

The Authority to Call the Unworthy

Matthew 9:9–13

There are moments in life when we become convinced that our past has permanently defined our future.

Perhaps it was a moral failure that still haunts us years later. Perhaps it was a broken relationship, an addiction, poor decisions, or simply the quiet realization that we have wandered far from God. We begin to believe that everyone sees us through the lens of our worst moments.

The world has a way of assigning permanent labels.

Failure.

Hypocrite.

Addict.

Divorced.

Outcast.

Unworthy.

Many people assume that God sees them the same way.

Matthew probably felt exactly that.

When Jesus encountered him, Matthew was not studying Scripture in a synagogue. He was not praying in the temple. He was not searching for a rabbi to follow.

He was sitting behind a tax booth.

To the Jewish people, that booth represented betrayal, greed, and spiritual compromise. Tax collectors worked for the occupying Roman government, collected money from their own countrymen, and often enriched themselves through dishonest practices. They were despised by nearly everyone.

If anyone seemed beyond redemption, it was Matthew.

Yet Matthew 9 reveals one of the most beautiful truths in all of Scripture:

Jesus specializes in calling the people everyone else has already given up on.

This passage is not merely the story of Matthew's conversion.

It is the story of every believer.

Jesus Sees What Others Miss (Matthew 9:9)

"As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him."

The opening words appear almost ordinary.

"As Jesus passed on from there..."

Jesus simply walks through the city.

Crowds surround Him.

People fill the streets.

Yet among all those faces, His attention settles on one man.

"He saw a man called Matthew..."

That simple statement carries remarkable weight.

Everyone else saw a tax collector.

Jesus saw Matthew.

Everyone else saw a traitor.

Jesus saw a disciple.

Everyone else saw a ruined reputation.

Jesus saw a future Gospel writer.

The difference was not Matthew.

The difference was Jesus.

We often evaluate people by where they are today.

Jesus sees what His grace can make them tomorrow.

That should radically change the way Christians view other people.

How quickly do we write people off?

How often do we assume that someone is beyond hope because of their lifestyle, political views, addictions, criminal history, or reputation?

Jesus never ignored sin.

But He also never allowed a person's past to become the final word.

His grace always looked beyond what people were to what they could become.

Perhaps you struggle to believe that God could truly use someone like you.

Matthew would gently remind you that Jesus often chooses the people the world least expects.

Grace Comes Before Transformation

Jesus speaks only two words.

"Follow me."

There is no long theological lecture.

No probation period.

No list of conditions.

Jesus does not say,

"Clean up your life first."

"Earn another chance."

"Prove yourself."

Instead, grace comes first.

Transformation follows.

This is one of the great distinctions between Christianity and every man-made religion.

Religion says:

"Become worthy, and perhaps God will accept you."

The gospel says:

"Come to Christ, and He will make you new."

Matthew's acceptance was never based upon his worthiness.

It was based upon Christ's invitation.

The same remains true today.

None of us earns salvation.

None of us deserves forgiveness.

Every believer stands before God only because of grace.

As the Apostle Paul later wrote,

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:8)

Grace is not God's reward for good people.

Grace is God's gift to guilty people.

Following Jesus Means Leaving Something Behind

Matthew's response is immediate.

"And he rose and followed him."

There is remarkable simplicity here.

Matthew stands.

He leaves.

He follows.

Behind him remained the tax booth.

The money.

The ledgers.

The security.

The career.

The old identity.

Matthew understood something many people still struggle to understand.

Following Jesus always requires leaving something behind.

That "something" may be different for each person.

For one person it may be open rebellion.

For another it may be pride.

For another it may be bitterness.

For another it may be self-righteousness.

For still another it may simply be trusting in oneself instead of Christ.

Whatever competes with Christ must eventually be surrendered.

Real faith is never merely intellectual agreement.

Real faith produces movement.

James later summarized this truth by writing,

"Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:17)

Works do not save us.

But genuine faith inevitably changes the direction of our lives.

Matthew could not remain seated at the tax booth and simultaneously follow Jesus.

Neither can we cling to our old life while claiming to follow Christ.

The Table of Grace (Matthew 9:10)

The scene quickly shifts from the roadside to Matthew's home.

Matthew hosts a great banquet.

Many tax collectors and sinners gather together.

Jesus is there.

His disciples are there.

The guests are exactly the kind of people respectable society avoided.

Why?

Because Matthew naturally invited the people he already knew.

The first people he wanted to introduce to Jesus were fellow sinners.

There is something wonderfully natural about that.

New believers often possess an excitement about Christ that overflows into their existing relationships.

Matthew did not isolate himself from everyone he once knew.

He invited them to meet the Savior.

Jesus gladly attended.

Throughout the Gospels, meals carry tremendous significance.

Sharing a table communicated fellowship, acceptance, and relationship.

Jesus was not approving of sin.

He was extending mercy to sinners.

The difference is crucial.

Christ never affirmed sin.

But He continually welcomed sinners who would come near to Him.

The church must never lose this balance.

We are called to remain holy without becoming isolated.

We are called to love sinners without celebrating sin.

We are called to welcome people exactly where they are while lovingly pointing them toward repentance and faith.

That is precisely what Jesus modeled.

The Danger of Self-Righteousness (Matthew 9:11)

Not everyone appreciated what they saw.

The Pharisees questioned the disciples,

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Notice they did not ask Jesus directly.

Instead, they challenged His followers.

The issue was not simply where Jesus was eating.

The issue was what His actions implied.

From the Pharisees' perspective, holiness meant separation from sinful people.

Jesus demonstrated that true holiness moves toward sinners in order to rescue them.

The Pharisees believed they were protecting righteousness.

In reality, they were exposing self-righteousness.

Their greatest problem was not that they saw Matthew's sin.

It was that they could not see their own.

Self-righteousness remains one of the greatest spiritual dangers today.

It often disguises itself as biblical conviction.

We become experts at identifying everyone else's failures while remaining blind to our own pride.

We compare ourselves with people we perceive as worse.

We quietly congratulate ourselves for being more moral, more disciplined, or more religious.

Yet Jesus consistently reserved His strongest rebukes not for tax collectors or prostitutes, but for religious people who believed they had no need of grace.

The Great Physician (Matthew 9:12)

Jesus answers with one of the most memorable illustrations in the Gospels.

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

The imagery is brilliantly simple.

Healthy people do not seek doctors.

Sick people do.

Jesus compares sin to spiritual disease.

He compares Himself to the Great Physician.

The point is not that some people are spiritually healthy.

Scripture repeatedly teaches that all have sinned (Romans 3:23).

Rather, Jesus contrasts those who recognize their condition with those who deny it.

The tax collectors knew they were sinners.

The Pharisees believed they were righteous.

Ironically, those who appeared morally successful were in greater spiritual danger than those whose failures were obvious.

The gospel begins where honesty begins.

Until we acknowledge our need, we will never seek the cure.

The cross only becomes precious when we understand the seriousness of our disease.

Mercy, Not Mere Religion (Matthew 9:13)

Jesus then quotes Hosea 6:6.

"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."

The Pharisees excelled at religious activity.

They attended worship.

They knew Scripture.

They carefully observed rituals.

Yet their hearts lacked compassion.

God had never desired empty religious performance.

He desired transformed hearts that reflected His character.

The same warning speaks powerfully today.

Church attendance is good.

Bible reading is essential.

Prayer is vital.

Giving is important.

Serving is necessary.

But none of those activities can substitute for a heart that genuinely loves God and loves people.

Religious performance without mercy eventually becomes cold legalism.

True Christianity always produces compassion because those who have received mercy naturally extend mercy.

Christ's Mission (Matthew 9:13)

Jesus concludes with one sentence that summarizes His earthly ministry.

"For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

This is not merely one mission among many.

It is why He came.

He came for sinners.

Not people who think they are good enough.

Not people who believe they can save themselves.

Not people who trust their own righteousness.

He came for people who know they need a Savior.

That includes Matthew.

It includes Peter.

It includes Paul.

It includes every believer who has ever lived.

And it includes you.

The invitation has never depended upon your goodness.

It has always depended upon His grace.

Living the Truth

Matthew's story confronts every one of us with several important questions.

Do I still define myself by my past, or by Christ's grace?

Have I truly left behind whatever competes with following Jesus?

Do I see people the way Jesus sees them?

Have I become more concerned with religious appearances than with mercy?

Am I living as someone who remembers that I, too, once sat at Matthew's table?

The church exists because Christ called unworthy people.

Every Christian is living proof that grace is greater than guilt.

Every transformed life reminds the world that no one is beyond the reach of the Savior.

The question is no longer whether Jesus calls the unworthy.

Matthew 9 answers that forever.

He does.

The only question that remains is whether we will respond as Matthew did.

Will we remain seated in the old life?

Or will we rise...and follow Him?