

Matthew 9:9-13

In the Book of Proverbs, Solomon wrote, *“Do not allow **mercy and truth** to leave you. Fasten them around your **neck**. Write them on the tablet of your **heart**. Then you will find **favor and approval** in the eyes of God and man.”* How **merciful** are you? Do you find it **easy** to forgive others, even those who **despise** you? If you don't, then remember the words of St. James who wrote, *“There will be judgment **without mercy** on the one who has not **shown mercy**.”* When it comes to being kind, forgiving, and **merciful** to others, we can use all the help we can get. So today, let's consider **Our Merciful Master**, and take some lessons from the greatest of all teachers, our Lord Jesus Himself.

The mercy of our Savior knows **no bounds**. We can begin to see that in His treatment of **Matthew**, the tax collector. I guess tax collectors have **never** been too popular, not even today, but in the days of the Roman Empire they were considered to be the very **bottom** of the barrel - the **dregs** of society. And there was a good reason for it too. The Roman government had established “tax farmers” who would **bid** for the right to collect taxes in a specific area of the empire. They paid a flat rate for that privilege. But then to recoup their fee with **profit**, they would **sub-let** their area to several “**chief tax collectors**.” They in turn would hire **publicans** to do the actual collecting, and if they could charge a **higher** amount than was **necessary** and get away with it, the profit was theirs to **keep**! It's easy to see how **many** of those tax collectors gave in to the **temptation**, and thus earned a bad reputation for **all** tax collectors.

We don't know whether Matthew was an **honest** collector, or a **dishonest** one, but in either case, he would still have been considered a **bad character**. And he had **another** strike against him. In the other Gospels, Matthew is referred to as **Levi** - his **Jewish** name. For a **Jew** to collect taxes from his own people in order to support the **Roman** government - which they **hated** - marked him as a **traitor**. It was almost unforgivable.

But notice the **mercy** of our Master. Jesus **called** Matthew to be one of His 12 special disciples. He didn't ask about Matthew's background, or family, or occupation. It was enough for Jesus to know that Matthew was a **sinner**, who needed His **help**. **Matthew's** attitude here is interesting too. He writes, *“(Jesus) said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Matthew got up and **followed him**”* - an interesting response! He didn't worry about losing his **job**, or how he would feed his **family**. He was confident that Jesus would provide **solutions** to those problems. And notice how **humble** Matthew is throughout his account of what happened. Luke

tells us that when Matthew followed the Lord, he **left everything!** And the **dinner** which followed wasn't just a little **snack**, it was a great **feast** - and it was all held at Matthew's **house**, and at Matthew's **expense**.

We can **learn** from Matthew. When Jesus shows mercy toward **us**, we ought to receive it **gladly**. There is no need to question whether His mercy will be **beneficial** for us - we know it **will** be. And His mercy deserves a positive **response**. We can't do exactly what Matthew did - by inviting Jesus to physically come and enjoy a feast with us - but we can humbly recognize Him as **Our Merciful Master**. When Jesus forgives **sin** in our lives, we can show Him that we **appreciate** that mercy, by **not repeating** those sins again.

God had shown great mercy to Matthew by bringing Him into a closer relationship with Jesus. And now that Matthew knew what it meant to be a follower of Christ, and had personally **experienced** His mercy, he wanted to **share** that joy with his co-workers. That was done by means of a **feast** to which both tax collectors, and also Jesus and His disciples, were invited.

We need to realize that **eating** together was an expression of **fellowship** in their society. So, when Jesus attended this feast, the **implication** was that Jesus belonged to that **crowd** - tax collectors, adulterers, and "sinners" in general. After all, a person is known by the **company** he keeps. So, when the Pharisees saw what was happening they were pretty **upset**. But instead of going directly to **Jesus** for an explanation, they asked His **disciples**, "*Why does your teacher eat with **tax collectors and sinners?***" The disciples were probably pretty embarrassed, and didn't really have an answer for that question - but Jesus did. He said, "*The **healthy** do not **need** a physician, but the **sick** do.*" Basically He was saying, "Where else **should** I be?" Even the Pharisees had recognized that the group Jesus was among was spiritually **sick**, and that they needed **help**. Jesus was **not** there to **fellowship** with them - He was there to **help** them - to lead them to the same understanding of His **mercy** which Matthew had already experienced. It should have been clear that the **greatest sinners** would need the **most help**.

Yet, too often we react just as the Pharisees did. We look down our self-righteous noses at those who supposedly sin more than we do. Who are we to judge that? God says that even **one** sin is enough to condemn us. So, when we look at others and say, "Why don't they **give** more to the church? - or why don't they offer to **help** with some of the organizations? - or why don't they get their lives **in order?**" then we need to remember the mercy which **Our Merciful Master** showed toward the despised tax collectors. Remember it, because it's the **same**

mercy which He continues to show to **us**, and He wants us to follow His example by showing **mercy** to **others**.

The Pharisees thought they were really on top of God's Word, but Jesus showed them how **shallow** their understanding really was. He backed up His actions with the **Scriptures**. Jesus said, "*Go and learn what this means: 'I desire **mercy**, and not **sacrifice**.'*" Perhaps you recognized that as a quote from our Old Testament lesson for today. In the Old Testament, sacrifices were **required** for receiving the forgiveness of sins. Such sacrifices foreshadowed the **ultimate** sacrifice which the Messiah would make when He died on the **cross** to bring forgiveness to all people. Typical sins in **Hosea's** day included idolatry, robbery, and murder. That sounds a lot like **today**, doesn't it? I guess the more things change, the more they stay the same. In view of the fact that those sins **recurred** again and again in God's people, the sacrifices which they brought to Him were **no good** at all. In fact, they were a **mockery** of God. The people were only going through the **motions** - there wasn't a real change of **attitude** - or a movement **away** from **sin** in their hearts.

That's exactly the way the **Pharisees** were acting. They were so worried about the **form** of worship that they forgot about the **substance** of worship. Offering sacrifices twice a day, tithing, and doing no work on the Sabbath were all things in which the Pharisees prided themselves. But Jesus wanted them to see that such things were only **secondary** in importance. God wants us to show **mercy** to others, as **Jesus** did. Were the Pharisees showing mercy toward the tax collectors? No way! Jesus was pointing out that the Pharisees needed to carry out some **self-examination**. They needed to understand what God **really** wanted, and then put it into **practice** in their own lives, as a reproof for their own faults.

That's something which can easily crop up in **our** worship too. For example, do we **think about** what we are doing as we go through the liturgical portion of our worship services, or have those things become so familiar to us that they are now only **meaningless repetition**? Do we listen **attentively** to the Scripture readings and the sermon, or are our minds continually **wandering off** into other thoughts? Do we sing the hymns with **zeal** and **meaning**, or do we only remember what a nice (or perhaps unfamiliar) melody they had? If we are only going through the **motions** in our worship, then we are guilty of **formalism** too - just like the Pharisees. If there is no **meaning** to our worship, then it too is little more than a **mockery** of God.

Yet, even if that would prove to be true, there is still **comfort** for us -

comfort in knowing that Jesus had shown **mercy** to the Pharisees by calling their formalism to their attention, and giving them the opportunity to **change** their attitudes. Unfortunately for them, they **ignored** Jesus' efforts. Dear friends, when Jesus shows such mercy toward **us**, pointing out our **sins** through His holy Word, may we follow the example of **Matthew** instead of the **Pharisees**. May we gladly **accept** the mercy of our God - may we **apply** it in correcting our lives - and may we also **share** the mercy of **Our Merciful Master** with others. Amen.