“I DESIRE MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE”

Matthew 9:1–17

Key Verses: 9:12–13

“On hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’”

 Mercy. What is it? We use the word so much, we become numb to its meaning. People even have used it as an exclamation, to express surprise or fear: “Mercy!” But to appreciate what mercy truly is, let’s think about its opposite: hard-hearted, cruel, or ruthless. We may try to hide, but the real world we live in is tough. In his theory of evolution Charles Darwin coined the phrase “survival of the fittest.” It’s also been used to describe human societies. In our world it seems that only the strongest people are successful, while others fail and die. And in our human ambition we don’t care too much about those who don’t make it.

 But mercy is a key teaching in the Bible, and a core attribute of God. God is described as “rich in mercy” (Eph2:4). God’s mercy is his compassion, his forgiveness, and his willingness to alleviate pain and suffering. God is the God of justice who punishes those who do wrong, but his mercy triumphs over judgment (Jas2:13). God’s mercy is best seen in Jesus. Matthew tells us that Jesus our King came to save us from our sins (1:21) and bring us back to his kingdom (3:2; 4:17,23; 5:3; 9:35; 10:7; 24:14; 25:34) by his great mercy. In his Sermon on the Mount he taught us to live as his kingdom members, saying, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (5:7). Jesus is the King of mercy; his kingdom is a kingdom of mercy. Receiving and showing mercy are key to living as kingdom members. Today Jesus shows us how to do it. He shows mercy to a paralytic and a tax collector. Then he challenges us to go and learn what God’s mercy means in real life. May God help us accept his word this morning.

Look at verse 1. “His own town” refers to Capernaum, which Jesus made his base of operations in his Galilean ministry. Read verse 2. Matthew gives us a much shorter version of this event than Mark does. He focuses on what Jesus says to the paralytic. But he also tells us that Jesus did this because of the faith of the men who brought him. Why is their bringing the paralyzed man to Jesus called “faith”? It’s because when someone is paralyzed, they usually don’t get better; they just have to live with paralysis. But these men believed that Jesus could heal him. It isn’t just a story about physical healing. Like leprosy, paralysis is a metaphor for what sin does to us. Sin makes us paralyzed. Sin makes us powerless to do the things God wants. There are so many spiritually paralyzed people. We may feel burdened and want to run away from them, but Jesus wants us to have faith to bring such people to him for healing. And what heals spiritual paralysis? Read verse 2 again. Some people would rather scream at a spiritual paralytic: “Get up! You’re lazy! Work harder!” But it never works. Rules and lots of pushing don’t really help. But Jesus’ forgiveness works.

Jesus is intentionally teaching something else here. Our real problem isn’t our condition or situation; it’s the sin in our souls. Jesus isn’t saying that God struck this man with paralysis because he’d committed some sin. He *is* saying that the sin in his heart was a more serious problem than his physical problem. It’s an important truth: Jesus isn’t interested in merely solving the surface problems in our lives; he wants to get at our core problem, our sin problem. We may not think we have a sin problem. Our other problems in life may feel way more real and way more pressing to us. But to Jesus, our core problem is sin.

 Read verse 3. Why were these people being so critical? To them, only God could forgive sins: Jesus acting like he could forgive was like trying to take the place of God, which is blasphemy. But were they really just having a theological problem with Jesus? No. The real problem was they weren’t open-minded and willing to learn from Jesus. They thought they knew better. And it was even worse. Jesus said they were entertaining “evil thoughts” (4). Here, “evil thoughts” means looking at God’s servant with human eyes and criticizing. Such criticism is evil because it’s against what God is trying to do.

Read verse 5. At first it’s hard to understand what this means. To us, it seems easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven”; it’s hard to cure paralysis. But to Jesus, it was *easy* to cure paralysis; it was much *harder* to tell a paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven.” To forgive him Jesus would have to die in his place. It’s still hard to touch somebody’s sin problem; we’re likely to get a hostile reaction. It’s hard to help someone experience God’s grace, but it’s so important. It’s what our King Jesus came to do and what his kingdom is all about. People who don’t experience his forgiveness can’t get into his kingdom, no matter how hard they work or how good they seem. Personally, we need to humble ourselves to accept Jesus’ spiritual help. We need to know how sinful we are, yet how great his forgiveness is. We also need to have Jesus’ point in helping others. We need to be praying for people, most of all, to experience his forgiveness personally.

Read verse 6. Jesus healed the man *only* because he wanted to demonstrate his authority on earth to forgive sins. Our King Jesus has authority, but he uses his authority to *forgive*. And his forgiveness brings spiritual *healing*. It fills us with awe and praise to God (7,8). So many people think they’ve sinned so much, God could never forgive them. But that’s not true. Jesus has authority on earth to forgive the worst sins imaginable. Jesus really wants us to *believe* his authority on earth to forgive sins. When we truly *believe* it, we can get up from spiritual paralysis and start living for the glory of God. When we believe his forgiveness, we also can forgive others, even those who hurt us badly (6:12,14, 15). Jesus’ kingdom isn’t about rules and works—it’s about *forgiveness*.

Read verse 9. Again, Matthew tells the story so briefly, but it’s loaded with meaning. In those days, tax collectors were lumped together with public sinners (9:11) and godless pagans (5:46,47). It was because they sided with the Roman oppressors and were traitors to their own people. In fact, tax collectors used their authority to squeeze money out of poor people to make themselves rich. The stigma was as bad today as being a child molester. When most people saw a tax collector, they would get sick to their stomach. They would avoid them. No religious leader would associate with such scoundrels. But Jesus did. Why? No doubt he was still thinking about demonstrating his authority on earth to forgive sins. The forgiveness of sins is still this *radical*, radical enough to reach out to the most *scandalous* people. In this world, when people make a serious life mistake, their careers can be over. But Jesus’ kingdom is different. Jesus was working to build a kingdom of forgiven *sinners*, a kingdom that *welcomes* forgiven sinners.

 Read verse 9 again. What do Jesus’ words “Follow me” mean? He was calling Matthew to a completely new life. He was challenging him to repent. He was telling him to stop his selfish, cruel way of life and begin a new life like Christ, the compassionate Shepherd. He was calling him out of a life of chasing money into a life of seeking God and his kingdom (6:33). Jesus’ words “Follow me” are very personal. We all like to think we follow no one but ourselves. But whether we realize it or not, we’re all following *someone* or *something*. Sometimes it’s a conglomeration of many things and people, many social and cultural influences. The Bible challenges us, in view of God’s mercy, *not* to conform any longer to the pattern of this world (Ro12:1,2), but to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices like *Jesus* did. Like Matthew, if we follow money, we’ll end up feeling lonely and despised. Following Jesus amidst the pressures and pulls of this world is hard. But we end up so blessed in his kingdom. Jesus is saying to each of us today, “Follow me.”

 How did Matthew respond? It says, “...and Matthew got up and followed him.” Wow! No hesitation, no calculation. In this Gospel we’ve seen Jesus’ authority over sicknesses, over evil spirits, over nature, and authority to forgive sins. Now we see his authority over human beings. Jesus has authority to claim anybody’s life for his use, for the work of his kingdom, because he is Lord. Matthew followed so quickly probably because he was sick and tired of his tax collector’s life. It's a powerful reminder that money or material things never makes people happy. Knowing Jesus personally makes us really happy.

Read verse 10. In going into his house and eating with him, Jesus was accepting Matthew and making friends with him. And he was going to be with him from now on (1:23; 28:20b). Many tax collectors and “sinners” came and ate with him and his disciples. In that strictly religious society, they were outcasts. The news that the rabbi Jesus had called Matthew to be one of his disciples surprised these tax collectors and sinners. It made them curious. It gave them hope. Most of them had lived rotten lives. But when they came, Jesus welcomed them and freely ate and drank with them. Jesus didn’t come to impose legalisms on people; he came to be with lost people. He came to make friends with sinners. He came to give sinners his forgiveness. This dinner at Matthew’s house turned into a party. There was food and drink enough for everybody. Matthew the selfish tax collector suddenly became generous. I'm sure it wasn’t a serious, heavy or gloomy meal; there was real joy and laughter. It was an exuberant celebration, a picture of the joy of God’s kingdom because of Jesus’ mercy.

 Unfortunately, some people were unhappy. Read verse 11. Why were the Pharisees even there? It certainly wasn’t to learn; it was to find fault with Jesus. They tried to poison the disciples’ minds against Jesus behind his back. How did Jesus respond? Read verse 12. Here Jesus compares people like tax collectors and sinners to “the sick.” He’s saying plainly that they’re spiritually sick. It’s a radically different way of looking at people. It’s looking at people with God’s mercy. When we view people with critical eyes, we see all their faults and can get angry or even disgusted, wondering how they could do such things. But when we view people through the eyes of God’s mercy, we can see that spiritually, they’re sick; they’re wounded. They don’t need a judge; they need a doctor. And not a doctor who comes in quickly for a few minutes then leaves, but a doctor willing to stay with them until they’re healed. Matthew wrote in 8:17: “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.’” Jesus was willing to be with Matthew patiently, no matter how long it took, how much he would be criticized, until Matthew was completely healed spiritually. Learning God’s mercy involves learning to be with people who are spiritually sick. Those who truly follow Jesus don’t isolate themselves from the spiritually sick; they are with them closely, just as Jesus was. What spiritually sick person are we with right now?

 Read verse 13. Jesus gives a challenge to the self-righteous Pharisees. They thought they knew the Bible so well, but they had only head knowledge; they didn’t really learn it. So Jesus quoted to them from the prophecy of Hosea. Hosea’s story in the Bible is famous. God wanted to teach him his mercy in a very personal way. He challenged him to go and marry a prostitute. And when she kept returning to her old life of prostitution, God told Hosea to go and take her back to be his wife again. God was using this painful experience to illustrate his mercy to his thoroughly corrupt people. God’s mercy embraces sinful people again and again until we can return to him with all our hearts. The Pharisees thought God was pleased with their sacrifices and strict adherence to religious rules. But God isn’t legalistic; God is merciful to people. God wants his people to experience and practice his mercy. Legalism stifles, but mercy heals. Jesus said, “But go and learn what this means.” He wants us not only to know his mercy in theory, but also to learn how to practice it. Learning God’s mercy is a life-long process. But we have to be intentional about it. And it’s got to be “real.” It has to affect how we treat our parents, siblings, spouse, children, people at work or school, even strangers, not to mention people at church.

Some other people also weren’t so happy with this dinner party. Read verse 14. These disciples of John the Baptist thought they were better than Jesus’ disciples because they fasted often. What did Jesus say to them? Read verse 15. Jesus compared himself to a bridegroom, and his kingdom, to a wedding celebration. Just as a bride finds joy in her husband, so Jesus our King is our true source of joy. When we experience his mercy and show it to others, we’re filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy (1Pe1:8). The imagery here also refers to his death on the cross, when he was “taken” from us. When we think about his death for our sins, it’s the time to mourn (5:4; 2Co7:10). Read verses 16–17. The old garment and the old wineskins symbolize self-righteous people with their own fixed ideas. The new garment and new wineskins symbolize people like Matthew. They know they’re sinners and are humble enough to listen to Jesus and learn from him, humble enough to accept his forgiveness. Jesus didn’t bother with self-righteous people; he invested himself in people humble enough to learn and receive his grace. We should, too.

Read verses 12,13 again. May God help us experience his mercy personally. And may he help us make a new decision to follow Jesus and go and learn how to practice his mercy.