

A Sermon for DaySpring

“Go and Learn”

By Paul Carron

Matthew 9:9-13

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Jesus must have been a charismatic figure. I mean, he walks up to Matthew, a wealthy young business man busy at work, and tells him to drop what he is doing and hang out with him for awhile. But we know from other times when Jesus tells someone to follow him that it is not a matter of simply hanging out. This is a major career shift. Like someone who has been in grad school for 7 years up and deciding to join a rock band (I can't say the thought hasn't crossed my mind... okay, perhaps this is a little more serious than that).

So what does Matthew do? He gets up and he goes. I can't help but wonder what was going through his mind. Now of course, Jesus the incarnate God has the power and gravitas to attract anyone, even a tax collector, and the Spirit moves wherever it will. Even still, I think that if we look back on our own various callings, whether they be to conversion, to ministry, to a new vocation, to a major life-change, we can see that something was stirring deep in our souls. God was at work and we didn't even know it. Surely God was already at work in Matthew as well. He must have at least known something about this Rabbi; perhaps he had heard some of the unbelievable stories or even witnessed a healing. But all we are told is that he follows.

Maybe Matthew was just having a quarter-life crisis, or business was slow. Or perhaps the nature of his business was beginning to wear on him. Earlier that day a young farmer with his wife and three young daughters came to the booth to pay their taxes. It had been a hard year on farmers, and clearly this family had felt the brunt of it.

Tattered robes...

worn-out sandals...

eyes filled with hunger and sadness.

As Matthew saw them approach, his stiff cheeks and hard eyes gave way just a little. But he quickly collected himself, sat up straight and looked sternly at them and quietly demanded the tax, which of course included his usual bonus. As they slowly walked away, the youngest daughter looked at her dad, whose head was hanging ever so slightly, and asked what was wrong. This was not an unusual experience for Matthew, yet for some reason today it struck him differently. He swallowed hard, and motioned to the next person in line. It was a single man, about the same age as Matthew. But he looked different than the others. He seemed to penetrate Matthew with his quiet, intense look. He calmly paid his taxes, which weren't much on his modest carpenter's salary, but then he lingered for a moment. Matthew turned to file away the money, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the young Rabbi still standing there looking at him with those penetrating eyes. He turned back to the stranger, but before he could say anything the Rabbi spoke first.

Matthew, follow me.

No cute talk, no comments like *Are you tired of your current job? Would you like to work less hours and make more money? Well look no further; I've got the solution for you.* No, just one simple command. Something clicked deep in Matthew. It was almost the end of the day, so he decided to pack up and go home, and he invited Jesus to come with him. He didn't think that Jesus would actually come. He was having some friends over, and they were not the types that you find sipping a latte with Rabbis in the local coffee shop. Besides, the guys Jesus was with might not mix well with this group. We all know what it's like trying to mix two groups of friends, having to play two roles.

Well over here we have Bill. He owns a laundromat, and this is Diane. She works in the 'entertainment' industry. Oh and here is Jesus. He is a traveling miracle worker. This is Peter; he's um, a zealot. But don't worry, he promised to leave his sword outside.

Even still Jesus seemed pretty excited. When they got to Matthew's house the saints and sinners party got going. But just then another group of Rabbis, some Pharisees, were passing by, and they could not believe their eyes. The young rabbi Jesus was at a party with tax collectors and sinners. As the Pharisees stood just outside the door, beside themselves, one of Jesus' disciples approached them. A Pharisee scoffed, *What in the world is your teacher doing with these people? Doesn't he know that they are sinners, that they're unclean?* Before any of the disciples got a chance to answer, Jesus looked up from the table. He paused for a minute as the room grew quiet. *Those who aren't sick don't need a doctor, do they? Go and learn what this means; I desire mercy and not sacrifice. After all, I'm not here to call righteous people, but sinners.*

I would love to see the looks on the faces of these Pharisees, to be a fly on the wall during their conversation later that night. Jesus had managed to hit them from both sides, so to speak. On the one hand, he gives them an apparent compliment; *I haven't come for the righteous.*

Well thanks, Jesus. You're right; we shouldn't be at this ridiculous party... with these... tax collectors, traitors. And besides, if that is what this Rabbi Jesus is really about, then he certainly shouldn't be hanging out with us. But those folks? Should any rabbi really hang around with them? And what did he mean by telling us to go and learn. We know what the law requires, and we get it done.

But on the other hand, Jesus' comments were not so flattering. These guys would know the context of the verse that Jesus quoted, and I'm guessing that they wouldn't like it. The prophet Hosea, speaking on behalf of God declares:

Your love is like the morning dew that disappears, so I will cut you with the words of my prophets, and kill you with the words of my mouth...

These are harsh words indeed. Hosea was commanded by God to marry an adulterous woman to symbolize Israel's unfaithfulness. Israel was worshipping Baal and ignoring those in need, and God was angry. Some of the things that God says he will do to Israel, his chosen people, are almost unbelievable:

I will be like a lion tearing them to pieces

Ripping them open

I will not let their children survive.

Hosea paints a picture of a God who is so passionate about his people that their betrayal breaks his heart. So through Hosea, God calls Israel, like Hosea's adulterous wife, to return.

Return to the Lord for healing.

For God requires mercy.

God requires the same steadfast love that he gives.

He requires the same kind of attitude and action that Hosea has demonstrated towards his wife. Hosea keeps on loving Gomer in spite of her unfaithfulness, in spite of her faults.

But why would Jesus be telling the Pharisees to go and learn what this means, when clearly they already know? They can quote Hosea chapter and verse. They know the prophets, they know what the covenant requires, and they truly believe that they fulfill it, and in a sense they really do. But something is missing in their appropriation of Hosea's message. A couple of chapters later Jesus runs into a group of Pharisees who object to Jesus' association with sinners and to his work of healing on the Sabbath. Jesus accuses them of missing the forest for the trees (Hinkle Edin). *You tithe a tenth of your mint, dill and cumin*, he says to the scribes and Pharisees, *but have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.* The law includes ritual as well as love. And they certainly wouldn't love Gomer, and they don't understand why they should love a traitor like Matthew. They can't see anything wrong with themselves, and so they can't identify with Matthew's shortcomings.

Mercy is an interesting concept in that way. Mercy is kind of a subtype of compassion, sort of like both lions and Siamese are cats. Compassion is the umbrella term that literally means to feel with someone, and you can't feel with someone if you can't relate to them. When I perceive someone compassionately, the weakness or suffering or dysfunction I see in him is a quality that I also see in myself. The Pharisees are right about one thing; Matthew certainly isn't righteous, and he certainly doesn't deserve mercy. He is a Jew in bed with the Romans selling out his own people and getting rich off it. If anyone deserves righteous indignation, it's Matthew. But isn't that the point? That's just what mercy is, being able to look at someone who is sinful and undeserving of love and loving them anyway.

Here is where we can see the wisdom of the lectionary in putting this text alongside Romans 4. Paul makes it very clear that Abraham wasn't blessed because he deserved it. No one deserves it because no one can do all the law requires on their own. We are all sinners, and none of us can love God and neighbor without God's radical intervention. No one can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and be merciful. Abraham needed God's mercy, but apparently the Pharisees do not. At least this is something that they cannot see.

Mercy requires a level of self-knowledge, of self-understanding, the realization that I myself am in need of something that I don't deserve. Remember the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke's gospel? The Pharisee prays and thanks God that he is not like the tax collector. The tax collector beats his chest crying to God for mercy. *Lord have mercy on me.* The Pharisee cannot see the sin in himself, cannot imagine that on a very deep level he is no different than the

tax collector. And so long as he is blinded by his own self-righteousness, mercy just isn't an option.

We can easily imagine that that same Pharisee is at our party. He sees another tax collector and Jesus in the same room and cannot believe it. And what does Jesus do? He tells him to go and learn. Jesus knows this transformation is going to take some time. It is going to take some time to move past the ego that keeps the Pharisee confident that he is justified and righteous. It is going to take some time to look into the eyes of a sinner like Matthew and see himself, his own sin, his own neediness. It's going to take some time because the kind of mercy that Jesus requires is both a character trait – something that's in me, that's such a deep part of who I am that it flows out of me naturally – as well as heartfelt emotion. And there are times when it might require some imagination. Because in a very real sense our Pharisee isn't like Matthew. Our Pharisee is a good guy, gritting his teeth and doing what he supposed to while that tax collector is just having himself a good ol' time, working for the Romans, making his living ripping off his own people, throwing lavish parties at night. Perhaps the Pharisee needs to take a moment and imagine himself in Matthew's shoes. What if he had been raised differently? What if he had made a few wrong choices? What if God's mercy hadn't been poured out on him like it had? He might soon see that he really isn't all that different from Matthew after all. But he doesn't think like that, he doesn't want to see those things, and so he must go and learn, because this is something that he is not yet in the position to hear.

Matthew, on the other hand, is in a position to hear. It doesn't take much imagination for him to see his failures. And to be shown love after all that he's done might not be easy for him to accept, but he's certainly willing to try. He is willing to see where this absurd mercy that knows no boundaries leads. This is Matthew's call. And it's a call for all of us. Matthew doesn't get a shot at love and forgiveness unless someone is willing to take a chance on him, to show him the same kind of love that we have been shown. And I have a hunch that it won't take much imagination for most of us to see ourselves in Matthew. If we can, I think that we will at least be on the right track. But the commandment to us is still the same: *Go and learn what this means; I desire mercy...*

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