



# “Mercy and Sacrifice”

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson for this afternoon as we follow the life and lessons of Jesus comes to us from the gospel of Matthew 9:1-17, occurring just after our passage of Jesus casting out the Legion of demons from last week. This scene is the first time that Jesus is accused of blasphemy - of acting in God's place - a charge that would ultimately bring him down before Roman rule in the book of Matthew. While the gospel writer is seeking to share something with us of the nature of Jesus in this story, he is also suggesting to us something about the kingdom of God. It is up to us as attentive listeners to the text, then, to discern what this passage has to say about our place in it. You will note that there are many sermons that can be preached in this text - we'll settle for just one of them today.

“After getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” Then some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” - he then said to the paralytic - “Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” And he stood and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings. As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

Almost exactly a year ago next month I was riding in a van along what some might consider a road carved through the countryside of the Yucatan peninsula. My fellow mission-trip goers and I were taking our first of several drives back and forth from the village we stayed in and the work site where we were helping to build a secondary school in partnership with several other churches. This trek that took 40 minutes one-way offered us a view of Mayan life that you would simply not see if you just lingered close to the cities. While this village that we stayed in was only 45 miles from Cancun, I can testify to the fact that it was a very long 45 miles as nothing that we saw in any way resembled civilization as we experience it in the modern world. And that resort world and this other were not exactly connected by a superhighway. Look to the side of the road when you weren't bouncing up and down over potholes and you might catch a glimpse of one of the stick and mud huts that the Mayans called home - a home that was camouflaged perfectly by the jungle around it because it was built with the very same sticks and mud. If you looked very

closely, you may even have been able to see through the opening where a front door might stand in our own homes, spot a goat tied to a post in the one room the family had for living, and simultaneously peer straight through to the children playing with balls that had seen better days out in the back where the laundry was drying or tortillas were baking on hot stones and iron skillet.

Our eyes were starting to become accustomed to this view when all of a sudden out of the blue there was a vast clearing with an uber-modern building set in the back of it. Metal hand railings curved around the painted concrete exterior walls, inviting your eyes up to a glassed-in front entryway that was covered by a steep roof that slanted up into the trees. ‘What in the world is that?’ We all seemed to ask simultaneously as if clarifying that we had actually seen the building and were not just hallucinating. Well, our Mayan leader explained that several years ago a group of well-meaning medical missionaries had committed themselves to building a clinic. They had the materials donated and quickly built the modern miracle. They supplied it with machines that could run simple tests, medical tools, first aid materials and vaccinations. They found physicians that would commit themselves to manning the hospital on rotation and stocked up on remedies for several of the simple diseases that were known to cause problems in the region and it specialized in pre and post-natal care and labor and delivery. But the building forever stood empty. Our leader did not know if it had ever seen a single patient. Because in their enthusiasm to build a state-of-the-art clinic in the area, nobody had asked the people if they wanted it or would trust the doctors from the North who ran it. No one asked if it would be possible for the people to even get to the clinic - particularly if they were on foot like 90% of the population and lived several miles away, let alone if they could make this walk while they were in labor. No one asked. These good souls just assumed that their understanding of what was required was right for everybody. That the answer they supplied to the problems of the community was a universal truth.

There had been a few universal truths in Jesus’ day. The spiritual pecking order in society was one of them. Like a sort of religious caste system there were the haves and the have-nots in relation to God and they were pretty easily identifiable because it was all ordered tidily under the rules of the law. At the top of the food chain of the faithful were of course the priests and the Pharisees. These guys were famous for being able to adhere to the law. They kept their noses clean by keeping them in the air most of the time and did not dare to defile themselves by touching the unclean - those who were sick, sinful, female, or disabled or were animals of the wrong species. “The Qumran community of the Essenes made a firm rule; (they wrote) “No madman, or lunatic, or simpleton, or fool, no blind man, or maimed, or lame or deaf man, and no minor shall enter into the Community.”<sup>1</sup> And by this they ensured that they would be found holy and acceptable in God’s sight and could order their community in a way that would moderate the means by which others could be saved as well. They knew what was best for everyone, and it was their calling in life to help others see the way. Then there were all the other folks. Those who just showed up in this world unclean - the blind or those befallen by disease. Women whose bodies banished them from the community every month. Those who didn’t score so well on the

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1995, p.153.

Iowa Test of Basic Skills. And then there were also perhaps the worst kind of outsiders in the religious community. Those whose jobs made them unclean. You couldn't choose your deformity, but you could choose your work. There were professionals who made money by taking it from others unfairly like tax collectors or robbers. Or those who made money by defiling themselves like prostitutes or swine herders. Didn't they know better?

But Jesus had another word about being in right relationship with God for the people - a reordering word that would turn the world on its head by abolishing the pecking order. For this man who had the power to heal and forgive sins would dine with the religious outcasts and tell the most powerful and influential people in the city that inheriting the keys to the kingdom had nothing to do with what you knew but how you loved. 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' he says. Mercy, not sacrifice. Compassion, not works, essentially. It's not that deeds were not important; it's just that they were no longer the essential component to salvation and so the people were called not to order their lives around social and religious rules but around love for others and for God. I can tell you it would have been a whole heck of a lot easier on Jesus had this not been the new law that he was called to call people to live by. Sacrifice at least is predictable and easy to identify. Universal truths about salvation and the Christian life are much easier to measure when they are based solely on behavior instead of the condition of the heart. It keeps the ball in our court, which we like, and I imagine Jesus would have liked too. If it weren't for this new rule, Jesus could have kept his distance from the folks that would make him look so bad. He could simply have laid out the priorities and waited to see if they would measure up. He could have kept the peace with the powers that be by telling them that their means of measuring success in the life of faith were in fact the ones that everyone should live by. It would have been much more comfortable for him and probably would have kept him off of the cross. But instead he challenges them, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" Like a new patch on an old cloak, the old way of measuring grace will not work under the new order of Christ. And this changes everything.

It seems that the church and even we ourselves spend a lot of energy on sacrifice but sure can be slow to mercy. Ready to build clinics in the jungle without first giving pause to listen to the way the Spirit may be calling us to set aside our certainty about what is essential for everyone else. Ready to define who is in and who is out. Ready to embrace how easy it is to ask others to measure up, and yet find it so difficult to recall that in Jesus Christ the Christian life isn't about measuring up at all. It is instead about doing what God did for us in Jesus - meeting people where they are. Reclining at the table and exchanging stories with those who are sinful and broken, who don't share the same priorities or lead the same kind of life and letting them and everyone else know that there is a new order based on love by the way you reflect the face of Christ to them. 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' Jesus said. What an infinitely more difficult word this is to live by, but what an infinitely more freeing word it is for us to hear. Because if it were the other way around I can guarantee you, with the third chapter of the book of Genesis as my witness, when every opportunity was in place for us to succeed and yet we succeeded only in sinning, none of us would measure up. But instead, by Jesus Christ, we are saved. This hard word is also our good news.

Philip Yancey writes, "In every generation the 'tax collectors and sinners' will assume a different appearance, but those who claim to be disciples of the Good Shepherd must diligently

seek ways of reaching out and drawing them into the banquet of God's people.”

Each and every day on the streets of Charlotte and in our places of work, in our families, in our lives we are given the opportunity to bear witness to the one thing that will draw tax collector and Pharisee and everyone in between alike closer to God. We have the opportunity to bear witness to his love. To have mercy on every single person we are otherwise so quick to judge and by doing so to welcome the disruptive new order of our God who tells us that judgment is his work, and proclaiming the love of Christ is ours.

May the Spirit grant us courage to follow the way of our God of mercy, and the wisdom to allow him to direct the steps. Amen.