

*No One Like Jesus: Sinners and Air Quotes*  
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*Psalm 1; 2 Peter 3:9; Matthew 9:9-13*

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 9:9-13. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "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. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

Do we all know what air quotes are? It's when we say a word that we don't really mean, but we use a tone of voice to indicate that we are using a figure of speech. Sometimes we'll actually make quotation marks with our hands. Sometimes we'll say something's "new and improved" with air quotes, meaning it really isn't all that new or all that improved, but it's different than it used to be, and it's a sales tactic. A lot of people say that Donald Trump "tells it like it is." He's isn't actually very good at telling the truth all the time. But! He doesn't sugarcoat his answers; he says exactly what is on his mind. We use the one phrase knowing we mean something different.

Surprisingly enough, this has everything to do with our passage today. In some English translations of the Bible, when the Pharisees call people sinners like they do Matthew 9, the word "sinners" is in quotation marks. They are air quotes. By using quotation marks, the translators tell us that they know we might find the word offensive. They are implying that the gospel writers (and even Jesus Himself) don't think of this group the same way the Pharisees did.

An inter-faith spiritual director who once worked for my mother's hospital in Indianapolis wrote about those air quotes this way: "What a great image. I feel the tension fade away. Nobody's really a sinner, those little air quotation marks say. We are just in different points of understanding as we continue to wake up to our divine relationship with God."

It's a nice thought. There's just one problem with it. Those quotation marks aren't actually in the text. Quotation marks don't exist in Greek or Hebrew, and neither does the concept of air quotes. So we're going to have to dig in and find out what this passage is about and what this word "sinners" really means. Behind these air quotes in the perfect lesson for Palm Sunday – the reason that Jesus lived and died and rose again.

But let's start at the beginning, with Matthew off the side of the road in his tax collector's booth. We've talked about tax collectors before; we know tax collectors were not beloved (just like today). They were seen as traitors serving the Roman Empire. But let's make it personal.

You know how the talk in recent years about class envy, how the top 1% have all the stuff? In ancient Israel, tax collectors were the 1% of the 1%. But unlike our society, where there are programs that help those who are poor – even if they aren't enough, even if they aren't perfect – nothing like that existed in the ancient world. The taxes went straight to Caesar and whatever he wanted to do, and the people hardly ever saw anything of those tax moneys again. 80% of Jews in turn-of-the-century Israel were subsistence farmers living day by day on what crops they could grow and the work they could get from others. The other 20% were merchants, selling goods and wares, necessities and luxuries both.

Unlike everyone else, the tax collectors were parasites. They didn't make anything, grow anything, sell anything, or employ anybody. Tax collectors made bids on how much they could collect for the Roman government. The tax collector had to pay that amount or face death. But the tax collector could charge whatever taxes he wanted and keep whatever was left after he paid Rome.

So imagine the tax collector as less of an IRS agent and more of the local enforcer for a crime syndicate. If you didn't pay, the tax collector could get the Roman soldiers to beat out of you what you owed or throw you into debtor's prison. These guys became immensely wealthy on the backs of their countrymen. We might argue whether or not corporations and CEOs pay their fair share and how much companies help our society over coffee in the fellowship hall, but these tax collectors were a blight. They did nothing but leave misery in their wake.

And one of them is who wrote the gospel we've been studying together.

It's a crazy turn of events, one that is still shocking. It's not even that Matthew chose to follow Jesus. It's that Jesus chose Matthew to follow Him! Doesn't Jesus know who this guy is? Doesn't He know that choosing Matthew will cause fights and divisions among His closest friends, a couple of whom actively campaign for the takedown of Rome? Doesn't He know that Matthew is a cancer on society, that he's the problem with Israel today?

Of course Jesus does. That's one reason Matthew was chosen. He is all of those things. There is no downplaying how serious his sins were. He was a sellout. He broke the commandments not to steal and not to covet. Since Caesar considered himself a god, serving his government in an official capacity was seen as idolatry. He harmed other people directly by his job. He was a disgrace.

But that's the core of the gospel, isn't it? God challenges, convicts, and breaks us, then He heals and restores the worst of us. Matthew comes from a long line of people who made terrible personal decisions. The Bible is full of them. The question becomes not why Jesus chooses somebody like Matthew; it's that He chooses anyone at all.

And that gets us into the next part of the passage. Matthew leaves it all behind. He then had a dinner in honor of Jesus, and he invites all his friends to come meet this amazing rabbi who's changed his life. Since no self-respecting Jew would keep company with a tax collector, the only folks who come to the party are as nefarious as he is. More tax collectors, probably prostitutes, low-lives, maybe Romans he does business with.

And the Pharisees are beside themselves when they learn about it. It's like Jesus has gone in to dine with the Godfather, with Don Corleone. They ask the disciples why Jesus would do that. Did Matthew make Jesus an offer He couldn't refuse? Eating with people was a significant sign of friendship in their culture. How could Jesus be the Messiah and yet be friends with these scoundrels they had excommunicated from the temple and the synagogue?

Jesus eventually hears the grumbling of the Pharisees and answers their question. The first part and the third part go directly together. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick...for I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus not only knows who He's dining with, He's chosen to be there. These are the people He has been called to minister to. The sick need a doctor. Could you imagine if hospitals kicked out people for being unhealthy? Imagine that if the worse you got, the less care you'd receive! But we know better than that! The people who are most sick, we put in intensive care, round the clock attention. We don't kick them to the curb.

But that's what the Pharisees did! They assumed every case of sin was terminal – and catching. So they threw out those who had broken God's law, and they wouldn't let them back in. There was no thought of repentance, of becoming someone different with God's help. A tax collector and a sinner were a tax collector and a sinner for life. That is who you are, the Pharisees said. Stay outside. We don't want you in here messing up things for us.

But Jesus does something totally different. He eats with them. He becomes friends with them. He teaches them. And He offers them the opportunity to turn from sin and become a part of His Kingdom. That's the whole reason He came – to call sinners to repentance. To allow for those far from the Kingdom to enter. To give them the power to cleanly break from their past and begin life anew.

God promised in Jeremiah 31 (and Hebrews 8 reminds us of the promise) that in the day of the Messiah, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Micah 7:18-19 say, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." Jesus fulfills this promise. Every sinner who comes to Him, He will forgive.

Jesus has little patience with the Pharisees. Other rabbis used the phrase "go and learn what this means" with their young students. Jesus rebukes the Pharisees with it, kind of like saying to someone now, "2 + 2 = 4." The Pharisees think they are teachers, but they are actually the students – and not only that, but beginners who don't even know the basics about Scripture.

What Scripture are they to understand? Hosea 6:6 – "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Jesus isn't saying that sacrifice didn't have its place; God commanded it at one point in time. But God commanded sacrifice to cover sin; sacrifice showed the destructive power of sin. God didn't want sacrifice, but He wanted mercy. God desires compassion, even to the least and most unlikeable person. As James 2:13 says, "Mercy triumphs over judgment!"

Hosea 6:6 points out something important – the Pharisees still had to make sacrifices. Try as hard as they did, they still were guilty in the eyes of God. As Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” They broke God’s law, just not in the ways they imagined. They broke the spirit of the Law even as they argued over every technicality of its letter. The Pharisees were just in much a need of mercy as every sleazy, disreputable scoundrel around Matthew’s table.

The first part of today’s message is just that: *when it comes to sinners, there are no air quotes*. That spiritual director was 180 degrees off. We are all sinners. There are no exceptions, no loopholes, no air quotes, no half-true half-false. We are all sinners. There is no greater threat to the human ego and no lifeline as secure and sound as that fact. We are all sinners.

The reason we put air quotes around “sinners” is because we do not want to believe it. It is difficult to accept. In school, I always liked to know everything going into the test and ace it, especially if it was a subject I liked. I never wanted to be less than prepared. I was confident that I was smart, able, capable. Even if we don’t have something we think we’re really great at, we like to think that we’re OK, that we’re good people. It’s deeply offensive to hear we’re not.

It offends us to be told we’re wrong. It’s painful to have to admit our shortcomings and failures. We can’t stand it. We’re in a political season where candidates can’t admit they were wrong, even though it’s plain they’ve contradicted themselves. And to be fair, once they admit their faults, we pounce. We use that admission of guilt to our advantage. Taking the blame, admitting to our limitations and indiscretions, make us look weak.

That’s the real reason the Pharisees didn’t like Jesus. He threatened not only their power but their understanding of themselves as morally superior. He would no longer allow them to see themselves as the caretakers of the ways of God and the gatekeepers of righteousness. He shows time and again they are just as sick as everyone else. Their greed, their lust for power, their arrogance, all compounded by their pride in their religious accomplishments, made them desperately in need of His healing hand.

Throughout Scripture, the only people excluded from the Kingdom of God are those who refuse to acknowledge their sin and turn away from it. Even when Paul told the Corinthian church to expel someone, it was because the man was deep in grievous sin and refused to say there was anything wrong with it! You don’t call a doctor if you don’t believe you’re sick. In the same manner, a hospital releases you only if there’s nothing more than can do for you. Jesus is not excluding the Pharisees. Instead, He’s saying, “Stop pretending you aren’t sick, come to me, and I’ll give you the cure!”

And that leads me to my second thought for the day: *when it comes to eternity, our entire past will be air quotes*. The one way the translation gets it right is that when Matthew had these folks over for dinner and they met Jesus, some of them changed. Some of them, their hearts were made right with God and they turned from sin. That night, their eternity was set.

All that stuff in the past, all those sins, all that guilt and shame, all those regrets, they are set aside. God looks at those of us who believe in Christ as belonging to Christ, as united to Christ, as part of Him, covered by His blood, made holy by the Spirit, and perfect in His sight because we are under Jesus' mercy. God takes His fragile rebellious creatures and makes them anew. He's taking you and me and fashioning us into His likeness.

So when it comes to the future, once we have been resurrected and ushered into His Kingdom, those air quotes will actually make sense. Because terms like "sinner" and "unrighteous" and "unholy" applied to us once, but not any more. Even when they creep in, even when we stumble into them in this life, they are not our destiny. Our destiny is to be like God in our thoughts and words and actions, to be completely like Him in every way that a human can be. We will not be all-powerful or all-knowing, but we will be completely obedient to His will. We will love perfectly, we will exist perfectly – we will be as we God made us to be.

Even to me, it seems as I read the Bible and preach it every week, I have to talk about our state as sinners a lot. I'm surprised more people don't come up to me and say, "Pastor, do you *want* us to feel bad about ourselves?" Because sometimes it seems like a broken record. In a broken-down world where life is hard even for the richest among us, where things are tough for everybody, it seems like coming back to the fact that we are sinners on a regular basis is just too much. It's why our culture has thrown out the whole idea of sin. It's depressing to think that *we're* the problem.

But it's only in that bad news that we can find the good news. It's in the bad news that we are sinners that we find the good news that we can be rescued. We are the sick, but we can be cured. We are dead in sin, but we are made alive again in Christ. We are all, in Paul's words, "the chief of sinners," but it will not always be so. We who believe go from no hope of redemption to no fear of condemnation. It's that simple.

That's why this week is such an important time in the life of the church. On this week, we celebrate that He who was not sick paid the price for our cure. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, He who had no sin became sin for us so that in Him, we might become the righteousness of God. As Colossians 2:13-14 puts it, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross."

Many of those who shouted "Hosannah!" on this day shout "Crucify!" on Friday. And yet some of those same people will be among those who see and hear and testify as Thomas did, stating, "My Lord and my God!" There's no one among us, no one out in society, no one in the bars, no one in the streets, no one in the corporate high-rises, no one who doesn't qualify as sinner, and there's no one who doesn't have the opportunity to turn from sin and embrace the life Jesus offers. So this week, as we contemplate Christ's suffering on our behalf, may we embrace those around us who don't look like us, those we might dismiss as beyond hope, and encourage them to come face to face with our Lord Jesus – the One who suffered so that we might die to sin, and who rose again so that we might live eternally with Him and for Him and through Him.