

# A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Thee Perspective”

Matthew 9: 9-13

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James Sanders says that often when we read the Bible we take the wrong perspective and consequently we misread the text.

We take the wrong seats...

Get in the wrong shoes

Fill the wrong sandals...

And in the process we misunderstand what the story wants to say.

I think he's on to something... we misread or at least miss something of what we could know if we could experience the text from certain vantage points.

For instance, in today's gospel reading... can you sit down at the table with Matthew? There you sit, in that tax collector's booth. No one comes by to chat. Everyone passes by on the other side of the street... except for Jesus on this day.

The way Matthew accounts for it, Jesus just blouses up and says, “**Follow me.**”

Like Matthew is sitting there, you're sitting there... working... **“4 x 6 is 24, carry the two, plus 8 makes 104 ... add the 20 % surcharge for my time and effort... you owe me and the Roman government I work for, 124 shekels. You can pay now or in three installments but I'll have to charge you 10% interest.”**

“**Follow me.**” And you do. Because, I suppose, Jesus is so alive, so connected to Being and life, that he radiates something... and some saints do, you know. So when this walking, emanating, being blouses by and says “follow me,” you just do.

That's kind of weird, huh? Abrupt. Maybe the author's way, Matthew's way, of saying, **“this is what it's like when God interrupts a life... don't expect it to be anything but strange.”**

Or do you imagine it differently... sitting there in Matthew's seat... quill in hand... ledger before you... but you're a million miles away. You always daydream your 8-5 hours away. You endure... is that it?

You hate what you do and what you've become...

it has no meaning, of course...

You've paid the bills but sold your soul.

And you'd love a way out... you're ready for change and something has been cooking in your soul. And “*when the student is ready, the teacher shows up,*” “**Follow me,**” and you do... because you know you have to have something else. Is that what it's like in Matthew's booth?

Or is it that this is the first fellow Jew to speak to you in so long, you're just curious.

**“What kind of rabbi calls someone like me?”**

From Matthew's booth, can you feel the shock of it? **“Me????? You've got to be kidding. Dang... he'll take anybody.”** Matthew tells the story with that kind shock, “dang,” in mind.

Jesus calls Matthew prior to any hint of repentance. Jesus doesn't find Matthew sitting in a support group for recovering, reforming tax collectors... **“Hi, my name's Matthew, I'm a**

**low-down, snake-of-a-sinning tax collector.”** Even if he was remorseful... Matthew was busy sinning when Jesus found him and called him... called you, I mean. And that should shock you down to your sandals, if you're wearing Matthew's.

It sure shocked the Pharisees, who took note. Matthew follows and Jesus winds up at his house at a big party. And the Pharisees, now you need to be wearing one of their robes, are shocked. **“What is this joker doing?”**

From that vantage point... what Jesus is doing would turn your stomach. Alarms would sound. **“You're not only fraternizing with the enemy... no-good, Caesar-assisting, tax collector... you're being contaminated and made ritually unclean and unworthy by eating with him.”**

If you're wearing those robes, are you? ... Put them on, now. If you're wearing those robes, you feel a sense of duty to maintain some values. Can you feel that? ... the burden of what's right and true? ... you know that feeling.

**“Someone must resist this drift away from what we've known...**

**Right is right and wrong is wrong...**

**Our tradition matters...”**

How are those robes fitting? They fit fine on my shoulders. Insiders protect... they conserve... and usually mean well. But conserving can become critiquing and critiquing can become first response... second nature.

Most of us don't need a Pharisee's robe to feel what it's like to be sizing folks up and judging them. **“Who's worthy to be a disciple? Who's fit for church?”** We know who is, and Matthew, that immoral Matthew, isn't. Is that what it's like in the Pharisees' robes?

Or maybe wearing that robe in this scene doesn't lead to such condemnation, maybe just curiosity. You've been given some truth... a religion... a way to be... a path to salvation... and here is one who seems to be doing it a different way.

So, you're curious... **“What does it mean that Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners?”** Maybe like Matthew at the tax booth, you've found the limits of your life ... of your religious garb... Legalism is always a dead-end, so you're seeing something new and really asking, **“Why is he doing that?”**

They ask the disciples... who I imagine standing at a comfortable distance... They're followers... but not yet sold out. They're nervous. **“Is this okay? ... he took us dancing last night, for goodness sakes, ... aren't we supposed to be doing holy stuff? ... shouldn't we be more serious or something? Aren't we supposed to be – you know – saving the world?”**

What's it like to be a disciple and have to save the world or explain Jesus? You like some of what you see in Jesus and aren't so sure about the whole nine yards, are you? Some of this feels real good and some of it seems backwards, and you don't say it out loud where Jesus can hear, but you're keeping your options open in case this Messiah-following thing doesn't work out.

You're a part of this God movement; you've said yes, but there's so much you don't get. You aren't sure you want Matthew on the team. How are those sandals fitting? You have more questions than answers. And people are asking you to give answers.

You're standing there... on the edge of this scene and a Pharisee asks you, **“What’s your teacher doing over there... eating with Matthew and those other morally questionable people?”**

You stammer... thinking... *“I’m pretty sure Jesus covered this last week.”* Your eyes dart towards the other disciples’ eyes with that... *“I didn’t know this was going to be on the test”* kind of look.

I’m figuring Peter probably spoke up with some feigned confidence. **“Ah... yes... well, this is what we call “strategy.” It’s our “friendship evangelism” plan. Jesus gets in good with them and then he goes to preaching. Any minute now, he’ll be explaining the Kingdom of Heaven to them, I’m sure... it’s strategy ... classic Jesus move ... vintage.”**

It’s not always an easy thing making Jesus seem palatable to the powers that be ... making Jesus acceptable ... user-friendly ... and maybe we shouldn’t try. Disciples aren’t supposed to explain away and re-interpret their teacher... but that’s what we tend to do, especially when we’re standing as disciples at too great a distance... when we’re not at the table with Jesus.

Jesus is at the table. Go there now... take his seat, best you can. Can you feel the joy of simply being present in that moment? It’s a great moment. Everyone is really enjoying themselves. No one is in a hurry. Everyone is really there. No deadlines, no waitresses to rush them off... no baby sitters to get home to. Everyone is present.

The food is great. You’re re by the Sea of Galilee so you can just imagine the meal. It’s the best... You start out with some oysters on the half shell with some horseradish sauce... You have a cup of lobster bisque or clam chowder (I know, the Sea of Galilee is fresh water... give me a break, I’m trying to get you to use your imaginations here).

You have the catch of the day... some fish; broiled with something spicy piled on the top. These courses take time and nothing is rushed and it’s all complemented with the best wines and ales.

There’s a three-piece band playing through most of the meal and occasionally you get up and do the Hebrew Hustle or the Palestinian Polka.

Later they bring out the dessert tray.

It’s your choice of Fig Pudding,

Figs Foster, Figs Jubilee, or Figs in a Blanket.

(They were a little limited on desserts.) Everyone’s full, sipping coffee and nibbling on whatever dessert they have room for.

The conversation is lively and playful. Lot’s of tax collectors there and so everyone is telling tax collector jokes. **“How can you tell when a tax collector is lying? His lips are moving?” “Why won’t a snake bite a tax collector?” “Professional courtesy.”**

And Jesus is there because he has this way of being where he is. **“Jesus, I’m having a dinner party. Want to come?” “Love to.”**

There is a Hasidic tale about a teacher who lived an unusually abundant and full, beautiful life. When he died one of his disciples was asked, "What was most important to your teacher?" The student answered, **"Whatever he happened to be doing at that moment."** (Spiritual Literacy, p 215)

Jesus doesn't have an agenda at the table. Except living... doing his life sacramentally... where everything is holy.

Jesus is there enjoying everything... the food, the conversation, the entertainment, the humor, the people... the moment. He's not buttering people up for a sales pitch about God.

Jesus was where he was... present to that moment. To the delightful conversation... good music and food... laughter... to people... and therefore to God.

I find myself thinking about that other meal... the one the night before Jesus died where he alone was able to wash the feet of his friends. And John tells us that he could do so because **he knew where he was from and he knew where he was going**. He knew... who authored his life... and who would keep it. Jesus lived in and from that reality.

A life lived in and from the mercy of God... so he could wash feet...

He could call really rotten people to follow him.

He could have a good time at a table.

He knew the center point of all existence was the mercy of God... and when you know that, it changes everything. You can celebrate life and surrender it. Live life and let go of it.

This is Thee Perspective. Matthew needs to get there from the guilt and boredom of his tax booth. And the Pharisees need to make their way there from tense, weighty lives of obsession and critique ... Those robes are too heavy. The disciples need to find that center, so they'll know that their lives are not simply utilitarian... Disciples who think of themselves only as tools in God's hands get way too serious and stop sitting at tables. It's a job hazard for those who do a lot of church – we need a mercy perspective.

We need to arrive at the mercy point. And we can do that at this table.

Come to this table, Matthew... it's a chance to start over, you can begin again, just like you are... Jesus is calling you just as you are.

Come to this table, all of you Pharisees who are “weary and heavy-laden”... You're sick too, and need a physician who can heal you. He can teach you what it means that God wants mercy and not sacrifice.

And you disciples, feeling the need all the time to answer for Jesus... working hard for God, serving... serving... but not really ever sitting down at the table to receive. Or maybe following, but at such a distance that you don't really know what Jesus is up to. There is a mercy you need to know.

Jesus said, **“Listen! Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; and if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.”**