**“Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?” – Matt. 9:9-13**

**Intro**

Many of you who know me, and know my family, know that my wife is a Pharmacist. And one of the main tasks of her profession is to take prescriptions for medications that people bring in, and fill those prescription for them. Which means she is ensuring that this is the right medication for the patient’s condition; that it’s the right dose; and that there are no contraindications with other medications; she then counsels the patient on how to take the medication properly; describes possible side-effects, and also counsels the patient on healthy practices in general which will aid in their recovery. And that’s not even a half of all she does. Beyond that, she can also alter a prescription based on her professional judgment. It’s a very involved profession and requires a great deal of knowledge and expertise. I promise you – for your own safety’s sake – never say within earshot of my wife that Pharmacists are just “pill counters.” I’m just letting you know, that’s gonna go really bad for you.

But in spite of all the things my wife can do with a prescription, do you know what the one thing is that she *can’t* do? Write one herself. In fact, even if she is 99% sure that she knows exactly what someone’s medical condition is, she cannot take out a prescription pad, and write a prescription for someone herself. The *only* person - as far as I know – who can write a prescription, is a doctor or a physician of some kind: family doctor, veterinarian, psychiatrist, etc. And one reason for that is b/c – along with learning about the drugs that they will be prescribing – doctors also are trained to diagnose illnesses. Being able to properly diagnose what’s wrong with someone – through observation, questioning and blood tests – is an essential step that must be taken *before* any medication can be prescribed. So, you could say, it is b/c doctors are trained *first* /to figure out what’s wrong with you, that *that* is why they are also given authority to prescribe the medication to fix what’s wrong with you.

If you haven’t been with is recently, each week in this current series we’re in, we’ve been looking at a question that Jesus was asked during His earthly ministry, and then discovering how the way Jesus responded to that question, reveals more of who He is. And this morning, I want us to look at a question that the Pharisees – the religious scholars of the day – asked Jesus: “Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (x2) And in responding to their question, what I want you to see today, is that Jesus reveals Himself as **the Doctor/Physician;** the Doctor who perfectly diagnoses the illness, and Who also gives the perfect prescription *for* the illness.

And the reason why this is so important for us to see is b/c / the illness that Jesus perfectly diagnoses in our passage today, is also the exact same illness that infects every single one of us today; it’s the illness that likes to camouflage itself in every part of our lives /but which also shows up / every time we recognize that there’s something wrong with the world; like when relationships break apart, when people get cancer, when un-born children are sold piece by piece, and when profit margins become more important than caring for our planet. It’s the illness that is terminal /unless it’s treated with the right prescription: that illness /is sin.

And I know – whether you’re a Christian or not here today – that that word, “sin”, might come along with a whole lot of baggage for you this morning and you’re thinking, “Are you kidding me? You’re gonna use a word like “sin” in 2015??? Hey buddy, guess what? The dark ages before the enlightenment called, and they want their word back!”

Well, I’ll tell you what: bear with me for a few minutes this morning and let me see if I can help you see that – really – “sin” is just a word that the bible uses to describe all the things we do – by commission and omission – that keep us from being in a relationship to a holy God. That’s it! It really isn’t any more complicated than that.

And the amazing message of Christianity / which is really summarized in our passage this morning / is that, Jesus – our great Physician - came to seek out, *and* offer a life-saving prescription, to sin-infected men and women like you and me. That’s the whole reason He came.

And as we look at our passage this morning, I wanna break it down into three sections to help us understand how He did that. So this morning, I want to talk about **the unexpected appointment, the false diagnosis,** and finally **the double-sided prescription.** (x2)

So if you’ve closed your bibles, please open them again to Matthew 9 and we’ll check this out together.

Alright, so let’s begin by looking at,

1. **The unexpected appointment – vs. 9**

If you look at the first half of vs. 9 with me, this is where Matthew describes this first meeting with Jesus. Look with me there. Matthew writes **(READ vs. 9a).** Now, the way tax collectors were viewed in Jesus’ day /is extremely significant in understanding the power of this passage. So, even though some of this may already be familiar to you, I want to just go over it again quickly /so that we’re all on the same page here.

Tax collectors were a hated group of people at this point in history – maybe that’s not hard at all for you to imagine. But – even if you’ve had some “trying seasons” with Canada Revenue Agency or the IRS – it’s, really, anachronistic to take what we think of today when we picture a tax collector, and assume that it was exactly the same thing in Jesus’ day. It wasn’t at *all* the same thing. No, what made tax collectors so hated was *who* they were collecting taxes for, and also the *way* in which they went about collecting them.

*Who* these Jews were collecting taxes for was the Roman empire; the occupying military power that ruled over Jerusalem like an iron fist. So these guys were collecting the very funds from their fellow Jews /that would then be used to continue to oppress them! As I’ve said before, this would be on the level of a Jew /in Nazi Germany, taking on the job of collecting jewelry and gold teeth from the bodies of murdered Jews to fund the Nazi war effort. These guys were seen as despicable *traitors*.

And then the *way* they collected the taxes also made them despised. B/c – since they were collecting taxes for Rome – they also had the protection of Rome as they did their job. And, most tax collectors were known for exacting what Rome required / and then /a little bit more to pad their own purses. And so, through corruption, opportunism, and extortion, they robbed their own people, even as they were being crushed under this Roman occupation. So // needless to say, these guys didn’t go out for a lot of evening strolls.

So that’s just a brief snapshot of how tax collectors were viewed in Jesus’ day, and also *why* they were viewed that way.

And yet - understanding all that now – this is what makes what Jesus does in the second half of vs. 9 so unbelievable. Look at vs. 9 again with me. We read **(READ vs. 9).**

Now, I can guarantee you, when Matthew got up that morning, put on his robe and sandals and brushed out his beard (or whatever a first century Jewish guy did when he woke up). I can guarantee you, Matthew had no clue that this appointment with Jesus was coming. Matthew knew his place in society; and he also knew who it was – and who it was not – considered acceptable for him to interact with. I can assure you, respected religious Rabbis was not even on the “maybe” list for Matthew.

And yet, here comes Jesus - this now famous miracle worker and Rabbi - walking right up to Matthew // and telling him to come and follow Him; to be one of his disciples! And, b/c of what we just covered about the social context going on here, we already know, this is not normal. Jesus has already called a few fishermen to be some of His disciples; people would have looked at that and said, “Well … that’s probably a dumb choice, but, OK knock yourself out Jesus.” But here – when Jesus approaches a tax collector, and asks *him* to be one of His disciples - people aren’t just confused, they’re indignant. And we’ll get to them in a moment.

But beyond that - what you may not know - is that / also/ in this social context, traditionally, Rabbis didn’t call *anyone* to follow them. Men would come to *them* and ask if they could be considered to follow them and sit under their teaching. Jesus just seems to be getting everything backwards here. Or is He?

But for the time being, consider Matthew’s reaction. I mean, surely there are feeling of excitement for Matthew. But do you think maybe there was also a bit of fear in his heart as well?

I mean, think about it: can you imagine, you’re walking through downtown Manhattan, and Tim Keller walks right up to you and says, “I want you to come and work under me and I’m going to take you everywhere I go / and mentor you.” Ok, maybe that doesn’t sound amazing to you; it’s my own dream alright? Back off! Ok, how about Bono from U2, or Gordon Ramsey the famous chef, or Barack Obama – one of them comes up to you and tells you to come follow them and learn under them? What would you say? How would you be feeling?

And how does Matthew react? Well, if you look at the bottom of verse 9, what we see there; very simply, is that Matthew’s response to this unexpected meeting is just to get up from his table, leave everything behind him, and follow. The joy of being called by Jesus –maybe doesn’t remove his questions and fears entirely – but it definitely overcomes them so much so that he just follows.

**App**

And there’s so much more I want to say right here, and a hundred ways we could apply even what we have looked at.

But what I see at the heart of this is **the call of Jesus to an outcast**; Do you see the *powerful* effect that it has on a person who is *used* to not being noticed; who is *expecting* not be noticed, to be seen? To be spoken to? To be invited?

Beyond that, when we’re sick /// everyone knows /**you** go and make an appointment with the doctor/ or go to the ER. You don’t wake up with a stomach flu and then hear your door bell ring, and your doctor’s there like, “Hi there! I understand you’re not well. Let’s check you out here and see what the problem is.” But in a very real sense, this is exactly what Jesus is doing here.

I can even imagine this scene where Jesus actually has to ask Matthew to follow Him twice! Like Jesus says, “Come follow Me.” And Matthew – never dreaming he’d be spoken to by *any* Rabbi - is like, “…. Huh? Sorry, what?” And so Jesus has to say again, basically, “Yeah, you at the tax booth there; Matthew. I want you to come follow Me.”

Jesus does this all through His ministry. Having conversations with people who no one else will even speak to; showing compassion to the social rejects of the day; allowing Himself to be anointed by prostitutes /and touching the unclean lepers. Now – no – of course. Some people go too far, reading this, and say these are the main people Jesus sought out; the main group of people Jesus came for. I don’t see the poor/outcasts of Jesus’ day as His primary focus in the New Testament. In fact, Jesus’ parable of the two sons shows us clearly / that Jesus came for prodigals *and*  for elder brothers! But I think what we absolutely do see here – amoung other things - is that Jesus /does not exclude anyone who will come to Him; there is no class/ or type /of person that is off limits for Jesus. What we’re seeing here is that He came for everyone!

And what I want us to think about in light of that is /// who are the “sinners”/outcasts in your life? And please, don’t go immediately to the homeless guy asking for change! Yes, care about that guy; notice that guy and talk to him. But, I’m asking you to go deeper than that even. Think about your work place; think about the classes you take at school, think about the building or the community you live in /// think about the church you worship in. Who are the outcasts in those places? Who are the people expecting not be noticed? Expecting not to be seen?

And – no - Jesus doesn’t say, “Well, now you need to ignore all your other relationships and go be friends just with that person from now on!” No no no. Following after Jesus simply means that – like Jesus - we extend the love of Jesus to everyone He puts in our path; that no one is excluded. B/c by excluding anyone and – more than that – by not seeking out those who are being excluded by everyone else // what we’re really doing (in one sense) is deciding *for* God who can be used in His kingdom /and who is deserving of His love and grace.

And the big problem with that - as theologian and pastor Russell Moore stated so well - “the next Billy Graham //might be drunk in a bar right now.”

Ok, so that’s Matthew’s unexpected appointment with Jesus. Next I want us to look at,

1. **The false diagnosis – vs. 10-11**

And this false diagnosis, comes in the context of a big party and - surprise surprise - it comes from the Pharisees – the religious rulers of the day.

Vs. 10 sets the context for us, look with me there. Matthew writes **(READ vs. 10).** Ok, so in response to Jesus call on his life, Matthew throws this big banquet to celebrate. Remember that tax collectors - while hated - were often affluent and well above the poverty line. And when Matthew throws this party, all of his buddies and their friends show up. And this is quite a crowd as I’m sure you can imagine.

What Matthew describes here as “tax collectors and ‘sinners’” – and you notice the way he puts sinners in quotation marks – this means that the party was made up of all the disreputable people in Matthew’s circle. And by putting the word “sinners” in quotes, I think that’s meant to imply – not so much that these were criminals or immoral people (though they could have been that too) – but that these are the people that the religious elite labeled as “unclean” and “unacceptable”. And, look again at verse 10; Matthew tells us that right in that middle of the party // is Jesus.

Now, this scene in particular is often mis-used in two ways:

1. One side wants to picture Jesus, blitzed out of His mind and dancing up on the table at this party.
2. Another side wants to picture Jesus – if He truly was at a party like this - sitting off in a corner, glowing white, and looking very disappointed and quietly judging everyone there.

And, listen to me: both those pictures are wrong. They both are! Although Jesus was a “friend of sinners” as He was called, He never once participated in the sins of His “sinner” friends. *But* //Jesus was *also* willing to get down on His hands and knees with kids; willing to get His hands dirty, in order to really engage people /so much so /that people *wanted* Jesus to come to their parties! Just think about that.

 And then, in the midst of all this, the Pharisees walk by this scene and are indignant; they can’t believe what they’re looking at; and this is *also* where our question from today comes in. Look at vs. 11 now. We read **(READ vs. 11).**

Now, it’s been said many times, but it’s worth repeating, eating with people in this first century context, was much more significant than it is today. Theologian G.K. Beale writes of this verse, “Table fellowship in ancient Israel was reserved for intimate friends, and usually implied an endorsement of the practices of those with whom one associated.”

So that, really, helps us understand a lot better /to some degree /*why* the Pharisees are so indignant. And if we’re being honest, we might have some of the same kind of reaction today if we saw this.

You’re honestly telling me if you were to walk past a Hell’s Angels BBQ in a park somewhere, and see Jesus sitting on a lawn chair with sunglasses on, licking his fingers from the hot wings He was eating and drinking from a red Solo cup, you wouldn’t feel a bit like “….huh?”

But what’s most important to see here, is that I don’t think the Pharisees are *truly* even asking this question; at least not in the same way you or I would be. Notice, that the Pharisees don’t even direct the question directly to Jesus, but to His disciples. Look at again at vs. 11. It says **(READ vs. 11a).**

And so what’s really going on here is two things:

1. The Pharisees are making a diagnosis of Jesus; they’re diagnosing His character and His holiness, and basically saying, “This guy is clearly a fraud!” So, really, they’re not asking a question, they’re making a statement.
2. The second thing going on here is that, in putting this question to Jesus’ disciples, and not directly to *Him*, the Pharisees are also intending to shame Jesus /and lower the opinion of Jesus in the eyes of His disciples and, really, all who hear their diagnosis.

This would be similar to some snotty, rich girls with their little dogs in their Louis Vuitton bags, and their Juicy Couture outfits, asking you loudly at a beach BBQ, “Why does you dad dress like such a loser?”

The Pharisees know /that Jesus’ disciples know /what eating with these type of people means. And their intent is for Jesus’ disciples to feel ashamed of Him, and maybe, to stop following Him altogether.

**App**

 You see, one of the many problems that the Pharisees had, was that they couldn’t even imagine /that the kingdom of God would include people like the ones Jesus was eating with. You remember that quote I just read from Russell Moore about the next Billy Graham maybe being drunk in a bar somewhere right now? Well, the Pharisees would have had no problem whatsoever saying to Russell Moore, “No ///he *isn’t*!”

 If you’ve ever read Victor Hugo’s classic novel Les Miserable, or seen the movie, you’ve seen this type of attitude depicted masterfully by the constable Javert. A man who has lived a life of service and moral purity //who cannot fathom that someone like Jean Valjean – a former convicted felon – could *ever* be reformed / or trusted /or positively contribute to society anymore.

 And one of the only ways we’re ever going to be able to keep from doing this exact same thing ourselves to people around us // is to ask God /to help us change the way we see! To see people the way Jesus did; to have His eyes to see – not just where people *are* – but where they *could be* when God gets ahold of their lives. Now, that doesn’t man we don’t use discernment and wisdom when we’re dealing with people. But, I’ll tell you what //if I just imagine someone coming across me in some of the lowest, darkest times in my past /// there’s no *way* anyone –w/o this kind of changed vision - is saying, “That guy’s totally gonna have his life turned around and be a pastor.” But when we see people through the eyes of grace /// then we know that *nothing* is impossible //and *no one* is beyond the reach of God.

 We need to ask God to change the way we see.

Finally, we need to get to Jesus’ response here. And in responding to the Pharisees’ question, Jesus is going to deliver,

1. **The double-sided prescription – vs. 12-13**

Look at the beginning of vs. 12 with me. After the Pharisees pose this question to the disciples we read **(READ vs. 12a).**

 Now, what Jesus is doing here now, is really just “Bull-dogging” for His boys. The same way that if someone were to ever threaten my wife or kids, and I heard about it, they would very quickly discover that they were – in fact – having a conversation with *me* /and not my wife or kids at all. And that conversation is going to go very differently.

 And the first thing Jesus says in response to the Pharisees question – their false diagnosis of Him – is in the second half of vs. 12. Look there again. Jesus says **(READ vs. 12b)** And in responding that way, Jesus is revealing Himself as **the Doctor/Physician** who has come for the purpose of helping sick people. And in stating at the bottom of vs. 13 – look with me – that He has not come to call the righteous, but sinners / Jesus is saying that the sick people He’s come to heal are those infected by this illness of sin.

 And this seems pretty obvious, right? I mean, if we were to go down to VGH when Dr. Frank was still practicing medicine, and saw him in a white coat, going from bed to bed, checking people’s eyes, or checking their breathing with his stethoscope, no one would look at that and think it was weird. But if Dr. Frank were to wander around our church picnic this afternoon in a white coat, looking in people’s eyes with a light, and checking their pulse, we’d all be like, “uhhhh … I think we’re good here Dr. Frank. Nobody here is in need of a doctor but we’ll totally call you if we do, ok?” Yet, where there are sick people, we *expect* to see a doctor.

But, it’s very easy to get confused here, so follow me. Jesus is *not* saying *at all* that the Pharisees are righteous, and these people are not /so He’s come to help these not-righteous people, become righteous like the Pharisees. That is not what’s going on here. *Nowhere* in this passage does Jesus say that the Pharisees are the righteous ones.

Boiled down to its essence, what Jesus is saying to the Pharisees is really a devastating indictment of them. He’s saying, people who think they’re healthy, don’t make an appointment to go and see a doctor. It’s only those who know something is wrong / and who know they can’t help themselves, who do that. And so Jesus is saying to the Pharisees: the problem isn’t that you aren’t sick too /it’s just that you don’t think you are! You think you’re healthy, and so you don’t come to receive help from the doctor; you don’t come to receive the prescription I’m writing for these people who know they’re sick and need help.

So that’s the first side of Jesus’ prescription for the Pharisees: a big, hard to swallow pill, of “reality check.” But the second side of the prescription is even harder for them to swallow. Look at the beginning of vs. 13 with me. Jesus says in response to their question, **(READ vs. 13a).** “Go and learn” was common language between a Rabbi/teacher and his disciples. So Jesus is also revealing Himself here as **the Teacher.** And in training these unwilling disciples, Jesus quotes a passage from the book of Hosea, which would have been very familiar to them. In fact, Jesus only quotes part of the verse; I think / intentionally /to make them go back and check out its context. The complete verse says, “I desire mercy (lit. “steadfast love”) and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

And what we need to understand, is that God spoke those words through the prophet Hosea /in a similar context to this: where all of the sacrificial system of offerings handed down through the Mosaic law /would have been in full effect.

So – what? - is God saying that all those laws and sacrifices are pointless and He never really wanted them to do that in the first place? Again, theologian G. K. Beale is helpful here. He says of Jesus’ quotation, “Hosea is not abolishing the sacrificial system, but rather, is declaring its meaninglessness apart from heartfelt repentance demonstrated through consistently changed behaviour.”

You see, in Hosea’s day, God’s people thought that as long as they followed God’s laws externally; jumped through all the religious “hoops”; that it didn’t matter what was really going on inside their hearts and minds. And so what God was saying to His people then, was that these laws and sacrifices /were never meant to be an end in themselves, but – rather - external actions pointing to an internal reality.

And by quoting this verse to the Pharisees, Jesus was saying the exact same thing to them. Jesus is saying, “You think by doing all this stuff to look holy to yourselves and others, that *that* is what makes you righteous in God’s eyes, and you’ve *totally* missed the point; and – in fact – you’re not truly righteous at all. You’re *just as sick* as these people I’m eating with here; you just don’t know it yet.

**App**

And that same double-sided prescription could be applied to us today as well. We need to really be willing to examine ourselves honestly and ask, “Am I really trusting in Jesus alone to heal the broken relationship between me and God? Or am I *really* trusting in all the “stuff” I do for God that makes me look so much better /and holier /than all the other people around me? Do I imagine that somehow, when I stand before God one day, that He’s going to say, “Yeah, Wes sinned a lot in his life and we really should condemn him, but – wow! – look at all the time he spent reading the bible, leading music in church and preaching sermons. I’m afraid we’re gonna have to let him into heaven anyways.” Now maybe you know that’s not at all how it works, but //we can absolutely still live out our lives acting like it is. And we can, as theologian John Gerstner said, base our Justification on our Sanctification; which is just to say we base our standing with God on how *we’re* doing instead of what Jesus *did*.

You see, we need to see in Jesus’ response to the Pharisees here, is that along with revealing Himself as the **Doctor** and as the **Teacher**, Jesus is also revealing Himself as the **Prescription.** Jesus blood *is* the healing salve that God applies to our hearts by His Spirit to remove the illness of sin. His sacrifice *alone* is the thing that can heal our broken relationship with God. And if God looks at your life and sees everything *but* the prescription of Jesus’ applied to your heart, *all* of your religious activities and sacrifices ///are meaningless and are not achieving a restored relationship with Him. Or, as one of my favourite pastors, Matt Chandler, has said so well, “If you’re trusting in your religious activity, and not Jesus, to save you, you’re like an engaged guy who has all the headaches of marriage and none of the benefits!”

Because Jesus is the great Physician, He can perfectly diagnose our illness; and – listen - we’ve *all* got the white chalk-mark on our coats that shows we’re infected. But the amazing news of Christianity, is that God doesn’t just show us the lab results and then say, “Good luck with that. Maybe if you exercise and eat really well for the rest of your life, maybe you can be healed.” No no. God sent His Son into the world to deliver the healing prescription of His shed blood on the cross. To do what we could never do ourselves; to heal us of our illness completely; and to bring us back to God. Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

**Conclusion**

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, the apostle Paul writes these words, “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”* And then he writes this in vs. 18, “*All this is from God, who through Christ, reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”*

So what that means for us this morning – in light of all that we’ve just been talking about - is that if we have been reconciled to God through Christ, we now have the same purpose in life that Jesus had: to see the world reconciled back to God. And if we have the same purpose in life that Jesus had, that means that our scope/circle of influence also needs to be as broad and inclusive as Jesus’ was. So that means – first of all – is that there is no place in the church of Christ for racism, sexism, classism, or self-righteousness. B/c we need to remember that we are not Doctor; we’re simply fellow patients introducing people to the Doctor who can heal and reconcile them too!

And /I know /we’ve all got our areas of comfort and familiarity that we like to operate out of exclusively – I know I do. But if we see the way that Jesus did not wait for us to come to Him; but left all the riches and comforts of heaven to seek us out just as we were (#noFilter) // that should be more than enough motivation to step outside of our own comfort zones and include all god places in our paths.

Secondly, It’s been said by many that, “the church is not a museum for petrified saints but a hospital for sick sinners.” That’s certainly been the experience of my wife and I when we came here 10 years ago. And now, in moving to two services during the school year, we’ve created space for a lot more “beds” in this hospital. But what I’ve said from the beginning /is that simply making space for more people alone does not mean that they will come and hear the life-changing message of the gospel.

One of my visions for this church (and I know it’s the vision of the whole leadership here) is that before people ever walk through these doors to hear about Jesus from a pastor in here // that they will have *already* encountered Him through each one of us //out there. And what Kajle has been working on for some time now with Missional Communities, is one excellent way for us as a church to see that happen. And the simplicity of it is just that it has nothing to do with planning more programs or giving up another night of your week. It’s just living out what we just saw Jesus doing in our passage this morning; opening up our lives to other people, and engaging them with the gospel where they feel comfortable. B/c – sadly – the average person is not going to come into a church to hear about Jesus; they’re just not. /// But they *will* go to a BBQ with you; they will bring their kids to a swimming pool with you; they will camp out for a day at Vanier park to see the fireworks with you.

And as we live out our lives before them as a reconciled community; as we act and speak /as reconciled people / about how Jesus has made a difference in the everyday stuff of our lives; along with encountering community - which is one thing everyone is longing for // they are also going to encounter Jesus, Who God designed our hearts to long for as well. And that’s the place they’ll truly find healing.

Let’s pray.