

April 14/15, 2007

No Perfect People Series
Jesus and Sinners
Matthew 9:9-17
Pastor Bryan Clark

Most of you are probably aware that two weeks ago the Lincoln paper did a story on our church. They posted it on their Web site, and then everybody could make comments. And as you would imagine, there were positive comments and negative comments. I wanted to read you three of the comments that were on that site.

[One person said:] **“I think, for \$10.5 million, there are a lot better ways to “share the love of god with people.” That kind of money could have established and practically permanently funded a shelter or any number of social programs. Now, there is just a building so that members feel more “loved.” At least their worship will be more convenient...I hate it when my faith gets tested by poor parking or going to the 3pm service instead of the 8am service.”**

[A second person wrote:] **“Thats a lot of money to be spent on false, heretical worship. Jesus started the catholic church...not the berean church. Do you think God wants to be worshiped in a theater. It’s disrespectful!”**

[A third person wrote:] **“It’s pretty for an auditorium, nicer than the Lied Center, I think. But it’s shame that you can’t tell it’s a church. There is no sacred imagery at all, nothing that would inspire people to fall on their knees before the Lord. In fact, the theatre seating sort of prevents that, doesn’t it? But that kind of goes along with what I hear people who go to Berean say – that church is so fun and entertaining for them. Nothing about humbling oneself in the sight of the Lord, or the sacrifice of praise I’m sure all the Berean folks will love it...it’s just not for me.”**

--from blogs posted on the Journal Star Web site, March 31 & April 3, 2007.

I would suggest to you this morning that those comments reflect what religion does to people. It causes them to sit in judgment of others in the name of God about things that really have nothing to do with the heart of God. Does anyone really think God is concerned as to whether we have theater seats or pews in here? Is someone under the impression that God made the first pew? But this is the risk of religion; it tends to misrepresent the concerns and the heart of God.

Perhaps some of you have experienced that. Perhaps you attended a church or were involved in a religion in some way and there was this subtle message that you felt very clearly that said to you, “You’re not really welcome here.” Those who were religious, with their rituals and their practices, communicated in some unspoken way that, “You just don’t belong here.” And the danger in that is you think: *Those are the people of God, and they must represent God’s opinion. So that must be how God feels about me.* But what if those religious people don’t represent the heart of God at all?

Another way to process this is: the church of Jesus Christ is meant to be the body of Christ on earth. So in our attitudes and actions, we should look like Jesus. I heard once that Charlie Chaplain entered a Charlie Chaplain look-a-like contest. He came in third. Apparently on that day Charlie didn’t look like himself.

But is it possible the same thing could happen in the church? If Jesus were to return and walk in the city of Lincoln in flesh and blood, is it possible He could enter into churches and there get the feeling that He just didn’t belong because His church looks nothing like Him?

If Jesus were to start a church in Lincoln, whom would He invite? Whom would He welcome into His church? Even more than that, whom would Jesus invite to be part of His leadership team, part of His ministry team, part of those who would come together with Him to change the world. It may not be the people you would imagine. As a matter of fact, are you aware of the fact that in the first century, one of those that Jesus picked to be part of His leadership team was so unimaginable, so offensive to the Jewish people that the religious crowd was in an uproar and Jesus had to explain to them why He did what He did?

If you have a Bible, turn with us this morning to Matthew chapter 9. The first part of the chapter is a story about Jesus healing a man who was paralyzed, but in the process He granted him forgiveness of sins. Jesus went on to say that the reason He healed the man of his physical disease, which was a little miracle, was to demonstrate that He had the power to do yet a greater miracle, and that is to forgive his sins. In other words, He was claiming at that point to be God. We pick up the story then in verse 9:

As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

(Matthew 9:9; NASB*)

Matthew was a tax collector. He had a booth that typically would sit on the border lines of different territories and would collect tax as people made their way through. It was possible in the first century to make a considerable amount of wealth as a tax collector. However, that wealth came at a significant cost. In order to be a tax collector as a Jewish person, you had to, in essence, betray your own people. You worked for the Roman government, whom the Jewish people hated. And you squeezed this exorbitant tax out of your own people and then would squeeze a little bit more and that more would go in your own pocket in order to make your living.

So the Jewish people absolutely hated tax collectors. They were the most offensive of all. As a matter of fact, consistently through the Gospels – and we'll see it in our story this morning – you have two categories: you have sinners and you have tax collectors. They were one rung below the sinners.

Matthew obviously knew this going in and had to have concluded that wealth – money – would ultimately satisfy this restlessness in his soul, because he knew the cost. But he was willing to sell his soul for this wealth thinking ultimately that would satisfy this emptiness within. Matthew knew it would disgrace his mother and father. He knew that it would disgrace his siblings. It would disgrace his wife and his children. Matthew knew that no good Jewish boy would ever marry one of his daughters because he was a tax collector. He literally had to disconnect himself from the life of the Hebrew people for the accumulation of wealth believing somehow that would make him happy.

But when He encountered Jesus – and obviously all the details of the story are not given – he saw something in Jesus that convinced him that this is what he had always been longing for. When it says he followed Him, the other Gospels tell us he left everything and followed Him. This doesn't mean that he followed Jesus around a little bit. It means that he gave up his booth; he gave up his territory; he left it all behind to become a follower of Jesus.

But it's interesting to note that Jesus probably could not have chosen a more offensive person to be part of His leadership team to reach the Jewish people. If we were his handlers, his consultants, we would pull Him aside and say, "Jesus, what were you thinking? This is a disaster! You've picked the most offensive person possible to be part of Your team to reach the Jewish people. It is a marketing disaster!"

We pick it up in verse 10:

Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 9:10-11)

The other Gospels tell us this was Matthew’s house. Matthew had encountered in Jesus what he had been searching for his entire life and he was so excited that he decided to throw a big dinner – a party – and he would invite his fellow tax collectors. He would invite his network of friends which are simply classified as “sinners” – outcasts, losers together – that they might come and dine with Jesus and find what he had found in a relationship with this Jesus. You have to understand that in the Jewish world, the religious crowd would have clearly communicated that because of Matthew’s choice as a tax collector, there was no possibility of a relationship with God. He was so far beyond that, he was just simply classified with the sinners and the tax collectors.

These people that gathered at Matthew’s house would have been those who had been convinced by the religious world that any hope of ever having a meaningful relationship with God had long since passed them by. Yet when God became flesh, He sat down and He dined with the sinners and the tax collectors. And the religious leaders did not know what to do with this.

The Pharisees were the religious leaders in the first century. They were the experts in the Scripture; they were the experts in the keeping of the law, of the religious rituals. They were considered to be the best of the best. They were very zealous for their rituals and their rules and their regulations. And even though Jesus on many occasions called them hypocrites, and this is very important, to the first century Jew, they were not viewed that way. They were viewed as the best of the best. They were viewed as the most righteous among them. If there was anyone who stood a chance of getting to God, it was them, in the eyes of the average Jewish person. So when these Pharisees communicated the heart of God, everyone assumed that that was correct.

Because these righteous people were so righteous, they had long since concluded that it was very important that they not make any contact with sinners and tax collectors because if they did, it was possible that they could become contaminated and lose their sense of righteousness. So it was clearly understood that there was to be no mixing between the righteous and the sinners. So when they saw Jesus sitting down to dine with sinners and tax collectors, they could not process such a thing. In the first century, to enter someone’s home and to dine with them was clearly to identify with them. Jesus was making a clear statement.

So they asked the disciples of Jesus, “Hey, what is going on here? What is up with Jesus sitting down and dining with *those* people?” Well, Jesus answers them:

But when Jesus heard this, He said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:12-13)

Jesus begins His answer by saying, “Okay, answer Me this: Who is it that needs a physician? Is it the healthy or is it the sick?” And of course the answer to that is obvious: It’s the sick. What kind of a physician would he or she be if they only spent time with the healthy? It’s the sick who need the physician. The next thing He says is, “Okay, go and learn.” Now that may seem a rather mild statement in English, but you have to understand that was a formula of the rabbis and the Pharisees.

The Pharisees and the rabbis were believed to be those who had the most knowledge about the Scripture and the most knowledge about God and who God is. Every time they would see someone who was doing something that they believed to be offensive to God, the formula was: Go and learn. And in that what they're saying is, "If you knew as much as we know, you would know that that's offensive to God." So the charge was: Go, read the Scripture, and you'll figure out why that's offensive. So when Jesus said that to these Pharisees, there was in that a significant rebuke because what He is saying is, "You need to go and learn." He's implying that they know nothing of the heart of God.

He then quotes from Hosea, an Old Testament prophet, chapter 6 verse 6. Hosea was an Old Testament prophet during a time when the nation of Israel was still carrying out their religious practices, their sacrifices at the temple. They were doing the rituals. They were keeping the rules. But their hearts were far from God. And God rebuked them, saying, "You know, I don't want a bunch of religious stuff. I don't want a bunch of sacrifices and religious rules and regulations. What I want is your hearts. What I want is a relationship with you." They had failed to realize that everything about the sacrificial system was ultimately to create a picture of how God could have a relationship with them, a sinful people. And even though they were maintaining the religion, their hearts were far from God.

So God said to them, "What I desire is compassion, not sacrifice." In other words, "I don't want the religious stuff. What I want is for you to know Me and for Me to know you in such a way that you start to understand My heart, and that you begin to cultivate within you My heart, that you have compassion like I have compassion." It was a Hebrew word that meant mercy. "That you have mercy like I have mercy. That you would love one another as I love one another." That's what God wanted from them. And then He goes on to say, "I did not come to call, (it's a Greek word that means to *invite*) I didn't come to invite the righteous. I came to invite the sinners."

What Jesus is saying there is not that the Pharisees were righteous and Matthew and his friends were the sinners. What He was saying is, "Even going with your categories, even if it was true that you're righteous and they're sinners, if you knew anything about the heart of God, you would know that the heart of God is to be compassionate and merciful toward sinners and tax collectors." By saying, "Go and learn," Jesus is saying that if these Pharisees – these religious people – knew anything about the heart of God, rather than isolating themselves from the sinners and tax collectors, they would pursue them. They would seek them because that's the heart of God because the heart of God is to be compassionate and merciful toward the sinners and tax collectors. In Jesus' rebuke, there's a clear statement that the self-righteous actually knew nothing of the heart of God and weren't righteous at all, because if they were, they would have been dining with the sinners and tax collectors just like Jesus did when God became flesh.

When God became flesh, He pursued the sinners and the tax collectors. He pursued the sinners in need of a Savior. A physician will go to the sick and the Savior goes to the sinners, to those who recognize their need for a Savior. If Jesus were organizing a church in Lincoln, whom would He invite? He'd invite the sinners and the tax collectors to experience the heart of God, the compassion and the mercy of God.

The religious people tend to divide everyone up into two categories. There are the righteous and the sinners. Well, God divides everyone up into two categories, too. There's God and there are the rest of us. And the rest of us are sinners, misfits, and losers.

The reality is I don't care how good you think you are. I don't care how many religious rituals you have done. I don't care how successful you've been. The standard is God Himself, and when we

judge ourselves according to the standard, we're just sinners, misfits, and losers in need of a Savior. God wants us to understand His heart.

Religion often convinces people that God is disgusted with us, that God wants nothing to do with sinners, that God wants to distance Himself from those people who aren't quite measuring up. That's not the heart of God at all. If somewhere along the way someone convinced you that God is disgusted with you, and God is avoiding you, and God wants nothing to do with you, I'm sorry for that because that doesn't reflect the heart of God at all. As a matter of fact, it's just the opposite. God, in His heart of compassion and mercy, is pursuing you. He is tracking you down because He loves you and He wants to have a relationship with You. And He wants you to know the life-changing power of Jesus the Savior.

Whom would Jesus invite to His church? Us – sinners, misfits, and losers. But not just to experience His salvation. It's more than that. He would invite us to be part of His ministry team to be used by Him to change the world. You say, "Now why would He do that?" In the first century, why didn't Jesus choose the religious elite to change the world? Why tax collectors, fishermen, and zealots? Well, He answers that question. We pick it up in verse 14:

Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved." (Matthew 9:14-17)

The disciples of John the Baptist come to the disciples of Jesus and say, "Hey, what's the deal here? We and the Pharisees fast. We're keeping the religious rituals. But Your disciples don't fast. As a matter of fact, it kind of seems like they're having a party here. What's up with that?"

So Jesus gives them three word pictures. The first one is the word picture of a wedding feast. In the Jewish world where life was very hard, probably the greatest times of celebration were the wedding feasts. They were an all out party – 24 hours a day, day after day, often going as long as a week – and it as an all out celebration. It was expected by the Pharisees and the rabbis that religious people would fast twice a week. The idea of the fast was that in your physical hunger, going without food, you would be reminded of yet a greater hunger and that is the hunger to know God. But during the wedding feast, because it was such a time of celebration, the Pharisees and the rabbis suspended the need to fast during the party week.

That's the imagery that Jesus is picking up. And Jesus is saying, "You know, as long as the bridegroom is here and it's the wedding feast, then we should party. We should celebrate." The whole idea of their fasting was that they would hunger for God. But when God had become flesh and was among them, there was no need to hunger for Him. "Celebrate Him. He's right here." What He is saying is the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist had become so distracted by their religious rituals that they failed to realize the fulfillment of their hunger was right before them. Jesus was among them. There was no need to fast. They should party. God is here! But that's the problem with religion. It often distracts people from experiencing the intimacy of a relationship with Jesus.

He goes on with the second word picture and says, “You don’t take a brand new piece of cloth and sew it on to an old cloth for a repair because as soon as you wash it, the new cloth is going to shrink at a different rate and it’s going to tear itself off. And then you have a bigger problem.” What He was saying in that picture is it is not possible just to take Jesus and somehow attach Him onto your old religion. It isn’t going to work. The Old Covenant had all of its rules and regulations and rituals that were all pointing to the reality that one day God would become flesh and shed His own blood for the sins of the world and would provide salvation to sinners and tax collectors. What Jesus was saying is that He was the fulfillment of that, and once the fulfillment has come, you don’t just add Jesus to the former, but you celebrate Him as the fulfillment. And it ushers in a New Covenant – a whole new experience in our relationship with God made possible by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

The third word picture Jesus gives is that of wine and the skins that the wine would be poured into. In the first century, they would pour their wine into these wineskins and the wine then would ferment, and so you’d have these gases and the stretching. By the time the wine was fermented, these bags would be very delicate, very brittle. So they would have to be very gentle in pouring out the wine. The temptation was, then, to pour fresh wine back into the old wineskin because wineskins were very expensive. But that would never work because the fresh wine now, again, would begin to ferment, release the gases, and it would stretch these old wineskins and it would cause them to burst. And the wine would be lost.

It’s with this word picture that Jesus is explaining why He chose fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots to be His team. The Pharisees had an imagery that the students were the wineskins and their teaching was the wine. So they were constantly filling up the wineskins with their wine. Jesus is drawing that imagery away from the Pharisees and saying, “You cannot take the new, fresh grace of Jesus and pour it into those old religious wineskins. It just won’t work.” The reason Jesus did not choose the religious elite to be His messengers of the New Covenant was because they were so captured by their religion – they were so deep in their religious thinking, and systems, and rituals – that they simply could not process the reality of the New Covenant.

So Jesus said, “You know what I’m going to do? I’m going to pour fresh wine in fresh wineskins. I’m going to take the sinners, the misfits, and the losers. And then I’m going to introduce them to the salvation of Jesus and I’m going to fill them with this message of the New Covenant. And they will become My spokespeople. They will become My messengers. They will become those whom I will use to change the world.”

What Jesus was saying is that the danger of religion is we get so caught up in the practices, and the rituals, and the rules, that we fail to celebrate Jesus is among us. And we can’t just attach Jesus to some old religious system. It’s never going to work. But rather, God is in the business of pursuing sinners, and misfits, and losers to introduce them to the life-changing power of Jesus. And He will pour His life into them. And they will be so radically changed that they will be compelled to go out into the streets, and to the marketplace, and the neighborhoods, and the schools to deliver a message to people they deeply care about: *That Jesus has changed my life and I want you to come with me, and I want you to sit down to dinner with Him, and I want you to know what I have now come to know.*

If Jesus were to start a church in our community, on one side of the building He would have a huge banner and the banner would say, “No perfect people allowed,” because perfect people have no need for a Savior. On the other wall would be a huge banner that would say, “Sinners, misfits, losers, welcome,” knowing that the building is already filled with them. That’s us – sinners, misfits,

and losers radically changed by the power of Jesus. So radically changed we can't help ourselves. We have to go to the people we deeply care about and invite them to dinner with Jesus that they might experience the same life-changing Savior that has changed us.

The church of Jesus Christ in the city of Lincoln – it's not Catholic, it's not Berean, and it's not Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, or Adventist. It is a gathering of sinners, misfits, and losers whose lives have been radically changed by the power of Jesus. So radically changed that we can't help ourselves – we're compelled to go to the people we care about and to tell them that Jesus has changed our lives, to invite them to come with us and sit down with Jesus at dinner and begin to experience the heart of God which is a heart of compassion, a heart of mercy, a heart that is pursuing you, seeking after you that you might know Him in a real and meaningful way. That is the church of Jesus Christ.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that that is who You are. Lord, religion sometimes convinces us that You are angry, You're judgmental, You're just looking for an opportunity to pour out Your anger upon us. Lord, somewhere along the way, we get convinced that You're disgusted with us, that You want to avoid us, You want nothing to do with us because that's how it feels in the religious world. But Lord, when God became flesh and walked on this earth, He dined with sinners and tax collectors. Where else is the physician going to go but to those who are sick? Lord, we acknowledge this morning, we're just a gathering of sinners, misfits, and losers changed and redeemed by the power of Jesus. Lord, our prayer this morning is that we as Your church would properly reflect Your heart in this community as we seek to be Your church. In Jesus' name, Amen.

April 14/15, 2007

Study Questions
No Perfect People Series
Jesus and Sinners
Matthew 9:9-17
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Defining religion as a manmade system of rules and rituals to get to God, what affect does religion have on people?
2. How do religious people tend to view themselves, and who would they define as “sinners?”
3. If the Church is to be the body of Christ on earth, list the distinctives of a church that looks like Jesus.

Bible Study

1. Read Matthew 9:9-13. Based on the attitude of the Pharisees toward sinners and tax collectors, how do you suppose people like Matthew viewed God before they met Jesus?

Do you think there are people around you who, like Matthew, have a false view of God because of their religious experience?

2. What was the attitude of the religious leaders toward people like Matthew? Why?

What is it about religion that divides people into “us” and “them” with the attitude that one must avoid the other?

3. Discuss Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ question. What is the application of Jesus’ words to us as His Church today?

What does Jesus want from us?

4. Read Matthew 9:14-17. While the Pharisees were fasting as a way of hungering for God they were missing the fact that God was among them and they were rejecting Him. In what way can we be guilty of the same mistake?
5. The illustration of the patch on the garment was meant to picture the ineffectiveness of trying to just add Jesus to religion. Why won’t this work?

6. The third illustration of the wineskins was Jesus' way of explaining why He called those He called to be His leadership team. Because religious people carry so much religious baggage it's hard for them to really grasp the message of grace. Therefore, this radical new message needs radical new messengers. What is the message for us as His Church today?

Who might be our most effective soldiers on the front lines?

Application

1. It's easy to paint a picture of the Pharisees in such a way they are someone else but not us. Day in and day out, at work, in your neighborhood, at school, etc., does your attitude look more like Jesus' in this story or the Pharisees'? In what way?
2. In practical ways, what does it mean to eat with sinners and tax collectors today?
3. What will be necessary going into the *Each One Reach One* vision for our church to look more like Jesus than the Pharisees?

What is your role in accomplishing this vision?