

**Matt. 9:9-13. 6-21-20. Talk about what the Church is... gathering of outcasts.**

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>12</sup> When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. <sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Those outside the Christian church will often identify us – our gatherings, our churches – with someone from this Bible section. Who is it? Well, it depends. We'd love the answer to always be: Matthew. But if you listen to the answers of unchurched individuals, in many cases it turns out to be more: the Pharisees.

Now before you get worked up over that reality, or begin to protest, pause to take in more. I'm not saying that the conclusions are necessarily accurate about you or me, or about our gatherings. But are you willing to understand the complexity involved in this issue of: what are the *perceptions* about Christians and Christian gatherings that individuals outside the church have?

By "complexity" I'm talking about this... How many times, how many places, have Christian churches (or individuals) given the impression that *you've got to dress a certain way* to fit in? Or... you have to *fit certain ideals* - like being cleaned up enough, or having yourself pulled together enough - to be welcomed, or to be *as welcomed (receive as much of a welcome)* as others?

Here is some data:

- In a survey done by Barna, 44% of young adults (millennials) agreed with the statement "the church seems too much like an exclusive club"
- 66% of those same young adults agreed that "American churchgoers are hypocritical." And if you isolate exclusively the responses of those who don't go to church, that figure jumps to 85% agreeing with the statement.
- You know the saying, "a picture is worth a 1,000 words." When shown 4 images and asked to *select which picture feels most like present day Christianity...* unchurched young adults were over twice as likely to pick a "finger-pointing" identity (41%) compared to "a hand reaching-out" identity (coming in at only 19%).

One observer has said: "Broader society often dismisses the [Christian] church today because it is perceived as fake." I'm not leveling indictments that you or I or our gatherings are fake. And some negative perception from the world certainly comes simply from individuals not liking what they hear from God's truth. But if what some people have encountered is Christianity/Christians where the image has been given "everyone has it together, and lives are perfect and pristine here," what kind of conclusion do you expect outsiders to draw? People often have a perception of "Christians" and "Christian gatherings" as this (indicating back to finger pointing). When the true message is this (showing Jesus with hand reaching out, or waving to come, come and follow).

See things from the outsider's view. Take time to ask and listen. See where they are coming from. And you'll have all the more reason – and, Lord-willing, see all the more opportunities – to communicate: "Oh, I could see why you have a negative view of the church you've seen. I would have a negative view of that too. That's not the church that I know though. Can I share with you what the church is – what it is about – for me?"

And then help them see Jesus, like this [show] with hand reaching out. To do that, you might choose to talk about this day on record in Matthew ch.9:9f. "Can I share with you what the Church is – what it's about? If the church was a gathering of ones who are worthy enough, and the unworthy were excluded, who would be left? No one. That's what we learn from Jesus. Jesus once explained that He didn't come to help the righteous. (And who really is?) He came to help sinners. And who isn't a sinner? We all are."

This is the message of the church: we have the God who assembles/gathers outcasts. We see that this day... "There was once a man named Matthew. It seems almost certain that he would have heard comments to make

one wonder the same kind of things people today wonder about. 'Is the church just a selective club, only open to individuals who are worthy enough? If so, what hope do I have?'"

Matthew as a tax collector was seen by his countrymen as a traitor, selling out to work for the occupying/conquering Romans. Whether true in every case or not, tax collectors were seen as cheats. They were shunned by the populace, as especially displayed here by the Pharisees who were viewed as the elite religious folks of the day. "Would the Christ want somebody like me to be by His side? Could the Christ welcome somebody as unworthy as me?"

Jesus, this day in Matthew's life, gives us the answer [indicate back to image: Jesus reaching out, welcoming with motion 'come / follow me'].

Matthew's personal story is our life story too. How awesome is it to celebrate God's grace – undeserved love – to sinners! God's holy standard is clear, right here [Bible]. We have fallen short of God's holy will. We deserve only God's just punishment for our sin. We were, and would have remained, outcasts from Him.

God came. For you, for me. He brought us to know and believe: "*Christ Jesus came in to the world to save sinners*" (1 Timothy 1:15), and I see myself as the first one in need. "*In Jesus – through faith in his blood – we have the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace*" (Eph.1:7).

When you are in Jesus, your past doesn't define who you are. Your sins aren't what God sees when He looks at you. You are forgiven, through faith in Jesus.

Now look what Matthew does next. "If this is offered to me, then why would it not be also for other outcasts, like me?" Matthew's never on record saying those words. But it is what he expresses. He prepares a feast, he invites those he knows, and there's a lot of people like him that gather.

And what does Jesus do? Does he pull Matthew aside and speak in a hushed voice: "Matthew, this is a little much. Isn't it enough that I've welcomed you, one tax collector? I mean this mercy thing is great and all, but there's got to be a limit!"? No.

Listen: "...many tax collectors and sinners *were actually there too!*" And who is right in the midst of them? Jesus. He came to call sinners to repentance – that means to bring to confess sin and trust in Him. He came to offer His healing to souls separated from Him. God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2).

Now comes the tension in the story. Jesus' behavior on this day was appalling to some. [in contempt] "What's your teacher doing eating with the likes of them?" The Pharisees object to what they see here. But really get the issue. To what, in particular, were they objecting? The answer is: to God's mercy. Let's just unwrap that thought a little.

Everyone identified Matthew, and his acquaintances, as "sinners." Matthew did in vs.10. Jesus did in his words in vs.13. The Pharisees certainly did.

But there's an important distinction between how Jesus uses that term and the way the Pharisees do. The Pharisees are saying: "There is no place in *our* church for sinners like that." Jesus is saying: "*My Church* is the place for sinners to come, because only here – only from me – are sinners able to be relieved of sin's burden – so that separation from God is ended."

This isn't ignoring sin. This is people being brought to know and trust in sin's solution: Jesus. When God opens our eyes to our hopeless condition, our need for a Savior from sin is clear.

The Pharisees – now – they were in denial of this. They didn't think they needed God's mercy. In their warped thinking they lived above the level of "sinners."

Jesus uses some Old Testament history to teach the Pharisees. You see, a group then also thought God would be happy because of what they offered Him, namely how many sacrifices they offered to Him. Well, God wasn't

happy – he never will be happy – with such an attitude. The law must be spoken to those who are caught in the delusion that they are self-righteous.

As a believer in Jesus, you know your sin and you know you cannot make things right with God. You appreciate that the Lord's mercy means: your forgiveness and acceptance from God – this all yours through Jesus, through trust in what Jesus has done for you.

Now something to still note...

It is important for us to hear the law, applying it daily. Why? How many times – in weakness – do you show an attitude that thinks too highly of yourself? In what ways does that affect how you view people, and interact with people? For example, when you cross paths with a person who is different – maybe something about their appearance, maybe something about the way they act – have you thought of them the same as everyone else? When you see people, do you see them as a soul whom Jesus loves and for whom He died? Is that the primary and motivating factor by which our actions toward them are guided / moved?

Thoughtlessness, or pride. Looking past someone, or down on them. We've all failed to show love and mercy, like God's love and mercy to us.

This is why we rejoice over the sight of Jesus dining with Matthew and the others with him whose eyes had been opened to their sins. Our eyes are open to our sins. And so we come here each week. And we confess our sins. We view our church as this miracle: a group of outcasts gathered in by God; Jesus here to give us His healing: "I have made you my own, washed you clean, wrapped you in my righteousness. Remain in me."

We look at this section of Matthew and, oh do we – in the church – ever identify with Matthew! We rejoice in God's mercy to us. We want others to know it too. So let's set our hearts and sights on the goal to...

Talk about what the Church is in terms like this: a gathering of outcasts, whom God has brought into His family.

Just think, if someone is outside the church looking in, what if they've never heard this Gospel truth expressed? Or maybe they've heard it, but other things have distracted them – gotten in the way of them hearing the message clearly. God's Truth, which we've seen today, clears up confusion about what Christians and Christian gatherings are about. It shapes our perspective. It gives us the truth and heart to share: our life story is just like Matthew's. In fact, it's the life story of the Church.

- God in grace has called & washed & made us His own.
- And we know that God wants everyone – and so do we – to experience the same.

This is the message of the church: we have the God who assembles/gathers outcasts. Amen.