

Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 25, 2017
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. 10) While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. 11) When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" 12) On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13) But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Dear friends:

I once had an elderly gentlemen tell me that he didn't like to see the doctor when he was sick because there were all kinds of sick people in the waiting room and he didn't want to catch something from them! I noticed the same thing several years ago when I had a broken leg! When I went to the doctor – there were all kinds of people who had broken bones waiting to see the doctor. I would imagine that you've probably had the same experience. You go to see the eye doctor and there are all kinds of people who have problems with their eyes. It really doesn't surprise us, does it, that there are sick people in a doctors office. After all, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Even though a healthy person may see a doctor on occasion, it's the sick people need a doctor most often.

In our text Jesus made that same statement, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** This was in response to the Pharisees who had asked why he was eating with tax collectors and sinners. They were shocked and offended that Jesus would do this – yet that should not have come as a surprise to them at all – if they had truly understood that Jesus had come to seek and to save the lost. There are probably people today that are shocked and offended by some of the people that they see in church – there are sinners there. But there's really no reason for us to be shocked at that thought because churches aren't intended to be museums of saints but hospitals for sinners.

One of the premises upon which the Christian Church is built is that

Only Sick People Need A Doctor

Let's take a closer look at the situation which lead Jesus to make this observation. Our text tells us that one day as Jesus was walking along the main highway at Capernaum that he saw a man by the name of Matthew sitting at the toll booth collecting taxes. The taxes that he was collecting was like a duty tax – a tax on the items that people were transporting. The Roman government required these taxes. Now the Jewish people hated the Roman government and it's taxes but this was the tax which they hated most of all! A Jew who would cooperate with the Romans in collecting this hated tax was hated by any respectable Jew.

Matthew was also known as Levi. It seems that he may have taken the name Matthew after he became a Christian to show just how completely he had broken with his former way of life. Interestingly the name Matthew means "gift of God."

Stories about Jesus and his teaching and miracles had spread throughout the area – and Matthew must have heard a great deal about him. Perhaps he had even secretly wished to meet Jesus. He may have wondered if the salvation that Jesus proclaimed was meant for him.

Now Jesus stopped by his tax booth and called him to follow him. Our text simply says that **Matthew got up and followed him**. In his modesty, Matthew doesn't give many details but Luke provides us a bit more information. Luke tells us that Matthew left all he had and followed Jesus. He gave up his job and his source of income to study with Jesus – just like the fishermen: Peter, Andrew, James and John had done. (Luke 5:29) **Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them**. It's not surprising that a large crowd of tax collectors would have been invited to the dinner that Matthew prepared for Jesus. After all these would have been Matthew's only friends and he wanted them to meet Jesus too. Because respectable people would have had nothing to do with him – his only friends would have been people who were regarded as "sinners."

You can imagine the "talk" among the self-righteous Pharisees – men who were regarded as fine upstanding citizens – when they heard about this. When they went to investigate and discovered that it was true – that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners, they asked the Lord's disciples why he would eat with that kind of people. To them it was unthinkable that if Jesus was really sent from God that he would associate with such people. When Jesus got wind of their visit and questions he gave this reply: **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13) ... For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners [to repentance]."**

In plain language Jesus reminded the Pharisees and us that the only people who will benefit from his work and who will truly appreciate his message are those who know that they have fallen short of God's expectations and demands – people who are spiritually sick and know it. That includes all of us, whatever our reputation in the community might be – or at least it ought to include all of us for all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The tax collectors and sinners in our text were included among those who knew that they were spiritually sick. Their fellow Jews let them know in no uncertain terms that they were not fit to associate with decent people, and their own consciences would have seconded the motion! Jesus made it plain to the Pharisees that they also were numbered among the spiritually sick and dying – in spite of their outward respectability. They considered themselves to be healthy – righteous people. But the way that they criticized Jesus for his concern for the sinners showed just how sick they really were.

It was most likely true that when it came to bringing offerings and sacrifices – that they brought them all – just as the Law required. But Jesus showed them that God required far more from them than this. He told them to go and learn what God meant when he said in the Old Testament: **'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'**

When the Pharisees indicated that they did not think that it was proper for Jesus to eat with the tax collectors and sinners so he could help them – they showed that they were willing to let these people continue in their sin and be lost forever. They also showed how unmerciful they were in their hearts. And because they were unmerciful – they were really unrighteous people who were in need of repentance. They were sick people who needed a doctor ... but they thought they could stand on their own two feet!

Jesus might talk that same way to people today – who take pride in bringing their offerings or in their church attendance – but who do not show their love for his Word and for the blessings it offers to sinners. He'd talk that way to those whose hearts were filled with self satisfaction because of what they had done. He'd want them to know that all of their righteous acts are like filthy rags in need of the healing or cleansing which he alone can provide.

Sadly the church of our day and age doesn't talk the way Jesus talked. One of the chief functions of the church is to help people come to the realization that

- are sinners,
- that they are spiritually sick,
- and that they will die eternally of this sickness
 - └ unless they get help.

I'm sure you'd agree that most people would be willing to admit that they're not perfect even non-Christians would mostly likely be willing to say that about themselves. Many people like to use that as an excuse for their weaknesses. But that's not all that we need to admit about ourselves. People have to realize that God demands absolute moral perfection – in thought, word and action – for an entire life time and that anyone who fails to live such a perfect life is ineligible to live with God in heaven.

That's like hitting the bull's eye every single time with every single thought we think, word we say and action we do. One of the Bible's favorite words for sin is a word that comes from the sport of archery. It means to miss the mark – to miss the target you were aiming at. You can miss the mark in lots of ways: you can overshoot the target, you can undershoot the target, you can hit the target but miss the center, you can even be in the area of the center of the target but not dead on. It doesn't matter – unless you are dead on – you have not hit the bull's eye!

God's bull's eye is absolute perfection – just as he is perfect. When we fail to meet this standard we are sinning. The Pharisee's were good people by community standards – but judged by God's standard the came far short of what God required.

I would hope that it would be true of each of us, too, that by community standards, we are considered to be respectable people. One would expect that from individuals who claim to be God's children. But when we come to church, we don't come because we're good – but because we realize that by God's standards we are bad. We come because we're sick – and each of us has reason to confess at the beginning of each church service that we have sinned against God in thought, word and deed.

But we don't just come to confess our sins – we come to hear God's word proclaimed to us. We've come to the place where the only Doctor who has a cure for sin has set up a clinic to treat us. When Jesus told the Pharisees that he ate with tax collectors and sinners because only the sick needed a doctor – he was implying that he was the doctor who had a remedy for sin and who could give them hope of recovery and life.

The only hope for recovery from the illness of sin lies in the forgiveness of our sins before God. This is the gift that the Lord Jesus earned for us by his holy life and innocent death. I've got a number of bottles of medication at home that didn't do exactly what the doctor thought it would do. The medicine that Christ offers is a positive cure that leaves no doubt about the outcome. Those who come to him because they want what he can give can be completely sure that they will recover from this illness and in the end find eternal life, where the sickness together with all of its symptoms, will forever be a thing of the past.

May God grant that each day of lives, we will not only see the sickness of sin within us, but that we also see and believe in the doctor who has the cure. Amen.