

November 20, 2016

“By Grace Alone”  
Matthew 9:9-13

FCF: Assumption that God’s acceptance of us depends upon us

**PROPOSITION:** (magnet) God accepts us by grace alone.

(anchor) We need to live out of that fundamental reality.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Ben Hooper, a former British police officer, set out this past week to make history. He’s going to try to swim 2,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean, from Africa to South America. It will take at least four months. He’s trained for three years, will be flanked by two boats, and will swim 12 hours a day. He knows the risks - especially sharks and high seas. But there’s also the danger of exhaustion, of physical and emotional breakdown, of reaching the point where it feels like he’s just chasing a elusive horizon in an endless ocean. He’ll need to guard against that.

At times, if we’re honest, it feels like that with God. We begin to think His demands are endless, that our efforts will never be enough, and that His accepting us depends upon us.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Matthew 9:9-13

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

You need to know where you are. And then embrace that fundamental reality. Many of us will be traveling over this holiday season and will encounter particular customs and traditions. Some will be unfamiliar and strange. Others will be all too familiar and loathed. Stuffing with oysters. Tofu instead of turkey. Another year at the kids table. Too little football on the TV. Too much politics at the table. My advice? Roll with it. That’s right. You’re the guest. So buckle up, Buttercup. You need to know where you are. And then embrace that fundamental reality.

Which brings us to our text. Last week, we saw that Jesus has authority not only over disease, nature, and demons but sin as well. He has the authority to forgive, to remove the guilt and to restore our relationship with God. That is an amazing claim and an astonishing discovery.

But how? On what basis can we know this forgiveness? This is what sets the Christian gospel apart from every other religion. God accepts us by grace alone - by His undeserved, unearned, unmerited, unshakeable favor. God accepts us by grace alone. That’s how He deals with us. That’s how we can be accepted. And we need to live out of that fundamental reality.

But what does that mean? How far does it go? Who needs to hear this? Our text shows us by addressing two groups. First, those on the outside. And, second, those on the inside.

**I. FOR THOSE ON THE OUTSIDE**

First, this is a message for those on the outside. That is, those who hear of the kingdom of God and assume there’s no place for them. But the truth is that there is no one too far gone.

*A) Identify the Parties*

We see that set forward here in a beautiful way. Let’s talk about the parties involved.

## 1. Matthew

First, there's Matthew (**READ Matthew 9:9**). Matthew is telling us his story. And he does so with humility, keeping the focus on Jesus. Matthew was a tax collector for the Romans, taking tolls as folks travelled across the borders. His was an occupation known for extortion. And he was in continual contact with Gentiles. So he was despised politically, ethically, and culturally. Matthew, in telling us of his past, is acknowledging "There was a time in my life when wealth and financial security meant more to me than friends and my reputation. But then I met Jesus."

## 2. Matthew's friends

Which brings us to Matthew's friends (**READ Matthew 9:10**). In his joy, Matthew throws a party and invites friends and others in the tax collector union. This is a group of people known for at least two things. They were impure in how they lived and mistaken in what they believed.

### *B) Unpack Jesus' Response*

So those are the parties involved. How then does Jesus respond to each of them?

## 1. He calls Matthew

(**READ Matthew 9:9**) Jesus knows all too well about Matthew and who he is. And He says to him, "I want you to be my disciple. In fact, an apostle, one of my authorized agents." And, lest there be any confusion, this is no request. It's a command, a command which Matthew heeds.

## 2. He eats with sinners

So Jesus calls Matthew. But what of Matthew's friends? (**READ Matthew 9:10**) Jesus ate with sinners. He went to this party and brought His disciples with Him. And understand that, in that culture, table fellowship was significant. It was more than just grabbing a meal. To dine with someone implied mutual acceptance and the intentional reciprocal pursuit of a relationship.

So what do we learn? That with Jesus, no matter who you are, no one is too far gone.

### *Illustration:*

I was reminded of that in a news story from a few weeks ago. Willard and Diana Turner just celebrated their 50th anniversary. And now they have something else to celebrate - the discovery of Willard's wedding ring. In 1966, just a few months after their wedding, Willard lost his ring in a football field. He looked for it but it was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

Fast forward to this past summer. The Turners were visiting some friends near this field. They got to talking about what had happened all those years ago and grabbed a metal detector just to see what might turn up. Nothing. But these friends didn't give up. Even after the Turners went back home, they kept looking. And, eventually, they found that ring under about 4" of dirt. So, after 50 years of sitting in a field, that ring hangs securely from a chain on Willard's neck.

### *Application:*

Now, maybe you feel like Willard Turner's wedding ring. In your heart of hearts, never expecting to be found. Irrecoverable, unredeemable. But with Jesus, no one is too far gone.

Despite what you've been told, Jesus is the friend of tax collectors and sinners. He is the friend to any who have been marginalized and ostracized. Oh, how He knows what that is like! And how He is glad to identify with those who have gone their own way and want a way back.

God accepts us by grace alone. That's good news. We need to live out of that reality.

## **II. FOR THOSE ON THE INSIDE**

Which takes us to the next point. Those who see themselves to be on the outside are closer to the inside. And those who see themselves on the inside are closer to the outside.

### *A) Identify the Parties*

(**READ Matthew 9:11-13**) As before, we need to start by identifying the parties.

#### 1. Who they were

There were several groups within first century Judaism. One was the Pharisees - not a majority party but quite influential. Paul, as one who had been a Pharisee at one time in his life, described them as having "zeal without knowledge". They meticulously adhered to the Old Testament law, even making additions around it so as not to break it. But it was mostly all a focus on externals. So much so that Jesus accused them of being "blind guides" and "whitewashed tombs".

#### 2. Their stance

What else do we know about them? Again, they were keepers of the traditions and faithful to God's law. Looking at our text, we see they were self-righteous. They would never admit it but they saw little need for grace. Really, in their view, God owed them for their obedience. They had shown themselves to be holier and better, able to look down their noses at others. All of which is to say that they had no category for a rabbi associating himself with such rabble.

### *Illustration:*

This sort of thing lives on in various ways. Some of you may know that in colonial America, many towns had just one church building. Whenever the people built a new church, delicate discussions began to determine which families would inhabit which pews. Those who had performed useful public service and those whose wealth granted them influence were entitled to the best pews, presumably at the front of the church. It was assumed that some people deserved to have a position of honor. They forgot that the church is an association of sinners.

### *B) Unpack Jesus' Response*

Back to the Pharisees. That's the party involved. What was Jesus' response to them?

#### 1. His mission

Jesus starts with a clarification of His mission (**READ Matthew 9:11-12**). Jesus makes clear that He came as a doctor for the sick. Which means He has to be with them if He's to treat them.

#### 2. Their condition

So He begins with His mission. But there's more to it than just that. There was their condition. Jesus presses the point (**READ Matthew 9:13**). "I've come for the sick. And, by the way, you

aren't as healthy as you think you are. It's obvious in the lack of mercy in your hearts towards others." Jesus is quoting here from Hosea 6. More than religious rituals, God wants to see the same loving-kindness He has shown toward us to be shown by us toward others. "If you've got it, you'll give it." Mercy is a sign of spiritual health. And it just wasn't there with the Pharisees.

So, what do we learn here? Those who see themselves to be on the outside are closer to the inside. And those who see themselves to be on the inside may well be closer to the outside.

*Application:*

Here's the problem with religious people. It's something that happens when you've been churching too long with too little of the gospel. The first thing is that you forget about our continual need to repent. That is, to repent not just of your unrighteousness - all the things we do wrong - but to repent of your righteousness - all the reasons we do right. We forget that.

But the second thing is we become confused about the difference between transforming love and accepting love. Dan Doriani speaks to this in his commentary on this text and he makes a helpful point. Transforming love is good in that it's loving to want to see people changed so they can become the best version of themselves. But that has to be balanced and subordinated.

That is, transforming love must come only with accepting love. That is, a love that takes another as they are and embraces them, warts and all, with all the sin, struggles, and baggage.

We have to have both and in the right order for there to be any flourishing in friendship, in marriage, in parenting, and in the church. Accepting love then transforming love. And Jesus is the only one who gets this right. He takes us as we are. And then begins to work from there.

What does all this have to do with our text? The Pharisees didn't see it that way. In their self-righteousness, their stance was, "You change first and then we'll talk. Then I'll love you. Then I'll accept you. Then I'll include you." The Pharisees didn't get it. And we still don't.

God accepts us by grace alone. We need to live out of that reality. That's good news if you think yourself to be on the outside. And vital news if you think yourself to be on the inside.

**CONCLUSION:**

Let me try and capture this with a parable of sorts from Jerry Bridges ([READ TG, p.25](#)):

Sam and Pam, two friends, both arrived in the United States as immigrants from the country of Quadora. Each one wanted to buy a house, and it so happened they each found one for sale by a certain wealthy man. Both houses were priced at \$100,000. Sam arrived with 500,000 quadros, the currency of Quadora, and Pam arrived with 1,000,000 quadros.

They knew quadros were not worth one dollar apiece, but they assumed they would be able to exchange the quadros for at least enough to buy a house. However, Quadora had been ravished by hyper inflation, and the quadro had been debased until it was virtually worthless. The bank would not accept their quadros in exchange for any dollars.

Let me stop there. We are Sam and Pam. Our currency is worthless - whether we're coming with 500,000 or 1,000,000 quadros. Now, that's not how we're used to thinking. We had buying power back in Quadora. But this is a new economy. And the old rules just don't apply here.

Okay, let me pick up where we left off. The picture gets bleaker ([READ TG, pp.25-26](#)):

To compound the problem, Sam and Pam both discovered that the wealthy man from whom they had hoped to buy their houses was not unknown to them. They'd each had business transactions with the man while still in Quadora, and were heavily in debt to him. Sam owed him about a million dollars. And Pam owed him \$500,000. Since their quadros were worthless, neither could begin to pay his or her debt, let alone buy a house from him.

Then a strange thing happened. The wealthy man - hearing Pam and Sam were now in this country and knowing they would have arrived with only their worthless quadros - sought them out. Despite the fact they were heavily in debt to him, he canceled the debts, gave them each the house they desired, completely furnished, with utilities and maintenance paid for life.

That is a picture of how God's grace works. The currency of our morality and good deeds is worthless in God's sight. To matters things worse, we are all heavily in debt to Him because of our sin. And so there is no question of our being able to even partially pay our way with Him.

But - and this is a wonderful word that we need to hear and hold - but God shows us amazing love and abundant mercy. He accepts us by grace alone. And we need to live out of that fundamental reality - each of us and all of us, tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees alike.

**PROPOSITION:** (magnet) God accepts us by grace alone.

(anchor) We need to live out of that fundamental reality.