

# Sermon Text for January 14, 2024

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## *Hosea 5:15-6:6, Matthew 9:9-13* *“Hanging out with sinners”*

We have had a long season away from our Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of righteousness. When we last left it we were in the verses immediately preceding the verses we will be looking at today. Keep in mind that I put this sermon list together back in November and it inevitably brings us Scripture that we need to hear as individuals, I'll speak for myself, but also as a congregation in such a time as this. We find ourselves in Matthew with our Savior literally hanging out with sinners.

We find in our reading the calling of the writer of this Gospel, Matthew, who in some other Gospels is called Levi as well. He was a tax collector, a known sinner in his position and in his life and in his lot in life. So many of the people that Jesus chose to surround himself were sinners. It is quite the opposite of what we tell our children, right? We tell our kids that the friends with whom you choose to surround yourself will dictate a lot of who you will be, because they will probably spend more time with you than we will, between school and hanging out. Jesus chooses Matthew, a known sinner, to be his disciple, he chooses Judas, who is called a thief, to be his treasurer. Jesus has prostitutes in his genealogy, and backstabbers like Jacob all the way back.

We read in Matthew 11:19 that Jesus is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, which basically meant that he never turned down an opportunity to eat at someone's house when he was invited and took part in the meal whole heartedly. But we also know that when we simply say don't judge that we are discounting the real costs of sin that stretch beyond the sinner and impact those around them. People's lives are changed, drastically, by sin committed against them. So how do we respond as sinners to those who sin in our midst in ways that are clear and evident and impact our community and our church? I think this Scripture will help us today. Let's read.

### **READ**

I have used this sermon title a couple of times in the past. One of my favorites was when I preached on the thieves hanging on the cross next to Jesus when he was crucified. But as we approach this topic today I think we need to be aware that it isn't as easy an answer as we would like to think. Isn't that what church does to you? You think you have it figured out, do not judge, but then when you are confronted with a reality in which you find yourself confronted

with a sinner in your midst and it makes you uncomfortable you see where our faith really comes into action in a real life situation.

The assumption in those situations is not to judge, but there is more to it because the sinners' action impacts not just them, but those around them and there are real live victims who have families and friends that are involved. You yourself could have been a victim some time back and this brings to you flashbacks and memories and it doesn't make any sense to say that just pretend as if everything is okay, is fine, and just love them because everything is simply not fine. At least we are not feeling simply fine, we are feeling uncomfortable and uneasy not just for ourselves but also for our families.

Let's see how Jesus handles it because we have to assume that Jesus understands all of these dynamics and is going to give us something to live by which doesn't wink at sin while at the same time provide us with an ability to live together as a community even in the midst of each other as sinners.

Jesus is in Capernaum, his home town, and he is probably walking along the seaside, it doesn't say here, and he gets to a tax collector's booth. There were tax collector booths along Capernaum so that they could easily collect the tax of the fishermen as they got their catch for the day. So who were these tax collectors? I have said in the past that in Jesus' day the tax collectors were the pedophiles of our day. A pedophile is probably the worst thing that you can imagine in our culture and society today. A tax collector was the worst thing that could be imagined in Jesus' day. Pedophiles in Jesus' day were a dime a dozen as it was common for rulers to have children as slaves for whatever they may have wanted.

Tax collectors were traitors who were Jewish who worked for the Roman government. A tax collector would often rat out his fellow Jew who hadn't paid so that the Romans could go and arrest the person who hadn't paid their taxes and take them and their children as slaves until their taxes were paid in the time that they were slaves. The tax collector, like the pedophile in our culture, was the lowest of the low on the totem pole of society. So Jesus calls a tax collector, a pedophile, to serve as his apostle.

Jesus doesn't celebrate Matthew as a hero. He calls him a sinner, for so he is. Jesus spent time with him because even while we were yet sinners Jesus died for us. But there is an uncomfortable line between hanging out with sinners and celebrating them in our midst, and so as a result be seemed to be celebrating the sin. How do we as sinners allow ourselves to be in the company of sinners especially those who have committed a sin which is public and one, like Matthew's, was known to everyone in the room?

I think in these verses, and others in Scripture, we get an understanding of what Jesus did and so in turn, get a glimpse into what we are called to do. Three points I want to share with you on this Scripture and this point. 1) Jesus definitely engages the sinner. Think of all the times that Jesus engages with those that he knows has sinned. The Samaritan woman at the well who has had many husbands. Jesus engages with her without celebrating her sin. The adulterous woman, in the same way Jesus engages with her, without celebrating her sin, in fact telling her to go and sin no more. This story of Matthew where Jesus calls him but doesn't celebrate his sin. The thief on the cross where Jesus engages him and welcomes him into the kingdom of God, but again, not winking at his sin. The first point is that Jesus, and so we, are called to engage the sinner.

The second point, 2) Don't lose sight of the fact that as a result of sin people's lives have been forever altered, mostly with tragic consequences. When Jesus calls Matthew we don't hear about what type of amends he makes in this Gospel. In other Gospels we hear that he gave back money to the victims, which is nice and all, but what about those families whose husbands and children and wives the Romans picked up and made into slaves and the generational impact that this had on them. Or the adulterous woman about her husband and her children and the impact that her actions had on them. Or what would the families of the Christian martyrs say to Paul after he came to know Jesus? Their fathers, their family members are still dead at his hands. How do you look past that?

Sinners commit sin which have lifelong impacts. The victims of sexual sin will be impacted for life. Who knows for a teenage victim how they will be able to interact intimately with their future spouse? This should make us angry. It is okay to be angry with sin. Matthew is not a hero, not someone to be celebrated, his sin could have ruined lives, but he is still loved by Jesus and called to be loved and shown mercy by us. But not celebrated as a hero.

The last point, 3) our lives are going to be shaped and marked by decisions such as these and how we decide today is going to be seen by our children will be the way that they decide in the future. It will probably be used to decide on how do I interact with people that I do not like, even though this isn't necessarily the case in all circumstances. It could be the way in which it is then used to decide on how do I interact with people who are different from me, how they think, how they look.

The rule of thumb for Jesus is mercy. Mercy does not equal approval, it simply means that we recognize that they are loved by God and so must be loved by us as well. As we continue along in the story we see that Jesus has a command for Matthew, the sinner, follow me.

And Matthew leaves his job, his position, and follows Jesus. There was no celebration on Jesus' part in Matthew's sin, but rather a command and a demand that he change and follow. Same with the adulterous woman, no celebration of her sin, but a command to go and sin no more. There is a demand for a change in a life of sin. That's what we covered last week in our covenant renewal service, and everyone who took part in that service while they were in church last week determined to live differently this year than they did last year. To not allow sin to rule their life.

But even while that was the case with Matthew, when Jesus goes into the room where Matthew is the Scripture describes the scene as many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and all of his disciples. These were all of Matthew's friends, he was surrounded by people who were like him, tax collectors and sinner, the lowest on the totem pole. Jesus, simply put, was choosing to spend his time with people that society had turned their backs on, frankly, because they had chosen to their backs on society, probably first. So now you have a room full of people who have made life decisions that the Bible, Jesus himself, would call sinful. There is no celebration of sin taking place in that room, no winking at it, but also no aversion to spending time with people who have willfully sinned. And while Matthew had turned and followed Jesus and left his sinful life, most of the people in that room were still willfully sinning. They had not changed anything in their lives at all and were just there for the free food and drink. But Jesus puts no demands on his presence. He was there, fully there with them.

The Pharisees noticed that. Spending time with sinners, in any willful capacity indicated complicity and approval of their lifestyle in their minds. Remember when the prostitute came in and washed Jesus' feet and they said if he only knew who she was he would have nothing to do with her. He knew, and he also knew by his allowing her to wash his feet that he was allowing her to find value in him. She knew who she was and how people looked at her, sinners often do. And Jesus answers the questions of the Pharisees, which is a fair question, he answers out loud to everyone even though they asked his disciples and not him.

Jesus knew that the best thing to do when people are uncomfortable with certain things is to address it directly. There is a short distance between being uncomfortable and speaking with people behind the scenes and then sides being taken. In this church we speak about things directly and clearly. We try not to let things simmer behind the scenes where they have the potential to blow up.

Jesus' answer is the Scripture that we read first today, it was found in vs.6 where he states that he desires mercy and not sacrifice. Now what does that mean? He is reminding

people that it is part of God's nature to be merciful and that Jesus is acting out God's mercy by associating with sinners. But we know that it is characteristic of human communities everywhere to shun members who disregard accepted standards of behavior. Jesus isn't just a friend of sinners but their physician as well. The authentic shepherd must care for the whole flock, and not just the loyal obedient remnant.

In every generation the "tax collectors and sinners" will assume a different appearance. But they will appear. Our job is to engage in a way that mercy is evident. The central purpose of Jesus is to forgive sins, we saw that earlier in the passage at the beginning of this chapter when he told the paralytic, your sins are forgiven. The invitation of the tax collector highlights the hidden scandal of Jesus' primary purpose that all sinners will be forgiven. While the Pharisees in this passage see that obedience has to come before mercy and there must be obedience before mercy can be shown. Jesus' mission is predicated on mercy and not merit. May God bless us and keep us as we look to understand what hanging out with sinners actually means for us as individuals and as a church. Amen.