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Pursuing the Kingdom: The King Who Forgives, Calls and Transforms

Matthew 9:1-13

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Today, we're going to continue looking at what it means to pursue the Kingdom of God as we turn our attention back to the Gospel of Matthew. Because, again, as I've stated before, every one of us, whether we realize it or not, is pursuing something. Some pursue success, believing that the next promotion, the next achievement or the next accomplishment will finally satisfy them. Others pursue wealth, security, pleasure, acceptance or influence. Many spend their entire lives trying to achieve some sort of fulfillment only to discover once they achieved what they set out to achieve they were still left wanting.

Now as we've seen so far, and will continue to see as we make our way through Matthew's Gospel, Jesus repeatedly called people to pursue something altogether different than what this world has to offer. In Matthew 6:33, our theme verse for the year, Jesus said to "Seek, or to pursue, first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). His point being that the kingdom of God is not simply a destination but it is the present rule and reign of King Jesus in the hearts of His people. To pursue God's kingdom is to place Christ above every other pursuit and to submit every area of life to His authority.

And Matthew ch. 9 provides us with three scenes that demonstrate what pursuing God's kingdom actually looks like. And at first glance these stories seem unrelated. One involves a paralyzed man. Another tells of a tax collector. And the third records a dinner party filled with notorious sinners. And Matthew intentionally places these events together because they reveal the very heart of Jesus and His mission.

For, you see, the kingdom Jesus established is unlike any earthly kingdom. Earthly kingdoms reward the accomplished. But Christ's kingdom welcomes the broken. Earthly kingdoms celebrate strength. Christ's kingdom delights in mercy. Earthly kingdoms honor the deserving. Christ's kingdom rescues the undeserving.

And just like our last passage that we looked at in ch. 8, the passage we will look at today has parallel accounts in the Gospels of Mark 2 and Luke 5 which will give us some more detail as we go along. But Matthew, writing more concisely than either Mark or Luke, focuses our attention on Jesus Himself. Matthew wants us to see not simply what happened, but who Jesus is. And so, if you are able, please stand with me as I read the Word of God from the Gospel of Matthew 9:1-13. [Read]

The text starts off by telling us that Jesus and His disciples have just made their way back across the Sea of Galilee after Jesus had delivered the demon-possessed men in the country of the Gadarenes. And we're told that He returned to "His own city," Capernaum, which, as we found out earlier in Matthew, had become His ministry headquarters.

And suddenly, a group of men approached the place where Jesus was staying carrying a paralytic on a bed. Now, Matthew simply tells us they brought him to Jesus. But Mark and Luke reveal the extraordinary lengths they went to. In those accounts, we read

that they were unable to reach Jesus at first because of the crowds, and so they climbed onto the roof, made a whole, and lowered their helpless friend directly in front of Jesus.

Now, try and imagine this scene for a moment. Jesus is surrounded by a crowd of people who are listening to Him teach and possibly perform other miracles, for that is what we see Him doing the last time He was in Capernaum at the beginning of ch. 8. And all of a sudden, dust begins falling from the ceiling. Everyone looks up and pieces of the roof are being removed. Then ropes slowly lower a bed carrying a paralyzed man. What remarkable determination! These friends were not discouraged by the obstacle of the crowd or any barriers between them and Jesus because they believed Jesus was their friend's only hope.

You see, true faith always finds a way to Jesus. As Charles Spurgeon once observed, "Faith laughs at impossibilities and says, 'It shall be done.'" And Jesus immediately noticed something deeper than the man's physical need. The text says in vs. 2, "When Jesus saw their faith..." Faith is always visible. In other words, genuine faith produces action.

And then Jesus said something astonishing at the end of vs. 2, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." The man and his friends likely only expected physical healing because, remember, just before getting in the boat to cross the other side, Jesus had healed those were brought to him. But here, Jesus offered something much more valuable than physical healing, and that is the forgiveness of sin. Why? Because Jesus knew the greatest problem in this man's life was not a damaged body but a damaged soul.

Think of it this way, every room in every hospital eventually becomes empty because every patient either recovers and goes home or, unfortunately in the worst cases, they die. The point is that every physical healing is temporary, both the miracles we read about in scripture, as well as, the miracles that still happen today. And so every miracle of healing points us toward a greater miracle, the forgiveness of sins and a right relationship with God.

Modern culture often tells us our greatest problems are emotional, financial, relational, educational or political. But those things are just symptoms of the real problem. Scripture says our deepest problem is separation from God because of sin. And this devastating reality is not an accident of circumstance, but the direct consequence of our own rebellion. As the prophet Isaiah sharply warns us in Isaiah 59:2, our iniquities have built a massive barrier between us and our Creator.

And this great divide affects every single human being, leaving us disconnected from the very source of our life, purpose and joy. And because we are completely powerless to bridge this divide on our own, this separation remains our greatest problem, one that only Jesus, himself, can ultimately resolve. Which He did when He willfully went to the cross paying the just penalty for our sin and making a way possible, through His grace, to be forgiven our sin and given right standing with God through faith in His finished work on the cross.

Now, immediately the scribes accused Jesus of blasphemy. For they understood something that many people would miss today, and that is that only God can forgive sin. And they were absolutely right.

And so Jesus demonstrated His divine authority by, first, exposing their thoughts in vs. 4, "Why do you think evil in your hearts?" Notice that no one had spoken out loud. The One who knew their thoughts was proving Himself to be far more than just a teacher.

And then Jesus asks in vs. 5, "For which is easier, to say 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" You see, both healing and forgiveness are impossible with man. Yet only the promise of healing could be immediately proven, because though you can't see someone's sin being forgiven, you can see that they are healed. For anyone can claim to forgive sins because forgiveness is invisible. But healing this man's paralysis, however, could be instantly proven.

"But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins..." Jesus answered His own question before the religious leaders did. Since He could make good on His claim to heal the man, it gave proof of His claim to also have the authority to forgive sins.

And the man was instantly healed, proving that Jesus did, indeed, have the power of God both to heal and forgive. And the crowd was amazed and glorified God and the miracle authenticated Jesus' message and confirming the forgiveness of the man's sin showing us that the kingdom of God begins not with improved circumstances but with forgiven hearts.

And there is a beautiful picture here in this passage. The friends brought the man to Jesus because he could not come himself. What a picture of intercessory faith. And so friends, never stop bringing people to Jesus. Parents, never underestimate your prayers for your children. You may not be able to save anyone, for that responsibility is God's alone, but you can point them and, sometimes even carry them, to the Savior.

And once Jesus demonstrates His authority to forgive sin, Matthew immediately gives his own testimony. Showing us that the King who forgives is the same King who calls.

Now, vs. 9 may be one of the most understated conversion stories in all of Scripture. Matthew simply says, "He saw a man named Matthew." How humble. Matthew never magnifies himself and there are no other details other than he identifies himself as a tax collector. Now, Mark and Luke give a few more details by telling us his name was Levi, or Matthew, the son of Alphaeus but not much else is given at this point.

But, for now, that is enough for it is important for us to realize that tax collectors were among the most hated people in all of Israel. They were Jews who worked for Rome, who often made themselves rich through cheating people in their taxes and tributes they owed to their captors. And they did this by weighting the scales in such a way that they would overcharge their own people above and beyond what was required by the Romans and then they would pocket the rest. And so they were viewed as traitors, outcasts and, ultimately, enemies. And no respectable rabbi would intentionally recruit a tax collector.

And yet Jesus did. Jesus looked beyond Matthew's reputation and saw what grace would accomplish. And the invitation was wonderfully simple, and it's the same invitation that has echoed throughout the history of Christ's Church, Jesus said, "Follow me." And just like the other disciples up to this point, Matthew immediately got up and followed Him.

Luke adds another detail, "And leaving everything, he followed him." (Luke 5:28) Matthew walked away from wealth, security, influence and his former identity to follow Jesus. Following Jesus always requires leaving everything behind. For some it means leaving sinful habits. For others it means leaving pride. Still others leave fear, selfish ambition, bitterness or worldly priorities. Following Jesus always involves surrender and dying daily to ourselves.

Matthew probably sacrificed one of the wealthiest occupations in all of Galilee. Yet he gained something infinitely greater. He gained Jesus Himself and the Holy Spirit later inspired him to write the very Gospel we are studying today.

Imagine that. The tax collector became the evangelist. The outcast became an apostle. The sinner became one of the human authors of God's word. You see, grace rewrites our story and none of our stories are finished yet. No one is beyond the reach of God's grace in Jesus. Perhaps you believe your past disqualifies you from the Kingdom of God. But Matthew would say otherwise. And God still delights in transforming people.

And notice what happens next. Matthew's first response after he begins to follow Jesus reveals the heart of genuine discipleship. Because people who have had their lives changed by Jesus naturally want others to meet the same Savior which is what we read about in the next few verses.

What's going on here, apparently, is that Matthew immediately hosted a great banquet in honor of Jesus. Luke specifically calls it "a great feast." And Matthew invited all his former associates, his tax collector friends and sinners. Which makes sense for who else would he know to invite?

You see, new believers naturally begin where they already have relationships. Matthew immediately became a missionary to his own circle of friends who happened to be other tax collectors and sinners.

But the Pharisees could not understand this. And they begin questioning the disciples of Jesus in vs. 11, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" You see, to eat with someone in Jewish culture symbolized fellowship and acceptance. The Pharisees believed that true holiness required separation from sinners not sitting down and eating with them. But Jesus demonstrated the opposite, that He came to reach sinners.

But notice carefully. Jesus never participated in their sin. Yes, He sat with them and ate with them but the purpose was not to assimilate but to remain set apart in order to show them the way out of their sin. For Jesus entered their world to rescue them. And we, as followers of Jesus, are called to do likewise. But the problem is that, we as Christians, far too often, look too much like the world, doing what the world does and conforming to its message that we then find it difficult to stand out and point others to Jesus. May God help us.

And then, Jesus gave one of His greatest missional statements about what He had come to do in vs. 12. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." What he is basically saying is that a doctor spends time around sick people because sick people are the ones that need a doctor. So, in essence, in the same way that sick people need a doctor to be made well, Jesus came because we, as sinners, need a Savior to not only be made well but to be made new.

Now, the Pharisees' problem was that they misunderstood their own condition. They thought that, as God's chosen people, they were spiritually healthy. But the tax collectors knew they were spiritually sick. You see, one of the greatest barriers to salvation is self-righteousness. Until someone recognizes their need for salvation, they will never seek it.

So he instructs them to "Go and learn what this means..." and He quotes Hosea 6:6, "I will have mercy, and not sacrifice." The Pharisees excelled at outward religion while lacking compassionate hearts. And God has always made clear through His word His

desire for transformed hearts above empty ceremony. The point being that religion without mercy misses the heart of God.

And so, Jesus concluded, "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." And that statement should be both comforting and convicting to us. Comforting because Jesus welcomes repentant sinners to the table. But convicting because self-righteous people often fail to see their own need.

One of the greatest illustrations of this comes from the life of John Newton, the former slave trader who became a pastor and wrote the famous hymn, "Amazing Grace." Near the end of his life, Newton said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." And that is the message of Matthew 9.

So, this passage raises several questions for us to wrestle with this morning. First, have you pursued forgiveness before pursuing everything else? Many people want Jesus to improve their lives while resisting His authority. The greatest miracle is not physical healing but forgiveness and a right standing with God.

Second, if you have decided to follow Jesus, are you still following Him with your whole heart? Matthew did not simply admire Jesus, he gave up everything and abandoned his former life to follow Him. Following Jesus is not just a one time decision back in our past somewhere but it requires daily surrender. Jesus still says to us daily, "Follow Me."

Third, who are you bringing to Jesus? Like the four friends of the paralytic and like Matthew inviting his friends to dinner, every one of us has people within our circle of influence. We may not be able to save them, but we can introduce them to the Savior who can through prayer, love, hospitality and the faithful sharing of the gospel.

Now, this passage is not primarily about the healing of the paralytic. It is not primarily about a converted tax collector. And it is not even primarily about a feast with sinners. It is about the King. The King who forgives. The King who calls and the King who transforms and shows mercy. And the King is still inviting every broken sinner into His kingdom with the same invitation, "Leave everything behind and follow me." Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for revealing the heart of Your Son in Your word. Thank You that our greatest need is met through the forgiveness He purchased for us. Thank You that no sinner is beyond the reach of Your grace, and no life is beyond Your power to transform.

Forgive us for the times we have pursued lesser kingdoms instead of Yours. Give us hearts that trust Christ completely and hands that lovingly bring others to Him. May our church become a place where broken people find hope, where sinners hear the gospel and where King Jesus is honored above all. Help us each day to seek first Your kingdom and Your righteousness until the day we stand before our King face to face. We ask these things in the powerful name of Jesus, Amen.

Benediction: May the God of all grace remind you that your greatest need has been met through the forgiveness found in Jesus Christ. As you go from this place, may you walk in the joy of His mercy, follow His call with wholehearted obedience and extend His compassion to those around you. Amen.