

Jesus Eats with Sinners

Matthew 9:9-17

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Lori and I lived in Ottawa, Ontario for 11 years before moving here. If you've never been to Ottawa, I would encourage you to go sometime especially to experience Canada Day there. It's a beautiful city with lots to do. One of the things is visit the many museums or special venues in our nation's capital. One was the National Art Gallery. Admission was free and we often went there when visitors from out of town came to stay with us. So I got to know the gallery a bit. And they have this one section called Modern Art or something like that. Now I don't mind abstract art or unorthodox art. But there's one criterion this art has to meet for me to consider it as art. I should not be able to reproduce the artwork. I'm not a paint artist. If I could do that, then it's certainly not worth being in the National Gallery.

Well, in one room of the Gallery they have this piece called the voice of fire. It was painted in 1967 for the US pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal. The canvas appeared in the massive dome of that pavilion. Barrett Newman painted it and is said to have been celebrated for his bold paintings. He conceived this design that would stand out in the vast, sunlit, crowded space under the dome. Now this part is from a website dedicated to Barrett Newman's work. "Limiting his colors to red and blue he created this powerful vertical canvas to be suspended from the dome's ceiling. While it appears simple in form, Voice of Fire conveys a range of meanings. Newman intended the work to be studied from a short distance; its enormous scale transforms the space and tests our sensory experience."

The National Gallery purchased the painting in 1990. The country was sliding into recession and not in a good mood. The Gallery purchased the piece for 1.8 million dollars then which would be almost 3 million dollars today. Now I don't know about you but I think I could do that. Give me two cans of paint and a roller and I think I could come up with something pretty close. What am I doing in the ministry if I could do that and get 1.8 million? But the piece remains and continues to cause some debate over whether or not this somewhat unorthodox approach qualifies as art.

Something is unorthodox if it is unconventional, nonconformist, untraditional, unusual or revolutionary. Some unorthodox approaches have led to some very positive benefits. Aren't we glad today that in 1840, the surgeon in that hospital in Vienna began to study why all these mothers were dying after child birth? He instituted the unorthodox practice of hand washing for surgeons and medical attendants before treating newborns and their mothers. From there

washing hands has grown to become a widespread practice. But the Voice of Fire's painter and the surgeon in Austria are not the only people who have tried unorthodox approaches.

Jesus Himself was pretty unorthodox in a lot of what He did. **Thankfully – Jesus took an unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God.** I say thankfully, because if Jesus didn't do this, none of us would be here today. None of us would be going to heaven. Nobody would be experiencing new life in Christ. But what were these unorthodox approaches? And do they have any significance for our lives today? That's what the next text in Matthew leads us to. As we continue the Matthew account of Jesus, I want you to see the unorthodox approach Jesus' took to calling people into relationship with God. I hope you will see why we have reason to be grateful today for this approach. We will conclude by considering how we respond to Jesus' calling on our lives today.

Matthew 9:9-17 (ESV)

⁹As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

¹⁰And as Jesus reclined at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹²But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

¹⁴Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. ¹⁶No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. ¹⁷Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, 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."

Thankfully – Jesus took an unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God.

How was Jesus' approach unorthodox in Matthew's day?

He called Matthew, the tax collector as one of his disciples. (9:9) How is that unorthodox? Tax collection was one of the most despised professions in the first century. Most tax collectors were Jews working for the conquering Romans. They were considered unpatriotic and unclean. But worse than that, religious people labelled tax collectors unholy. They had good reason to conclude this. Tax collectors often overcharged the common people for their tax bill.

They had Herod's or Rome's soldiers to enforce their demands. So they got rich on the backs of the common. Since they were so widely hated, they couldn't socialize in their regular Jewish community. So they gravitated to other tax collectors and the outcasts of the society for their social lives.

It's possible Matthew was more of a customs tax collector than an income tax collector. Capernaum was a port that received goods from the region of the Decapolis where Jesus cast out the demons or from other jurisdictions. Customs tax collectors often ordered the search of people's belongings and maybe even personal searches. It was likely they overcharged on the customs of goods found. Common people despised this practice and saw the tax gatherers as agents of the Romans and their colleagues in the Jewish elite. Perhaps they felt like Dutch or French citizens felt towards their own countrymen who collaborated with the Nazis in World War 2. People despised tax collectors.

No respectful Jewish rabbi would ever call a tax collector as his disciple. But Jesus sees Matthew at his tax collecting booth and says to him "Follow me." And Matthew stands up and followed him. It is possible that this was a dramatic first encounter between Jesus and Matthew. Maybe the forcefulness and obvious authority of Jesus persuades Matthew. But more likely, this is the culmination of a prior relationship. Matthew has probably been under Jesus' influence for a long time. In Capernaum, Jesus has done public healing, exorcisms, preaching and teaching. Matthew, the tax collector accepts the call.

This leads to a second way Jesus took an unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God. ***He ate with tax collectors and sinners (9:10-12)*** Verse 10 tells us that Jesus went to a banquet where many tax collectors and sinners came to recline with Jesus and his disciples. Other gospels reveal Matthew held this banquet in his house. Maybe he wants to host a farewell party with his friends because Matthew cannot continue as a cheating tax collector and follow Jesus. Maybe he wants to introduce his friends to Jesus.

But many come and they recline with Jesus and the disciples around the table. This must have been an unreal moment for the disciples. Their religious had instructed them that you never share a meal with such a crowd. In an honor and shame culture like theirs, who you ate with had huge implications for your own honor. Yet Jesus is willing to do this and takes his disciples with him to eat with people they probably never dreamed they would eat with.

But some Pharisees notice. They believed anyone who failed to keep God's law as they interpreted it as a sinner. People who were guilty of publicly known sins were also sinners. Eating with sinners in these Pharisee's mind

communicated approval of them. So these Pharisees ask the disciples “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

They spoke with some Scriptural back-up. Psalm 1 begins “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of mockers.” But this command and others in the Old Testament warn against spending time with people who can overpower our faith and influence us away from God. If we are weak in faith, it is wise to stay away from those who drag us down away from Christ. But Jesus went there to influence that crowd for God. He loved them and showed them that God had come to save them.

This leads to a third example of Jesus’ unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God. ***He came not to call the righteous but sinners; not the “healthy” but the “sick.” (9:12-13)*** Jesus hears the Pharisee’s question. He answers it. Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. Jesus portrays the sinners and tax collectors as the sick. He is the physician who has come to bring healing to them. If Jesus would have stopped speaking there, this encounter might not have become so scandalous in the eyes of these Pharisees.

But Jesus goes on “Go and learn what this means.” This country rabbi is telling Pharisees, the most learned and respected scholars of that region to go and learn what something means?” Then he directs them to their area of expertise – the Scriptures. “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” That’s Hosea 6:6. Hosea, speaking for God in that passage, shows God’s heart. God desires for His people to worship him with head and heart, mind and actions. He does not want worshippers who fulfill religious rituals and then conclude they are superior to those who don’t. He more prefers that they show their devotion and heart desire for Him by showing mercy to others.

Then Jesus concludes “For I came not to call the righteous but sinners.” Now the term righteous here does not refer to someone who is already right with God. It refers to those who saw themselves as righteous because of their religious practice. Most common people would probably label them righteous. But Jesus has not come to affirm those people in their religious self-satisfaction. He has come to call those who are aware of their sin problem and humble enough to admit that they can’t solve it themselves. So Jesus has actually come to call the so-called righteous and sinners to come into right and real relationship with God. Can you imagine what those Pharisees thought of such a statement? From this point on, we will see the increasing opposition of some Pharisees and Scribes to Jesus and His ministry.

But the opposition against Jesus comes from an unexpected source in the next verses. And it leads to the final example of Jesus' unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God. The disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus. Remember He lived a very strict and devoted life to God in the desert. His disciples followed his example and took up the strictest demands of their faith concerning fasting. So they ask Jesus "why do we and the Pharisees fast but your disciples do not fast?" The Pharisees fasted twice a week. The law did not require this. You had to fast on the Day of Atonement and during some of the other feasts. Jesus does not oppose fasting. Remember back in the Sermon on the Mount where He talks about fasting?

Just after the Lord's Prayer, He instructs the disciples to fast but in a way that nobody else knows what's going on except the Father. But perhaps these disciples of John hear about or see the feast going on between the tax collectors, sinners and Jesus' disciples. So they conclude "this band is not very devoted or strict." They're leader had prophesied that Jesus was the promised one. He was the Messiah. So maybe they wondered how Jesus was going to fit His messianic kingdom into the established religious system of the day.

Jesus' answer reveals another unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God.

Jesus does not conform to expected standards of religious practice but has come to open up a new way of salvation and relationship with God. (9:14-17) First, he gives them an image of wedding feast in verse 15. At wedding banquets or receptions, is it appropriate to fast? If you were a bride or groom, how would you feel if at your wedding, your bridal party decided to reject the wedding meal and instead fast and pray? Would that give you a sense that they were really celebrating this wedding? Would that help convince you that they were fully participating in what this gathering symbolized? No. Wedding attendants celebrate when the bride and groom get married. There are times to celebrate. There are times to fast which was often associated with mourning. And in perhaps the first hint that Jesus is going to suffer something drastic, he says, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast."

So He and His disciples will not conform to some strict almost legalistic standard of spiritual practice. Nor will Jesus try to fit His messianic kingdom into the established religious practices. He announces this with a couple of images. You don't put a new piece of cloth on an old worn out one. For when the garment is washed, the new cloth will shrink and pull the other material apart. You don't put new wine into old wine skins. They often used animal skins to

hold their liquids. Well they would wear and stretch and reach the limits of their tolerance. If you filled an old wine skin with new wine, what would happen? What does new wine do – it expands and the skins would burst.

Jesus did not come to fit God's kingdom into the accepted form of religious practice. He brought a "new" way of salvation and relationship to God. I use the term new in comparison to the way of salvation that many believed was required in that day. That way included justification by right religious practices. The way of salvation was not new in God's eyes because He always saved people in the Old and New Testament through faith in Him. Jesus brought in a new way to be in relationship with God not through the sacrificial system but through him.

In just a short passage, we have several ways in which Jesus has taken an unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God. He calls a tax collector. He eats with sinners and tax collectors. He declares that He's come to call not the self-righteous but those who are aware of their sin and in need of help. He's come to bring a new covenant and new way to connect with God in relationship.

So what does this mean for us today? **Since Jesus took an unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God, anyone can accept His call.** Some of you here today might think you are "not good enough" to accept Jesus' call. Maybe you think you have to get your life completely in order or do a bunch of good things before God will accept you. But when a doctor comes to help those who are sick, does the doctor say "Well, I'm not going to see that patient unless he's healthy. No – the doctor goes to see the patient as he or she is. Jesus didn't ask the tax collectors and sinners to become Pharisees and then He would eat with them. He met them as tax collectors and sinners.

Anyone can accept Jesus' call. Those who think they are "not good enough" and that includes "good people" who think they don't need God. Some of you here might be good citizens or even model citizens. People respect you – society respects you. Or maybe you are a good religious person. You go to church and do your religious duties. You conclude that's got to count for something. But you do not know Jesus in your heart. You may have never admitted your sins. There are some good people and model citizens and religious people will be in Hell. Romans 3:10 states there is no one righteous, not even one based on their own efforts. Joni Eareckson writes this – *Suppose a man works as a cook and a doctor on a pirate ship. He has never picked up a sword a day in his life. He just stays on the ship and cooks nourishing meals for the other men when they come back from a hard day of pillaging and looting. He is there to heal*

their cuts and put ointment on their scrapes. What could be more innocent? But if the British crown captures the pirate ship, the doctor-cook will swing from a rope just like his shipmates. Why? Because he was doing good things in a wicked cause.

This is the way God looks at model citizens who ignore the Savior. Good people may work hard, drive their kids to soccer, keep their lawns spruced and wave cheerily to their neighbors. But God says the first and greatest commandment is to love Him with all our heart, soul and strength. That is, do everything out of a motive of pleasing Him. For the non-believer, good acts in his life amount to nothing if he disregards God. Two factors can make an act sinful – a wrong action or a wrong motive. Often, people’s actions are good but their motives are a universe away from the righteousness God calls us to. Only Jesus is our righteousness. We may say, “I know some very good people. If you only knew the woman down the street. She may not claim to be a Christian, but she’s the most Christian person I know. But if this woman ignores Christ’s claims on her, she has not acknowledged her sin or need for God.

How will you respond or have you responded to Jesus’ initial calling on your life? If you have already received Christ, will you think back to that day or time and relish in the Amazing Grace God showed you? If you have never responded to Jesus call – He calls you. He came not for the well but for the sick; not for the righteous but for sinners. Jesus calls out to those who think they don’t have anything to offer – to those who think they are too far gone to be salvaged – to those who made some terrible mistakes – to those who are broken – to those who have deceived themselves into thinking that good citizenship excuses their sin. If you have never responded to Jesus’ initial call, will you respond today and say yes to Jesus’ call to turn from your sins and follow Him?

If you are already a Christ follower, how have you responded to the latest call of Christ on your life? Jesus’ calling on our lives doesn’t end when we become Christians. It continues as He calls us to the next thing and the next step. Each one requires faith and obedience and risk and maybe denial. Maybe He is calling you today to imitate His example of being unorthodox and counter cultural. Maybe there’s someone in your life like Matthew, who you’ve written off just because they are different or don’t fit your mold or expectations. Maybe He’s calling you to reconsider all that. Or when was that last time we sat down with tax collectors and sinners for the purpose of knowing them; loving them and bringing Christ to them? Or maybe He’s calling you to be unorthodox in the ways of this culture. In Jesus’ day, the great pressure was to conform to the dominant religious culture that often ignored heart issues. We

don't face that pressure anymore. The dominant culture today is to reject anything about Christ and the Bible and God and His way and His Word. It is unorthodox to go against our culture. Yet that's exactly what Jesus calls us to do. So where is He calling you to do that in our lives.

Thankfully, Jesus took an unorthodox approach to calling people into relationship with God. Gratefully, how will we respond to His call upon us?