

WHY HIM?! WHY ME?!?!**Matthew 9:9-13**

INTRO: In the early 80s I was here at Ashland Seminary. For our required field experience Paul Keefer and I accompanied Doug Denbow in his work as chaplain at the county jail. (Tell the story about Dave Rollins)

God pursues us. Jesus held a child on his lap and said as much: *“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.* Matthew 18:12-14.

This was in response to a question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of God and right before his teaching on pursuing the person who has fallen away.

Over the past several weeks in our Lenten series, OPEN THE EYES OF MY HEART LORD, we have seen how Jesus went looking for his disciples. He purposely traveled through Samaria in order to have an encounter with the Woman at the Well. Then in our talk from two weeks ago, we saw how he went and **found** Philip and called him to be a disciple. Notice, again, this is what he does in our text for today. Listen, **(Read Matthew 9:9-13)**

This is our God. No one is beyond his grasp – and no one is too “bad” for him to redeem. I read an awesome quote from Philip Yancey the other day that makes this very point. Yancey writes, *“The essence of Christian faith has come to us in story form, the story of a God who will go to any lengths to get his family back. The Bible tells of flawed people—people just like me—who make shockingly bad choices and yet still find themselves pursued by God. As they receive grace and forgiveness, naturally they want to give it to others, and a thread of hope and transformation weaves its way throughout the Bible’s accounts.”*

This is our God.

Matthew certainly must have asked himself “Why me?!” when Jesus walked up to his tax collection booth and said “Follow me.” He was part of a notoriously corrupt and wildly unpopular class of people. Tax collectors bought their positions from the Romans or the local tetrarch. Matthew had purchased his from Herod Antipas who was the Roman puppet king in the province of Galilee. While the tax collectors who worked for the Romans were especially despised because they served the “enemy”, Matthew’s group were only slightly higher on the despicable scale. Tax collectors were informed of the amount they owed to the government and there were no further instructions as to how that was obtained or how much was levied on the populous. The sky was the limit. As a result tax collectors were hated even as they became wildly rich. We have no idea if Matthew was one of the corrupt ones or not, but he still was not someone you invited to your son’s bar mitzvah.

So when Jesus walked up to his table and ordered him to “Follow me!” everyone, not just the judgmental religious leaders, were asking “Why him?!?!”. And then, Jesus went to Matthew’s house for dinner. And there were more tax collectors and sinners there. And people were wondering “Why them?!?!”.

But that’s what Jesus does. He isn’t put off by people because of what class they are – he sees each individual as his loved and coveted child who needs his redemption. His message of forgiveness is for those who have ears to hear – no matter who they are or what they are doing or have done. We do well as his people to do the same.

Allow me to take some time to unpack this story so that we can have the eyes of our hearts opened. You see, in the words of one of the commentators I read on this passage, *“Jesus sees the veins of gold and precious gems in the most unlikely places.”* Matthew was just such precious find. So are you. So is the vilest sinner. So first, let’s ask . . .

How often do we fail to see ourselves as God sees us?

- Jesus SAW Matthew. He doesn’t avert his gaze when he goes past someone who is in a shameful situation. He SEES us. And he sees us without condemnation. He sees us and loves us. In John 8, the woman who was caught in adultery was brought to him and he was challenged to affirm the Jewish law which demanded she be stoned. Jesus did that. He affirmed the law and he said that anyone who was without sin could throw the first stone. All the accusers left. Not a one was without sin and they knew it. The only ones left were the woman who had been caught in sin, and the man who had never sinned – the ONE person who could have thrown that first stone. Jesus looked at her and asked, *“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”*

John 8:10b. And when she affirmed that fact he said, “*Then neither do I condemn you. . . Go now and leave your life of sin.*” John 8:11b. He doesn’t condemn – he loves.

- Jesus’s invitation to follow him, words completely free of condemnation, changed how Matthew saw himself. He no longer saw himself as a hopeless case but as one called to be a disciple. When Jesus calls us our status changes. We go from worthless to worthy. It’s nothing we do, it’s all his doing. We are all called through the riches of his grace. Paul put it this way, *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* Ephesians 2:8-9.
- So then, if we ourselves have experienced such grace, we need to then ask . . .

How often do we fail to see others as God sees them?

- Why are we so quick to call out the sins . . . OF OTHERS?!
- That is the reason for the title of this talk: **WHY HIM?! WHY ME?!!** When we see a person whom we judge to be beyond redemption, it’s almost like we are asking God, “Why him?” or “Why her?” When, truth be told, the question we should truly be asking is “Why me?” Why did God look beyond my fault and see my need? Plain and simply it’s because he loves us that much. As I pointed out earlier, he is not willing that any should perish.
- Let’s not be so hasty to see the sinner. Let’s instead see the potential God sees. Pray, “Open the eyes of my heart Lord.” Our vision will be clearer when we realize that for everyone . . .

Jesus meets us where we are

- Again, notice who Jesus has dinner with? Not only does he go to this tax collector’s house for dinner, but other tax collectors and sinners join them. What kind of sinners? All kinds. It doesn’t matter. The point is Jesus sat down and ate with them. He didn’t lose his appetite to dine with the dregs of society, he relished the chance to break bread with them. Jesus meets sinners where they are, and he says follow me. There is a method to his madness. He does not expect the sinners he meets to stay the same – he doesn’t leave us in our sin. No, the implication is that you leave the sin and become a disciple.
- So that means, there is no one who is off limits. I quote it often, but those words from the wonderful old hymn *To God Be The Glory*, are so powerful, *O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood, To every believer the promise of God; The vilest offender who truly believes, That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.*
- So, who are the sick . . . REALLY? Jesus confronted the condemning religious leaders with “*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.*” Matthew 9:12b. His question brings them up short. And then it begs the question – are the sick just the ones the religious leaders looked down their noses at, or does the description fit them as well? You know the answer. When you are pointing a finger at someone it’s important to remember that three are pointing back at you. Instead of seeing others as sinners, we need to meet them where they are, and introduce Jesus to them.
- My friend Ethan did this. He was a very traditional BIC Pastor. And then his son bought a motorcycle so Ethan, wanting to spend time with Roger, bought one for himself. And then Ethan noticed the biker culture. They were rough and profane and they needed Jesus. So this straight laced Kansas boy grew a beard and wore black jeans and leather and spent the last 25 years of his life ministering to bikers. And they loved him because he loved them and met them where they were – at biker bars and rallies. And they came to Jesus.
- Ethan didn’t care what others thought because he knew what Jesus taught. Think about it, who is beyond God’s redemption? The answer is, the person who no longer has brain function. So allow God to take care of people’s worries. Be like Joshua Harris who wrote “*Be like Jesus: Spend enough time with sinners to ruin your reputation with religious people.*” Because being like Jesus is what does it come down to in the end? That’s why we do well to listen to Jesus when he says in verse 13 to . . .

“Go and learn”

- Jesus used this confrontation from the religious leaders as a “teachable moment” from the scriptures they knew so well. He asked “What is important? Ritual purity or caring for needs?” And he quoted, *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice* which is part of Hosea 6:6 which Jay read earlier in the service. Jesus wants his church to be more interested in mercy and justice than ritual purity. R. T. France, commenting on Jesus’s word, writes “*Righteousness is not of course itself a bad thing; indeed, properly understood, it is the goal of discipleship. But the sort of righteousness which puts sacrifice before mercy is not the righteousness of the kingdom of*

heaven, and those who rely on such correctness of behavior are not likely to find their way through the narrow gate.” Striving to do everything right is admirable but impossible. Being merciful is always the right option. Holiness with mercy is the perfect combination. Let’s learn to do that and then, let’s do that.

Conclusion: Let me remind us that the definition of the word “church” as it is used in the New Testament is “Called out ones”. We are the church. We are called out of sin, out of the world, and into the ministry of the Good News. We don’t have to be preachers to be ministers. It’s our job to be Jesus and that means we are called to go to the tax collector tables of our culture and call people to follow Jesus. That means we are called to go to the sinners and love on them until they see Jesus. I don’t know who said it, but a great quote I read the other day is this, *“We will never change the world by going to church. We will only change it by being the church.”* Instead of asking “Why him?” Or “Why me?” Just praise God for his plan and say “Why not?” Amen.