

### **Matthew 9:9-13**

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.

10 And as he sat at dinner<sup>\*</sup> in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting<sup>\*</sup> with him 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>But when he heard this, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup>Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

**Arms Wide Open**  
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**07/29/17**

At the end of June, we began our sermon series: **Brave New World, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church.** Before I went on vacation, we covered the first four sermons in the series, but since it has been a while I thought we would refresh ourselves on what we have covered so far.

The purpose of this sermon series has been to take an honest look at the decline of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church, and to examine some of the harder questions that are being asked today – such as what does the future hold for the church? Is it evolving into something new (and what will that look like), or is it outliving its usefulness altogether?

On and off throughout the series, I have been referencing the novel “Brave New World,” by Aldous Huxley because it forecasts a future world where God has been phased out. In Huxley’s world, humans are created through genetic engineering and their young minds are shaped by endless hours of subliminal programming. No one questions anything; everyone thinks the same, and despite several layers of hierarchy and inequality in society, everyone believes themselves to be happy. In BNW, God is not necessary, and the theological question it poses is, do we need our sin and suffering and brokenness in order to find our way to God?

Now in the world we occupy currently, we still have plenty of sin and suffering – we still have hierarchy, oppression and poverty, but in the church, the one place

we should always be able to find healing and compassion, we also hear of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual abuses that leave people feeling afraid of God, and believing that God is not safe.

So the theological question this world, is has the church become more of an obstruction to God than the Way of Christ?

In the first sermon in our series, we talked about the evolution of Christianity and how it became the very institution that Jesus had come to challenge.

The second sermon was about following the way of Jesus and the massive step back from the ego that it requires. In that sermon we talked about the pursuit of pleasure, and how that contradicts the way of Jesus, which is the way of self-emptying love.

The third sermon touched on how following Jesus by way of the church, has become more about obedience to the church rather than following Christ, and finally, the fourth sermon showed how Jesus' divinity was not even a thing until long after he was gone.

So this week, we're on the subject of tax collectors and sinners again. It seems like those tax collectors and sinners are always showing up in the gospels, but this time I think they will be quite helpful in answering the two theological questions that have been posed. Do we need our sin and suffering and brokenness to lead us to God, and, has the church become more of an obstruction to God than the Way of Christ?

Has the church become an obstruction? In many ways yes. Not the whole church, but most certainly the public face of the church. The face that the rest of the world sees.

In the eyes of the world, American Christianity has become pretty unwelcoming and mean-spirited.

Consider:

Whose voices are most amplified against equality for gays, lesbians and Trans genders?

Whose voices denounce our Muslim friends and neighbors as unwelcome and probable terrorists?

Whose voices label Pro Choice advocates as “baby killers” and sanction killing abortion doctors?

Whose voices accuse the poor of being lazy and unworthy of government help?

Not all American Christian voices, but this is the snapshot that is tacked up on the bulletin board right now, and like it or not, this is the general perception most people have of American Christians.

When I identify myself as a Christian, I have to explain that I am not that kind of Christian. It can be frustrating. But I also have to be careful not to cast aspersions on those who are. Because for better or worse, I’m mixed in them. I don’t agree with them, but we are all following Christ, and coppering a smug attitude would only place me right in the middle of the camp I’m pointing my finger at.

In the reading today, it is this exact same smug attitude that Jesus is addressing. When the Pharisees see him eating with tax-collectors and sinners, they start asking questions. ‘Why is he eating with *those people*?’ We have rules against eating with *those people*. But when Jesus heard them, he said something strange. He said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” In other words, if you think you’re so perfect and good, then you don’t really need me, now do you? If you think you think you’ve got this whole thing figured out, then I’ll just get out of your way. But think about this, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

The Pharisees were obstructing *those people* as punishment for not measuring up to *their* religious laws. Throughout all four gospels – tax collectors and sinners – over and over again – tax collectors and sinners – because where is Jesus? With tax collectors and sinners. Jesus didn’t leave much room for doubt that *those people*, those tax collectors and sinners, were the very people he was most interested in.

And how dare these hypocrites tell *anyone* they're not good enough for God and God's kingdom? How dare these hypocrites pretend as though they are above sin? Just because you go around putting on a good show and looking all pious about it doesn't mean you get to decide who's in and who's out of God's kingdom.

Rules, laws, codes, creeds, doctrine, and dogma – these are the things that anesthetize us and keep us on that lonely island of self-righteousness where it's all about patrolling the perimeter and keeping out anyone who doesn't measure up. That was the problem in Jesus' time, and it is the problem now.

This past week our president threw a bone to Evangelical Christians by tweeting that Transgender people will no longer be allowed to serve in the military. And these Christians were elated because making sure *those people* were excluded was far more important than protecting everyone's access to health care that week.

But you see, it is the Transgender person to whom Jesus would say "come along with me," and it is the Transgender person whose meal Jesus would be sharing.

Not because it is a sin to be a Transgender, who decided that? But because we are all sinners; we're all human; we all make mistakes; we all need God's grace, mercy, and guidance, and the Transgender needs that reassurance badly right now because the rules, laws, codes, creeds, doctrine and dogma have been obstructive – communicating that they are not welcome in God's kingdom, nor are they worthy of God's love.

Imagine being told all your life that you are not worthy of God's love because of who you are. Then imagine Jesus showing up and just loving you to pieces. Imagine how life-changing that would be.

"I'm after mercy, not religion. I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders."

So that leads to the second theological question, do we need our sin and suffering and brokenness to lead us to God?

In Huxley's BNW, everyone fulfilled their role. No one believed themselves to be suffering. Humans had figured out a way to keep themselves in line by suppressing everything that make us human. There was no passion and there was nothing to stir passion. There was no art, literature, relationships and most certainly no religion.

It was actually a pretty good illustration of what things would look like if religion had its way, except religion would no longer be necessary because we'd all be dead inside.

We have this thing about erasing sin, but sin is what makes us human. It's what makes us gutsy enough to try things and push boundaries, and when we get burned, it is what draws us closer to God. Our sin and our suffering are what soften us and make us real.

Remember the Velveteen Rabbit? Remember when the Skin Horse said to him:

*"Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."*

In BNW there was a colony of savages outside of Huxley's world who were still human, and in a debate with the director one of the savages said:

*"I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin."*

We're scared to death of sin, but all sin is, is the human tendency to make mistakes. And when we make mistakes and get our fingers burned, where do we turn? We turn to God right? We pray and we reflect, and then we grow from our mistakes.

But if we believe that perfect obedience is the only path to God, and that we are among the chosen few, then we can't see our mistakes; we can't see the pain we cause others, and we don't feel the need to turn to God and ask for guidance and mercy.

Sadly, the Christians who point fingers at others and condemn them to hell, are the face of Christianity today. They don't represent all Christians, but they are the ones grabbing all the headlines, and to those who don't know much about Christianity, they represent all of us.

In his time, Jesus exposed that kind of behavior for what it was by accepting everyone and sitting down to the table with the very ones who had been shunned and despised by the religious establishment. He didn't grab a sign and start protesting; he just simply ignored the rules and situated himself right in the middle of the ones who had been left to rot.

He opened his arms and he invited in everyone who acknowledged their need for his love, mercy, and compassion. And out of that ragtag group of backcountry outcasts emerged what would become *the* dominant religious force in the Roman Empire. The cat was out of the bag. All are worthy. All are loved. And there is no mistake that cannot be forgiven and redeemed into a learning experience that brings us closer to each other and to God.

For three centuries Christianity was illegal. Hundreds of thousands of Christians were tortured and killed by the Roman government, yet people just kept joining. The Christian population grew by 40 percent each decade, and by the year 350 there were somewhere in the neighborhood of 33 million Christians in the world.

Slowly but surely, Christ's way of open-arm welcome transformed the Roman Empire. It transformed the way neighbors treated the sick, the way parents treated their children, and the way husbands and wives loved each other. It was this welcoming lifestyle which attracted so many new believers.

And here's the best part, Christians weren't welcoming because they were trying to be good, they were welcoming because they were profoundly aware of God's welcome in their lives, and they wanted to share it with others.

People today are no different; the world is starving for a return to God's radical hospitality, and the churches that openly practice this welcoming form of Christianity may be the last hope the church has for survival.

To be a welcoming church is to fulfill both of the Great Commandments, to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. As Paul said, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

The realm of God is the world’s true home, and the only way people are going to know it is if we open our arms wide and welcome everyone – no matter who they are – no matter their personal preferences – no matter their mistakes.

That is how we reawaken the church of Jesus Christ – a new church for a new day! A community whose welcome is as wide as God’s, with all of our arms, stretched as far apart as they can be. May it be so! AMEN