

### Jesus Calls Sinners

Dear Christian friends,

“The other side of the tracks.” You may recall the phrase. People used to use it in some towns to talk about the disreputable area, where the theaters and saloons and other sinful establishments were located. Respectable people avoided that side of the tracks. You wouldn’t want to socialize with someone from there.

Where did Jesus spend his time on earth? Our Gospel today makes it clear that Jesus spent a fair amount of time with “those people,” the ones on the other side of the tracks. His enemies attacked him for it. Yet he made it clear that this was why he was on earth: **“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

Despite the world’s efforts to box Jesus in with those who think they are good people, to restrict Jesus’ church to those who claim they act the right way, Jesus made it clear that he came for those who can recognize their own sins, realize they need a Savior, and then humbly trust in him. Jesus Calls Sinners.

In Jesus’ day, there was a group of Jewish teachers called the Pharisees. They were considered very holy in their lives. They prided themselves on how well they kept the Law of the Bible—their name means the “separated ones,” because they were a little better than everyone else. They wouldn’t have anything to do with those folks on the other side of the tracks.

But where was Jesus? **“As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ he said.”** This Matthew was a tax collector, working for the Roman government. He was sitting in what we might call a toll booth, along the main road leading out of Galilee. Merchants and travelers would have stopped at his booth to pay the toll. Tax collectors were independent contractors, hired by the government. Rome had a huge empire, with lots of building projects and large armies to support. Tax collectors would bid on a job—in Matthew’s case, collecting the tolls along this road—and give Rome what was expected.

Tax collectors made their living by charging more than the tax. They tended to be very rich, as they lined their pockets. They were so unscrupulous, that they weren’t permitted to serve as witnesses in a court. Tax collectors were often linked with “sinners,” a catch-all phrase for those caught up making a sinful living.

We don’t hear anything about this Matthew prior to this account. He apparently did not stand out from others. He had not done anything to make himself special—just as the rest of the people Jesus called had not spruced themselves up. Jesus chose this man, chose to walk up to him when everyone else hated him.

And Jesus had a simple invitation: **“Follow me.”** These words changed Matthew’s life. These were God’s words, empowered by the Holy Spirit to turn Matthew’s heart around. No longer was he just the conniving, wicked tax collector. He was loved. Loved by Jesus, the preacher from Galilee who by this time had done a number of amazing miracles. Matthew was being accepted into a group, a church, people gathered by Jesus to learn more of God’s love.

“Follow me” is not some law, a demand for total commitment, something that Matthew could choose to do if he really wanted to change. No, these were Jesus’ words, drawing Matthew

to his Savior. Jesus was showing the most amazing love; and that love overcame all the sin that Matthew had held onto throughout his life. That love of Jesus led Matthew to actually believe in God, to trust God instead of his own schemes. Jesus spoke those words, the Holy Spirit worked through them, and Matthew was brought into God's kingdom of faith.

Now, our account is taken from the Gospel of Matthew. That is the same Matthew—he would become one of the 12 Apostles, and later would be inspired by God to write this history of Jesus' life. But notice how briefly he mentions himself. Jesus said, "Follow me," **"and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples."** That's it. We don't read what went through Matthew's mind. Just the simple fact that Jesus' words changed his life—and the lives of other tax collectors and sinners.

This account is very similar to another time Jesus called a tax collector. That man's name was Zacchaeus. He was the one who climbed a tree to hear Jesus talk, only to have Jesus call him and say he needed to come to his house. There Zacchaeus announced to the crowd that he would give back all the money he had stolen, pay it back four times; plus he would give half of his possessions to the poor.

You see, when Jesus comes into someone's life, he is not just putting in an appearance. He's not just changing their attitude for a few minutes. Jesus changes lives completely.

Whom does Jesus come to? When he was questioned by the Pharisees as to how he could dine with sinners like Matthew, Jesus did not mince words. **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."** The Pharisees thought they were righteous by what they did; they had their salvation already paid for. But Jesus makes it clear that we need to recognize that we are sinners.

How do you react when you get sick? I think that most of us will try to tough it out—it's just a little cough, just a pain in the chest that will go away. But we could end up waiting until it's too late to get the help we need.

This is even more important when it comes to our souls. If we think we are good enough to save ourselves—if we are going to try to heal ourselves, we will be left out of God's kingdom.

But when we recognize our sin, then his blood cleanses us. If we recognize our need, then his promise changes our hearts.

Jesus acts out of mercy. He loves us not because we deserve us; he loves those who don't deserve it. He loves thieves like Matthew and Zacchaeus, sinners like you and me.

As Paul wrote in our Second Lesson, we trust in Jesus, and God credits that faith as our righteousness. Believing in Jesus means we have stopped trying to be good enough, stopped trying to save ourselves. We know we can't do it. Instead we look to Jesus, the perfect sacrifice for all sins. And as we trust him, God announces that we are righteous in his sight.

It is all God's grace for us.

Keep that in mind the next time you dine with Jesus—that is, the next time you come to the Lord's Supper. The Bible says we should prepare before receiving the Sacrament; but it tells us how to prepare—by recognizing that we are sinners, and then recognizing that in this Sacrament we are forgiven again.

Many of us grew up Lutheran; and despite all the true instruction we received, we may have gotten the notion that “preparing” means we have to make ourselves worthy of receiving Jesus’ body and blood. You might think, I can’t come to Communion, not after what I’ve done.

Of course, it’s true that if you are not sorry for what you’ve done, then you shouldn’t receive the Sacrament. Sometimes we have to tell members who are living in a sinful life that they can’t take the Sacrament until they repent. This is medicine, after all, medicine intended for those who know they are sinners.

But once we recognize our sin, Jesus wants to feed us. He wants to fill us with his forgiveness. The sick need the medicine our doctor won for us. The Holy Spirit works through that Sacrament no matter how bad our sins have been, to restore us to the arms of our loving Savior. Jesus comes to us in our need.

And Jesus comes to others, even those on the wrong side of the tracks, when they recognize their need.

This past week homosexuality was again in the news. The Supreme Court affirmed equal rights protections for LGBTQ persons. I won’t get into any of the legal arguments. But since this was in the news, you might wonder, How should we react to homosexual people?

Scripture says that homosexuality is a sin—it’s plainly stated in the Old and New Testaments.

Would Jesus meet with homosexuals? Well, he sat down with tax collectors and other sinners. So our first answer would be, Yes, he would. And we know that Jesus paid for the sins of all people; and we know that God wants all people to be saved. Of course he would want to talk with them.

But what would Jesus say to them? Jesus said, **“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** Those people who recognize their sins—those are the ones Jesus assures of forgiveness. But those people who won’t admit their sins—the ones who think they are righteous—they are not forgiven.

If we know people caught in homosexuality—or any other sin—and they won’t admit they are sinning, then they are missing out on Jesus’ love. You have to accept God’s law where it applies to your life in order for the Gospel of what Jesus has done to benefit you. And it’s not enough to just mouth a few pieties, like the Israelites in our First Lesson from Hosea; their love was like a mist that passes away. You have to humble yourself before the Lord, acknowledge that his ways are right. Recognize just how sick you are; then the doctor will give you new life.

Matthew knew that his cheating people was sinful. And when Jesus said, **“Follow me,”** he left behind that sinful life. The Lord has led you to recognize your sins; and then by the Gospel he has forgiven you and renewed you in the life he wants.

In a sense, we are all on the wrong side of the tracks. But then Jesus came across the tracks, or built a bridge over the tracks, or tore the tracks up, so we could live with him. Now he wants us to be his workers in tearing up those tracks for those who still live separated from him by their sins. We can do that, as we first admit our sin; then help others by leading them to confess their sin, and then trust Jesus’ loving forgiveness.

May Jesus heal you of your sins each day. And may he use you to lead more people to the wells of his forgiveness. For Jesus Calls Sinners—he calls us to his astounding love. Amen.