

# SIN AND GRACE IN MATTHEW

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This fall we are studying the Gospel According to St. Matthew in Bible class. The story of his call to follow Jesus is recorded in ch. 9:13. Matthew was a tax collector in the city of Capernaum. Mark and Luke refer to him as Levi the son of Alphaeus; the name Matthew means Gift of Jehovah. As a tax collector, Matthew was an outcast to his people because he collected taxes from his people for the Romans, their hated oppressors. Hence, tax collectors were lumped together with prostitutes and other 'sinners'. Matthew would thus have been a man of means, and a man who was conversant in Greek, the lingua franca of the day. His circle of friends would have included other societal outcasts, and he would have been very conscious of being one who was excluded and looked down on.

One day while he was conducting his business, he was spotted by Jesus. All that the Bible tells us is that Jesus spoke these words to him: "Follow Me." Matthew's response? He arose and followed him. A simple exchange, yet it contains a world of spiritual meaning. The gracious and holy Word of Jesus calling Matthew away from his tax collecting into discipleship awakened faith in Matthew and he immediately left his old life to follow Jesus. The conversion of a sinner is a great miracle. One moment Matthew was a sinful outcast, the next he was a disciple of Jesus. This is the way it is with every believer. Jesus comes to us in His grace and claims us for His own, granting us faith through the Gospel, and we are changed. Conversion is not the work of human will and reason; it is the work and gift of God received by faith. And the very faith by which we believe is also a gift of God.

I am reminded of the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian writer C.S. Lewis, who relates the story of his conversion to Christ this way: "I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the Zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. 'Emotional' is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake." (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 237)

Right after his conversion, Matthew gave a dinner at his home. Jesus was there with his disciples, and so were many of Matthew's friends; other publicans and sinners. It is as though he wants to say goodbye to his old life and celebrate his new life, and he wants his friends to be a part of it. Luther, the night before he entered the Augustinian monastery to become a monk, threw a party to say goodbye to his friends, to give away his possessions, and to share with his friends the momentous beginning of his new life. There is a real understanding that

something old is being left and something new and important begun. The believing Christian wants to share his joy with others.

The Pharisees, who believed that people are righteous by virtue of their works, and who looked down on those who didn't measure up to their standards, saw this and complained to the disciples that Jesus was eating with publicans and sinners. The implication is that if Jesus were a true righteous teacher, he wouldn't associate himself with such riff-raff. With legalists it is always a matter of us vs. them – self-exaltation. The Christian always understands that in our sinful selves we are all 'thems', but we have been included in God's church by mercy and grace, and we want all the other 'thems' to become part of 'us' in God's kingdom of grace.

Matthew climaxes the account of his conversion with the response of Jesus to the Pharisees. "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go and learn what *that* meaneth, 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice:' for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

It is not the healthy but the sick who need a doctor. The Pharisees, and all legalists see themselves as being spiritually healthy. They look at their conduct and their connections and they compare themselves favorable over against others who do not measure up. They conclude that they are good people, and that they have earned God's favor by their strict observance of God's law. The tragedy is that, despite their outward conformity to the law, and their outward connections to good people and institutions; despite the high regard in which many hold them, they are sick and in need of a doctor. Their works do NOT justify them in God's sight, and their self-exalting attitude pits them against their neighbors whom God's law has commanded them to love. You cannot love your neighbor if you despise and dismiss him. The legalist deceives himself into thinking he is what he is not; that all is well with him when it isn't. In this way he is sicker than the man who knows he's a sinner. Jesus is a physician for the souls of all men, but many will not have him because they think they're just fine without him.

Jesus then tells the Pharisees to consider what is meant by Hosea 6:6 – "I will have mercy and not sacrifice." The unmerciful, holier-than-thou attitude of the legalist reveals a spiritual sickness that will prove mortal if not healed by grace. But because the legalist conforms outwardly to all the sacrifices and other observance such as fasting, stated times of prayer, almsgiving, public worship, and pious language and conduct, he is blinded to his true condition. He thinks, "How can I be sin-sick like these other low-lives when I so scrupulously observe God's commandments?" He does not see that the failure to show mercy to others proves that he doesn't really believe that God has been merciful to him. He who will not forgive others shows that he really doesn't believe that God has forgiven him. One who knows that he is a forgiven sinner is quick to forgive those who sin against him. A Christian who bears a grudge is an ugly thing – it has no place in the kingdom of grace. Scrupulous observance of the rules does not override an unmerciful and faithless heart. Genuine observance of God's law springs from a heart of faith, and faith clings to God's mercy for sinners. A forgiven sinner is merciful, not smug.

Jesus finishes his response to the Pharisees by saying, “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Jesus saw Matthew and his friends as sinners in need of salvation. When Jesus ate with publicans and sinners it wasn’t because he preferred the company of sinful people to good people. Christ ate with sinners in order to call them to repentance so that they could enjoy the blessings of the kingdoms of grace and glory. Sinners heard Jesus gladly; they knew that they were sinners, and were thankful to hear of God’s mercy and love. The Pharisees cut themselves off from this mercy by insisting that they were righteous and did not need any repentance. Sure, they might slip up now and then, but their good deeds far outweighed the bad, and they were doing just fine, thank you. This horrible blindness afflicts most people in our culture today. The good news of a savior means little to those who think that they’re doing fine. And so they go to their graves trusting that their good works and good intentions will stand them in good stead on judgment day. What a horrible deception.

But Jesus is still calling sinners to repentance. His desire to save includes even the Pharisees. If they are lost it is not because Christ didn’t die for them; it is not because the Gospel isn’t offering life eternal to them. If they are lost it is their own fault. Christ came and died to redeem all sinners. The preaching of the Gospel is addressed to all sinners. It promises life to all. “Whoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” Matthew is an example of a sinner saved by grace.

In the light of this, it is not surprising that one of the continual themes of Matthew’s Gospel is the theme of sin and grace. Matthew’s Gospel parallels St. Paul’s words: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15). Right from the beginning of the Gospel, Matthew highlights how Christ is the savior of sinners.

Matthew begins with a genealogy which traces Christ’s ancestry from Abraham, through David, to Jesus. It is as if he wants to show that Jesus is the climax of the history of Israel. Israel’s hope as the people of God was all wrapped up in the Messiah who would come and bring universal redemption. They were not God’s people because they were better or more moral than others; in many ways they were smaller and more insignificant than any other people. They were God’s people because in mercy He called them to be the people redeemed in the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus at the end of the genealogy shows the mercy of God calling and sustaining Israel throughout its history. He shines as the Hope of Israel, the purpose of their being, their long awaited Savior. God promised Abraham that in his seed the Messiah would bless the entire world (Genesis 12:3).

Another way that Matthew uses the genealogy to show the glory of the mercy of God in Christ, is to show the sinfulness or moral questionableness of a number of key people in the very family history that ended in Christ. The names in the genealogy are not the names of an unbroken succession of morally perfect people. Israel was a nation of sinners saved by grace. To highlight this Matthew mentions four women who are part of that history to which a certain amount of stigma was

attached: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, all great, great, great, great... grandmothers of Jesus.

You can read about Tamar in Genesis 38. She was the widowed daughter-in-law of the patriarch Judah. He had promised that one of his sons would marry her and raise up seed for her, but he neglected and eventually forgot about her. She disguised herself as a harlot and Judah went in and lay with her. She conceived twins, and one of them, Pharez becomes part of the family history of Christ. When Judah finds out about the deception, he realizes his own fault and says, "She is more righteous than I." But nobody comes up smelling like a rose in this story.

The next woman, Rahab, is written about in Joshua 2 and 6. At the end of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the children of Israel under Joshua are about to go in and conquer the land of Canaan. Joshua sends two spies in to reconnoiter the land and report back. While the spies were in Jericho, they lodged in the house of Rahab the harlot. She reveals to them that she has heard how Jehovah had redeemed, blessed, and protected the Israelites, and confesses that she has come to believe that He is the true God. She then hides the spies from the men of Jericho who come looking for them, and secures the promise of protection for her and her family when the Israelites attack Jericho. The spies tell her to put a scarlet thread in her window and to gather her family together in her house. They are spared, and Rahab dwelt in Israel from that time on. She married Salmon and became the mother of Boaz the great grandfather of king David.

We learn of Ruth from the book that bears her name. Ruth was a Moabite woman who married into a family of Bethlehemite refugees living in Moab because of a famine in their homeland. All the menfolk die in Moab, and Naomi and Ruth (who has come to trust in Jehovah) return destitute to Bethlehem. Ruth is quickly embraced by the people of Bethlehem who have great respect for her character and virtue, despite her Moabish origins. A wealthy kinsman, Boaz, shows great kindness to Ruth and Naomi, and to make a long story short, marries her, and she becomes king David's great grandmother. While Ruth has no moral blemish associated with her name, she was a Moabite, and among the Israelites the Moabites were held in particularly low regard (see Genesis 19).

The last woman mentioned in Matthew's genealogy is Bathsheba. But as if to accentuate the sinfulness associated with her, Matthew simply refers to her as "her that had been the wife of Urias". You can read the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. David was walking on the roof of his palace when he saw Bathsheba bathing. He was overcome with lust and had an adulterous affair with her even though she was the wife of one of his best soldiers, Uriah the Hittite. When she becomes pregnant, he tries to get Uriah to come home and sleep with his wife so that the child will be considered Uriah's. But Uriah will not relax with his wife while his fellow soldiers are in harm's way. Therefore, David arranges Uriah's death in battle. He then takes Bathsheba to be his wife, and eventually she becomes the mother of king Solomon.

So by including these women, and the foibles of those connected with them, in the genealogy, Matthew wanted to cut short any fleshly boasting about being an

Israelite, as if physical descent meant moral superiority. We are all sinners in need of a savior, and God be praised: He has given us a Savior to the Uttermost in the person of Jesus Christ the Son of the Living God. Sin and grace. Matthew knew that he was a sinner and that Christ alone was his redeemer. One of the many things he wanted to tell the world was that though all people are sinners, Jesus is the universal Savior. A sinner saved by grace has great occasion for rejoicing: God's grace is greater than all our sin!