

Title: “The Lord’s Table”

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Matt. 9:9–13

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Service Readings: Hosea 5:15–6:6; Rom. 4:13–25; Matt. 9:9–13

The Lord’s table is not a reward for the worthy, but the place for sinners.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Matthew set his table long before Jesus came onto the scene. He had become a tax collector – either by choice or by circumstance. That really didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he was what he was. He was a collector of money. Hated by his people and he knew it. Not a moment when by where he was able to forget. The snarls, the looks, the disdain from everyone were obvious. His social circle, his only support, were from those in his profession. They understood because they too lived it. They were all hated, and that hate drove them into isolation, exclusion from their own people. And so they gathered together, each tax collector, and formed a community where they could find relief, support, and encouragement. A community that together tried to justify the lives they chose.

A portion of the hatred was not justified. They were collecting taxes for an empire that had a firm grip on his people and demanded a share of their income. Corrupt or not, the Roman empire required the collection of this money. And so the disdain from the Jewish people towards the tax collectors was unfair. Their anger was misdirected and sinful. But there was also the corruption of these tax collectors, who exhorted excess to line their own pockets. They deserved a fair wage, but in greed sought more. This was their sin to carry.

And so they gathered together, justifying their sinful practices, hiding the contributions that their own actions played in society’s hatred toward them. They lived in active sin, unwilling to repent because they had built an entire life with stolen money. If they collected only what was fair, their way of life would dramatically change: their wealth, gone; the only source of comfort and peace, gone. And besides, even if they *did* abandon their sinful practices, their own people would *still* hate them because, at the end of the day, they were collecting money for the people’s enemy.

They were caught up in a life of sin with no apparent way out.

This was Matthew’s table. And it was a table that Jesus approached. “Follow me,” he said. Stop for a moment and consider the seconds that passed in that moment. Matthew knew his societal position; he knew his financial position. He knew that an affirmative response would transform the life he now lived. But he didn’t know how and he didn’t know the cost. Would following Jesus isolate him from the only society he enjoyed fellowship with? Would it free him from the sinful prison he built for himself? Would he join Jesus just to be outcast once again, rejected again when the depth of his sin was made known to this Rabi? Would it even be *worth* the cost?

You see, active sin does some terrible things to a human heart and mind. It overtakes a person and redefines them from the inside out. It slowly molds within them an identity that would never be chosen. It forces decisions and behaviors that solidify that identity by whispering in the person’s ear that they have gone too far to turn back, that the cost to continue is far less than the cost to repent. And sin doesn’t just change how the person sees himself, it also changes how the person relates to others. Active sin seeks privacy, isolation. It

wants to remain hidden so its grip cannot be loosened. But our human nature was built for relationships and so we fight the temptation to separate completely from society. Instead, we seek others who are just like us, others who are also living in this same sin. And together we form a community where we justify our actions and enforce our sinful behavior.

And in a world like ours, where the formation of community can be global and immediate, we begin to not just gather together but also attempt to normalize our behavior so that we can integrate back into the greater society. Adultery is one easy example. In Matthew's time it meant stoning. Today, it means.... Nothing. It has been normalized and no longer considered taboo. This makes it easier for a person to engage in this sin actively and justify its actions as right and even proper. But there are also sins that today still require a person to detach from others and hide his actions. But even these sins are slowly making their way into the fabric of society and will one day be normalized and accepted.

In both cases, sins that are accepted and sins that are not yet accepted, the problem still remains for the sinner. He knows, deep down inside, that what he is doing is wrong, even if the world disagrees. And for so many people, they come face to face with the living God who confronts their sin. Just as Jesus came to Matthew's table, he comes to ours. He comes to where we are – broken, isolated, scared, and beckons us to follow him. Stop and consider the seconds that pass in these moments. What does it look like to obey? A life built around sin is costly to cleanse. There are worldly consequences, not just for the sinner but for those in his life. Consequences of relationships, money, honor, and pride. The cost is very real and very high. And for what? The outcome is not guaranteed. The repentance of Matthew might not have brought complete restoration. Even to this day he is considered “the tax collector.” In his time, this title would follow him for the rest of his life. The same can be said today. Society may still remind a repentant sinner of his sin; it is a consequence that he might never escape. And yet, Jesus beckons, “Follow me.”

What I find interesting about this account is that immediately after Matthew decides to follow Jesus, he brings him to his own home and his own table. He surrounds Jesus with people just like him – people active in their sin. In this way he shines a light into the lives of his entire community. This is a detail worth being challenged on. Just as sin isolates a person, we often see repentance as a different act of isolation. We turn from our own sin, and then immediately escape the community that once served us. But Matthew doesn't do that; instead, he brings his savior *into* the community he was participated in. Instead of hiding this light from others like him, he brought it to them to shine in their own lives.

And Jesus allows this. He doesn't shun Matthew or discourage him from surrounding him with these sinners. He welcomes it, encourages it, and even participates in the fellowship that they share. But he does it with one goal in mind – to transform the hearts of those who remain in their sin. He does it with the same invitation he gave Matthew: to follow him.

You see, this is a God who does not condone sin but instead enters into it, enjoins himself to those who practice it. He does it for one purpose – to save them. The cross of Jesus was not a cross where the sins of the world were gathered and placed upon his shoulders. In order for him to suffer the punishment, he first had to join himself to us. This was not some sort of reverse Santa Claus Christmas where he detached our sins from our bodies and carried them away. This was deeper. He first attached himself to us. Our sins, our *active* sins became *his* active sins. He didn't just carry our sins to the cross, he carried *us* to the cross. Through him we punished, but because of him we did not feel the punishment. You see, the cross is far more intimate than we typically describe it. We were with him on the cross but were shielded from the punishment. And now saved, he calls us to his table, every Sunday where he can once again remind us of his forgiveness and feed us with his body and blood.

But then what? This is what stops us in our tracks; it is what makes us pause. If this is what he did, and still does for us, how does that impact our lives? What is the cost of receiving it? We through around phrases like “complete transformation of body and soul” and that is true, but what does it mean for a person who is deep in their sin? For some, the cost seems too high to consider. And this is where we as Christians come in. All too often we are like the Pharisees who shun the sins of others. We disgust at the LGBT community, condescend those who have aborted their children, ostracize those with opposing political views. And then, on Sunday morning, we gather around the Lord’s Table – rejoicing that we are in community with our own.

But that’s not what Jesus did and not what he asks of us. We are to be his voice in this world. We are to go into the these communities of people who are active in their sins. We are to recognize that we too have our own active sins. And we are to bring the message of Jesus to them: “Follow me.” And we are to enter into their communities, not so we can justify their sins, but so that we can bring the light of Christ into their lives.

And so we can call them to Jesus, and eventually to the Lord’s Table, for this is where Jesus calls each one of us; it is where he still sits with sinners; where he transforms them. And this also means you. You who are ashamed of what you have become. You who have justified your sin for so long that you no longer know how to untangle yourself from it. You who fear what repentance might cost. You who wonder whether your sin will forever define you. Listen again to the words of Christ: “Follow me.” Not after you fix yourself. Not after society accepts you. Not after you finally become worthy.

Now.

And where does following him lead? Not into isolation. Not into despair. Not into a life where your sin gets the final word. It leads here — to his table. Matthew once sat at a table surrounded by sinners trying to justify themselves. Now he sits at the table of Christ where sinners no longer need to justify themselves because Jesus has justified them by his blood. And that is the difference.

At Matthew’s old table, sin was hidden, defended, and normalized.
At Jesus’ table, sin is confessed, forgiven, and crucified.

Here, Christ joins himself to sinners still.
Here, he gives his body and blood still.
Here, he speaks mercy still.

And then he sends us back out into the world — not as Pharisees standing at a distance, but as redeemed sinners carrying the voice of Christ into the darkness: “Follow me.”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.