

“I Desire Mercy, And Not Sacrifice.”**Matthew 9:9-13****Matthew 9:9-13**

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¹⁰ And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹² But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

I wonder if you have heard of a doctor by the name of Tetsu Nakamura. Born in 1946 in Fukuoka Prefecture, after received his medical license, Dr. Nakamura at the age of thirty-eight was sent by the Japan Overseas Christian Medical Cooperative Service to work in Pakistan. For over twenty years he worked helping patients of Hansen's Disease (leprosy). It was an incredibly difficult calling, but Dr. Nakamura was beloved by all. They affectionately called him, “Uncle Nakamura.” He deeply loved his homeland, Japan, but he continued his sacrificial labor among those who were distraught and helpless. Having faith in Christ, he was a man who knew he had received mercy from the Lord, and he was passionate to show this same mercy and love to others. In recognition of his dedication and sacrifice, he has been awarded numerous prizes and medals.

As you hear about the amazing sacrificial life of this man, it is hard not to be moved. It gives us pause to wonder, what would motivate someone to do something like this? To move to a third world country, to dedicate his life to serving a people whom he had never met, whom would never be able to pay him back? The only possible answer is “steadfast love and mercy.”¹ One thing for certain that we can say about Dr. Nakamura is that in his life he had not overlooked the true meaning of the gospel. Without a doubt, by looking at his life we can see that he believed the fundamental truth of the gospel; it was more more precious to him than anything.

This afternoon, as we read this passage in Matthew 9, I believe the Lord has a very simple question for us. Namely, “Is the gospel precious to us?” For various reasons, we all tend to fall into ruts that can cause to overlook and miss the true beauty of the gospel. And when that happens, it can have disastrous effect on our lives, our families, and our church.

“Go and learn what this means.” Two times in Matthew's gospel Jesus makes the following statement, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” It is abundantly clear from the Lord that this is an important lesson for us to learn. So, what is “steadfast love and mercy?” And if it is so beautiful, why do we so easily lose sight of it?

I believe there are two primary reasons why we tend to forget and overlook the beauty of mercy. In order to explain the first, let's look at this scene of when our Lord first calls his disciple Matthew. First century Capernaum, with a population of about fifteen hundred, would have been a town of considerable size. A large Roman road passed

nearby, so it would have naturally been fitted with a tax collection office for the Roman government. And on this particular day the man sitting in the tax collection booth was Matthew.

As we read in verse nine, Jesus passed on from there, "He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him." Why, among the fifteen hundred residents of that town, would Jesus call Matthew the tax collector to follow him? He would certainly be the last person we would expect to receive such a call. The reason being, for Jews at this time, tax collectors were despised more than anyone else. At this point, the Romans ruled Israel. The Jews had lost much of their freedom, so naturally they had great contempt toward the Romans. However, these tax collectors, even though they were Jews, cooperated with the Romans, making them much like accomplices to the very power that was oppressing their own people. What's more, the Romans were gentiles, causing all those who had dealings with them to become unclean. Jesus of course knew all of this, which makes it more shocking to see Jesus call Matthew into his fellowship. Why would he choose to call an unclean, corrupt traitor? And how does Matthew respond? By this time, Jesus would have been widely known in Capernaum. It is likely that Matthew had heard Jesus teach before, or perhaps even seen one of his miracles performed firsthand. We just get a very brief comment here about Matthew's response in verse nine, "He rose and followed him."

¹ This term comes from Matthew 9:13, "shinjitsu no ai" in Japanese (*Shinkaiyaku* 2017), "mercy" in the ESV (cf. 1 Sam 15:22 and especially Hosea 6:6, where "חֶסֶד" [hesed] is translated in the ESV as "steadfast love."). "Steadfast love" toward the Lord and one's fellow man is the primary notion behind the word in the original context from Hosea that Jesus quotes in this passage. In Greek, this word becomes ἐλεος [eleos], which has a more narrow emphasis on showing mercy towards someone in need. I can only conjecture as to the reason for the choice of the translators of the *Sinkaiyaku* 2017 to use the term "shinjitsu no ai" here, but it is probably an effort to bring in the nuance of the OT word, hesed, used in the original quote from Hosea. It would be quite a mouthful to explain this every time I mention it in the sermon, but let the reader know that the mercy and steadfast love will be used in largely interchangeable fashion here throughout.

One thing I would like to point out as we move to the next scene is that Matthew himself is the one telling the story. This is taking place in his home, and he documents these events in such a way as to draw special attention to verse ten, in the way he uses the word, "Behold!" "As Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples" (v.10). The reason this is meant to shock is because it was not a common occurrence; Jewish rabbis simply did not associate intimately with those who were publicly known to be sinners.

The power of the shock is perhaps lost on those of us reading this in 2021. But what Jesus does here would be akin to him walking into church today - instead of pursuing the pastor, or the elders, or even church members - and intentionally pursuing instead those who were widely known as drunks, or people with sketchy reputations. We would be shocked to see Jesus focusing his time on non-Christians.

But let's return to our question, why would Jesus choose someone like this, someone like Matthew? The reason is clear - so that we might understand the true depth of his mercy. The other disciples definitely did not come from positions of high social status, but at least they were not morally and religiously suspect as Matthew was.

Jesus was part of the party, but not everyone in Capernaum was celebrating that day. In the ancient Near East, to enter into someone's home and to share table

fellowship with them was a mark of incredible intimacy. For Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, this kind of behavior would have widely been believed to have been forbidden. Because of this, the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders of the day, simply could not accept Jesus' behavior. For fear of being made unclean themselves, the Pharisees here don't even entertain the thought of entering Matthew's home. It is perhaps from the garden or an outer courtyard that they begin their dialogue with the disciples in verse eleven. They ask, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus overhears their questioning and answers their anger with two different sayings. The first is, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." And the second is a quote from the prophet Hosea. In verse thirteen he commends them to, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

As the Pharisees confront the disciples, they refer to Jesus as, "your teacher." Interestingly, Jesus's words back to them include a special rabbinic formula, "Go and learn what this means." The Pharisees don't view him as their teacher, but with this formula Jesus, in a sly way, is assuring him that he is in fact their teacher. He is showing them that he is indeed the one with authority. "Go and learn what this means...I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

From the Lord's perspective, of course, there is nothing wrong with righteousness. But the problem with the Pharisees is *where* they believed true righteousness came from. In the kingdom of God, there is no one who is well, no one without need. Because all men struggle with sin, we are all sick. There are none who are healthy but many who believe that they are well. Here Jesus uses the word, "sacrifice," by which he is referring to the obedience of the law. Just like many of the Jews in the days of the prophet Hosea, the Pharisees believed that they were made righteous by their outward observance of the law. In their view, obedience to the law could make one healthy and clean. While in truth, the inside of their hearts was sick with sin. They were in fact totally unclean. What Jesus is essentially saying to them is, "You cannot make yourselves clean in your own strength, so in order to be healed you must go to the doctor." But the Pharisees believed by their own hard work they could make themselves pleasing to the Lord. And this was the rub. This line of thinking not only created distance between them and God, but it led to an ugly form of self-righteousness. They loved being seen as righteous. But on the inside they knew nothing of mercy and love.

I cannot emphasize the lesson here enough, the one who needs a doctor is you and me, each and every one of us. From the Lord's point of view we are all sick. I am sick, and so are you. We are sinners, far from God like Matthew, and apart from receiving a great mercy, we cannot be saved. But, the Lord Jesus Christ has perfectly met each and every one of our needs. The Apostle Paul tells us that, "Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). Jesus delights in saving sinners. You see, Matthew went to the "physician," and he was healed (hence the party & celebration). But if you don't see your need, your sickness, you'll never go to the doctor. Don't let your self-righteousness deceive you from the reality that you are indeed sick. Let's put off all of our notions of self-righteousness, the idea we don't need help from the outside.

I wonder if you struggle with self-righteousness like I do at times. In effort to see what's really in our hearts, I want to ask you a few diagnostic questions. What makes you angry? Do get angry when you go unnoticed or when you feel disrespected by others? Does it make you angry at times to see the success of your peers? To put it another way, what makes you happy? Do you ever rejoice in the misfortune of others, even in the

secret corners of your heart? Does it make you feel just a little happy inside to see bad things happen to others at times? Or, do you ever have a hard time rejoicing in the success of your coworkers? Think about it. These problems are signs that you are probably struggling with self-righteousness in one form or another.

I still to this day remember this one incident very clearly. Many years ago I read on the internet about a missionary acquaintance of mine who had to move back to America. The instant I saw this, my heart's first response was to fill with pride. I'm not going home! I am a strong missionary who can really stick it out here! This is really disgusting, isn't it? It is proof that there is still sickness in my heart. In that moment, I was just like the Pharisees, looking to my flesh to give me righteousness, I had totally lost sight of my need for the mercy of God. I had forgotten the true source of righteousness. To faithfully serve here in Japan doesn't give me a shred of righteousness. The only one who can make me righteous of course is Jesus, and I need to repent every time when I find myself trusting in anything else. We will find ourselves losing sight of the beauty of the mercy of Christ, the healing of our sickness, each time even a small amount of self-righteousness creeps into our hearts.

But self-righteousness is not the only thing that moves our focus from the mercy of God. What other hindrance might there be?

In order to answer that question, I want to take a comparative look at what Jesus loves to do and what the Pharisees fail to do. What was Jesus' attitude towards sinners of all stripe and variety? In Matthew chapter nine, we read that Jesus joyfully received Matthew and many other types of sinners. But for Jesus, this kindness ended up coming at a great cost to him. Think with me for a moment. At this time, the leaders of the Jewish synagogues were upset with Jesus' behavior. From the perspective of Jewish society, to associate closely with sinner would make one unclean. Even Jesus' own disciples complained at times when Jesus chose to spend time with sinners (cf. Luke 19:7). But Jesus pays no mind to their complaints, and he happily spends time with these people. Jesus was scorned and condemned by those in his culture for showing love to sinners. But this was the very thing he loved to do, to spend time with the people who had been shunned. And aren't we so thankful for that! And it is here that Jesus is showing us what a truly holy life looks like. It is often thought that to be holy in life means to avoid sinners as much as humanly possible, but if we pay attention to Jesus' priorities, that simply isn't the case. The Lord Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to the law. His like shows us exactly what our Heavenly Father wants in the life, heart, and obedience of man. Remember he was the Word become flesh who dwelt among us (John 1:14). With all of his life, he at every moment perfectly honored his Heavenly Father. Therefore, if we want to know what a holy life truly looks like, we must pay close attention to how Jesus lived. He came to fulfill all of the law, and he makes it abundantly clear that a life of true obedience does not lead one to an isolated, distanced relationship with a sinful world. We can be certain that a holy life is one that involved enjoying the company of people seen as sinners.

Given what we have seen so far, if we want to really follow the Lord, if we really want to be Christlike in our lives, we too much reach out to sinners with this kind of mercy and love. But, this is the very thing that the Pharisees refused to do. A good doctor doesn't retreat from the sick. A good doctor loves to go out of his way to help the sick, the poor, and the needy. The Pharisees were waiting on a savior who would honor those who followed the law, one who would come to crush sinners in judgment. And this shows just how far they were from a right understanding of the scriptures.

At this point it will be helpful to briefly touch on the background of the book of Hosea that Jesus quotes from. As I mentioned before, during the time of the prophet Hosea, God's people were struggling with sin. This prophesy was delivered to the northern kingdom of Israel during the eighth century BC. Everyday the Israelite people offered sacrifices and outwardly obeyed the law, but their hearts were full of idols. The Lord refers to the idolatry of their hearts as "adultery." From the perspective of the Lord they were prostituting themselves out to sin and to other gods. And this is why Jesus directs the Pharisees to go and read the book of Hosea again, because they apparently had not taken that lesson to heart. In other words, they had missed this simple lesson - if we have received mercy from the Lord, we too, in the same way, must show mercy to even the worst of sinners. This they had not understood. The "steadfast love"² we read of here in this passage is covenant love, unconditional love, a love that will never die. In some translations it is translated as "mercy." This is God's deep sympathy for us in our sin, sorrow, and suffering. This word in Hosea, and here in Matthew, also refers to the steadfast love and mercy that God's people are to show others. Our responsibility as the covenant people of God is to show this unshakable love to the world. This is more dear to the Lord than our offering sacrifices. It is more crucial than an hollow, outward obedience to the law. The lesson is clear, "Where Torah-piety and the interests of mercy conflict, mercy should prevail."³

Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for followers of Jesus to show mercy to others. Of course, we also need a doctor because of our own illness, but part of our calling as those who have been healed is to also be a doctor for a world that is sick. This was the kind of love that the Pharisees did not comprehend, and served as proof that they did not really know God. We must take care not to fall into the same error. But what does this look like for us? What does it look like for us to show this kind of mercy to others?

Years ago I was eating lunch by myself at a restaurant in downtown Houston. As I ate, I remember watching a homeless man slowly making his way from table to table as he was asking for something to eat. Just before he came to where I was sitting, one of the staff of the restaurant came over and made him leave. I can still remember my first gut reaction...I was so relieved, I am ashamed to say. It quickly raced through my mind what it would have cost me to show this man mercy. Maybe it would have meant having a painful or awkward conversation with him. Maybe he would have smelled bad, and I would have had to endure that for a while. If I were to treat him like a human and actually had a conversation with him it could have cost me a chunk of my afternoon schedule. Maybe I would have had to endure the scorn or anger of the other customers if I had shown kindness to him and invited him to sit down with me. But instead of making any of these sacrifices, I thought only of myself, and decided it wasn't worth the sacrifice of my comfort or time to show him kindness. Friends, this attitude could not be further from the heart of the Father. At that time, I had completely lost sight and forgotten about the incredible mercy the the Lord Jesus has shown me.

² See footnote 1 above.

³ *Davies and Allison 1988–1997: 2:104; cf. Cope [1976: 68], quoted in Carson and Beale (2007), 35.*

If we truly understand the mercy that Jesus has shown us, we will understand that the Lord sacrificed everything to serve us. And this is the same kind of love he is calling us to show. It is self-sacrificing and often comes with negative consequences. The real definition of love we see in scripture is "substitution." For us, we'll often do something for others, if it is of some benefit to us. But not so for Jesus. It would have been better for Jesus not to have received shame from the leaders of the Jews, but he took that upon himself that

he might show love to sinners. It would have been better for Jesus not to endure the pain of death on the cross, but he took that upon himself to save us from our sins.

Seeing firsthand the incredible mercy that God has shown you, who is he calling you to love today? What non-Christians in your life is the Lord calling you to make sacrifices for so they can see and know the love of Christ? To say it another way, what do we need to change about the way we do family or church to ensure that sinners feel welcome here? Are we willing to sacrifice what is good for us in order to serve and love those who are different than us?

Why is it important for us to show this kind of sacrificial love? Because the heart of the gospel is mercy. To follow Christ means not only to receive mercy from him, but to show that same mercy to the world that he made. Without exception, to show this kind of mercy will take sacrifice. And when we fear sacrifice, it can become one more thing that causes us to lose sight of the mercy of God.

To close, I'd like to once again return to the life of Dr. Tetsu Nakamura. After serving many years in Pakistan, he relocated to Afghanistan, where he took the lead on building canals that allowed them to turn lifeless deserts into lush forests and farmlands. Sadly, in 2019, he paid the made the ultimate sacrifice for his service when was assassinated in a terrorist attack.

The Lord may not be calling you to sacrifice your life. He may not be calling you to serve the poor overseas, but you do not have to do these things to show true mercy in this world. Uncle Nakamura has shown us in his life the true heart of the gospel. While we were yet sinners, knowing the depth of our sin, sick with sin, Christ died for us so that we might be healed. God's great love for us was made clear through the life of Jesus. He sat with us in our suffering and sorrow, taking it upon himself to show us the ultimate mercy.

Thankfully, the Lord delights in saving sinners like Matthew, like the Apostle Paul, and like you and me. There is no sin too big that he cannot forgive - even our self-righteousness, even when we choose self-protection over self-sacrifice in loving others. And when we understand this, the power of the gospel to transform will shine through sinners like us as we begin to show mercy to a hurting world. Let us not forget how to get there, the mercy of Christ. And let us heed Jesus' own words to "Go and learn what this means."