

A God-Lived Life
Sample Sermon – Month 3
Matthew 9:9-13

Eating with Sinners

Do you remember that place from your past that gives a clear window into the human condition? ...the high school cafeteria, that seedbed for stress and judgment? Do you remember the mental gymnastics that went on? Who is going to sit with whom? What table is yours? Do you sit with the jocks or the nerds or the artists or the mean girls? Or, are they the cool girls or the smart kids or the athletes or the leaders or the losers or....

You remember that? What was that all about? It was about “image”, right? You had to think what it would do to your image. “I don’t want to be seen with someone like that.” “What will people think of me?” You had to pick the table that fit what you wanted people to think about you.

It's like that scene from the movie, *Forrest Gump*. Remember, he's the “Life is like a box of chocolates” guy. Remember the scene when young Forrest, Forrest Gump, the kind of slow, mamma's boy with leg braces, hesitates to get on the bus because the bus driver is a “stranger,” but then he finally steps in. As he looks for a seat, he gets met with “You can't sit here.” and “Seat's taken.” Have you ever been there? Really, either side of it? Have you been the one not wanted? Or the one closing a door, trying to distance yourself from someone?

There are a lot of things that we put in the way of connecting with others by opening up our lives to others. That's the way to live a life of hospitality. Usually, all of our reasons and excuses to NOT live hospitably all come back to pride. You would've had no problem sharing your bus seat with the beautiful captain of the cheerleaders or letting the “cool kid” who throws all the best parties sit at your table. But the kid everybody picks on—not so much. And we're silly if we think we outgrow it. A little ambition makes the dinner invite from the boss, who can promote you, a little more attractive than hanging out with the awkward beet-farming co-worker. A chance to be seen with a well-known community leader holds a little more sway than hanging out with the person who can't seem to get her life together.

But in our Gospel Lesson today, Jesus flips that all on its head. He calls together the scum of the earth to hang out with him. Then, he goes to eat with him, and his friends—those tax collectors and sinners - that no self-respecting Jew would ever be seen with. That tax collector, Matthew, teaches a lesson in this too. He opens up his home so people can have a relationship with Jesus.

Our Gospel Lesson is Matthew 9:9-13. It's printed in your bulletin:

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and “sinners” came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

This is God's Word. And there he was—Jesus, being just so “Jesus”, right?! He's doing something that seems so crazy, but then, you think about it. And it's just right. He's **eating with sinners**. It starts even before the meal. He goes and calls Matthew, a tax collector. You've probably heard all about how the Jews hated tax collectors. Those guys worked for the Roman government. They represented the oppression of their own

people. As a rule, they were dishonest and greedy and got away with robbing you to line their own pockets. They were the kind of people Jews would not allow in their synagogue and the rabbis warned you to stay away from.

But then, Jesus does his thing. He goes up to this man at his job. (And there's a lesson in that for us too, next time you're in a rush and don't pay attention to the grocery workers name on their nametag.) But Jesus, he sees this man at work. He sees more than just a guy who is collecting tariffs on everything at the city gate. He sees him as a person that needs a relationship with God. And he gives him one with one simple invitation: "**Follow me.**" We could talk about the power of Jesus' Word. We could postulate that Matthew must have seen Jesus before or heard about his miracles or something, that he followed. But, regardless, this is just Jesus being Jesus—living the God-lived life. He loved that man that everyone else wrote off. And it wasn't just words. It wasn't just Jesus' job. Look at what happened next.

I mean, think about it. Most of you have jobs. And in those jobs, you probably have to be nice to some people you'd rather not be. You have to spend time with some people that you would never think to invite over for tea or a beer, or a meal, or whatever you have people over for on your own time. But, you're nice to them at your job because you have to be. You get paid to do that. Jesus didn't just call Matthew because he needed to diversify the experience for his group of disciples, needed someone who knew their way around the books, not another fisherman. Jesus wasn't just trying to get some leverage with another key demographic. And you can tell, because Jesus chooses to hang out with Matthew, to go to his house, his party. He's **eating with sinners.**

And it gets noticed. The Pharisees are watching and seeing this as a big red flag. This rabbi, Jesus, is eating with sinners. What does that say about him? Now, understand, when we're talking about eating with sinners today, we're not contradicting Psalm 1. Remember that?

**Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.**

We're not talking about "eating with sinners" as hanging out with them as they do their bad thing and joining in their sin. We're talking about eating with sinners as an invitation to connect with their lives so that we can influence them, so that they can meet our Father. That's what Matthew did, right? Jesus called Matthew. Jesus made him his. Then, Matthew invited all these "tax collectors and sinners" into his house. Why? To meet Jesus!

This week, we're talking about the God-lived life as a life of hospitality. Now understand, we all like to think of ourselves as hospitable. We're friendly enough. We show hospitality, right? Let's challenge that. Are we really as hospitable as we think? The biblical concept of hospitality is radical. Consider what Abraham did in the Old Testament Lesson when strangers showed up. He begs them to let him get them something to eat. And then did you notice what he did? He ran and told Sarah to quick get 3 seahs of flour and make some bread. That's 93 cups of flour. That's a lot a bread. That's a lot of work. But he didn't just give *her* work. He then ran and got a calf from the herd, slaughtered, butchered, and roasted it—for strangers, for people he had just met, who happened to be passing by.

The Greek word the New Testament uses for hospitality is φιλοξενία—*Philos*—you might recognize that word—*love* (like *Philadelphia*). And then ξενία—the Greek word meaning "stranger, alien, foreigner." Biblical hospitality is literally a "love of strangers" ... not tolerance of strangers, or even acceptance of strangers, but love of strangers. And remember, "God demonstrates what love is in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Biblical hospitality is showing that sacrificing love. It's treating others as family, even "strangers."

Think about that. It's inviting others into your family so that they can meet your Father. I know, we're really good at coming up with reasons not to bring others into our home. "Oh, my house isn't clean enough." Or "We just don't have the time." Realize that all of those reasons come back to pride. "I don't want people to think less of me because something isn't perfect." Or the time thing—"I feel I've got better things to do," or, "I don't think you're worth the time." It's very easy to be the Pharisees here and condemn biblical hospitality as unreasonable.

Common sense would say Jesus shouldn't have called Matthew because he didn't deserve it. Jesus shouldn't have gone to Matthew's house because Jesus had better places he could be. He could've stayed in heaven. But Jesus did call Matthew to be his. Jesus lived the God-lived life. And thank God for that! He called you when you didn't deserve it. He comes here into our house when two or three of us sinners gather together in his name.

Jesus' call and love made Matthew something new—no longer "Matthew the tax collector," but Matthew, the "disciple of Jesus", Matthew the evangelist, Saint Matthew. Jesus' dying love makes *you* something new—forgiven. Jesus' call makes you something new—a baptized child of God. And Jesus invites you to a banquet with him—around his altar. In the Lord's Supper, he changes our relationship with him and gives us a foretaste of heaven, not because we had status, but because he *changed* our status. He lived the God-lived life in our place that he might strengthen us to live the God-lived life.

And when he was accused of hanging out with sinners, Jesus silenced every opposition to that quickly. Look at verse 12 again. Look at what he said: "**It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.** Great point, huh?! It would be foolish for a doctor to stay away from his patients because they are sick. That's exactly why the doctor exists, to help the patients. That's why you are who you are, with the blessings God has given you. That's why he put you in your life with the people you come across. So, doctor, are you going to run away from your patients? No way! It's time for you to do some "**Eating with sinners.**"

After all, look at what Jesus said next: "**Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.**" He wants us to not just look the part, not just go through the motions, but to *truly love*...even strangers, even sinners. That's who he came for. And thank God for that. That means he came for me and every time I have been less than completely hospitable. That means he calls you. He came to make you sinners, righteous. He came to give you his God-lived life and motivate one in you. And through your God-lived life, through your life of hospitality, he will be calling even more sinners into his righteous family.

We said it before. Hospitality means you want people to meet your family so that they can meet your Father. You invite people into your family and maybe God makes them a brother or sister in Christ. Think about it. People are normally loved toward belief. They aren't argued into the kingdom of heaven. They are drawn by love. The way to love is not just words but hospitality. May God bless you this month as you challenge yourselves toward some specific activities of hospitality. I'm excited to see what God does through it.

At the beginning of this sermon, I reminded you of that scene from *Forrest Gump* where the kids wouldn't let him sit by moving books in the way or telling him, "seat's taken." But then, do you remember Jenni, that sweet girl who told him, "you can sit here if you like"? That simple act of hospitality for someone no one else wanted created a bond, a friendship. Jesus has done that for you. He's prepared your place, and it is much better than a bus seat. May God bless you living your God-lived life in response, and may he give you plenty of chances to practice **eating with sinners.**

In Christ,

Amen.