nasty, just questioning.... It had some questions that no one had ever asked me in my life. At the end of the letter the pastor asked me, please, to give him a call."

Now, this was no fluffy letter. Pastor Smith asked Professor Butterfield about the nature of the Bible, and about how she could be sure of her spiritual well-being. And his denomination is not liberal by anyone's standards – they only sing Psalms in worship, they don't use any musical instruments, and they don't allow women to serve as elders. It would be hard to find greater distance between two worldviews than those of Ken Smith and Rosaria Butterfield.

But Professor Butterfield said this very conservative Presbyterian pastor, "Wrote in such a gracious way, and I was intrigued by it." The pastor invited the professor to dinner, in much the same way that Jesus sat down in Matthew's house. Now, at that dinner Pastor Smith and his wife didn't pressure Professor Butterfield to accept Jesus, or even to come to church – they just wanted to get to know her, to have a relationship with her. They became friends, the sorts of real friends who share books and who talk deeply about important ideas. More importantly, Pastor Smith's very conservative Reformed Presbyterian Church began to pray for her.

Eventually, she decided to attend worship, and she felt accepted. Moreover, her new Christian friends were honest with her about their own struggles with different kinds of sin. In short, instead of ostracizing sinners, the way the Pharisees of Jesus' day were inclined to do, these Presbyterians sat down at the table with them the way Jesus did, inviting sinners not only into their worship services, but into their personal lives. And as a result, Professor Butterfield became a Christian.

Jesus told Matthew, "Follow Me." For Matthew, that meant realizing that He was a sinner, and placing his faith in Christ alone. It meant repentance, turning away from his abusive, oppressive, selfish ways. But it also meant inviting a bunch of sinners over to his house so that they too could meet Jesus.

So, are we as eager to admit our need for Christ as Matthew was? Are we as willing to turn away from our sin? And are we ready to be as welcoming of other sinners as Jesus has been of us, truly sharing His unconditional, self-sacrificial love with others who need Him as much as we do?