

"Mercy, not Sacrifice"

Matthew 9:9-13

June 7, 2026

As 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. - Matthew 9:9

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

The Son of God is seeking disciples. Among those who follow, twelve who are chosen will accompany Him for three years of intensive training and study. Eleven of them will then be sent into the world to make disciples of all nations; and they will suffer great hardship, even death, along the way.

There is no need to apply: He will select. Don't call yourself; He'll call you.

On this day, the Son of God has a choice between two very different groups. On the one hand, there's Matthew of the tax collectors -- a government functionary who sends out the tax bills and counts the revenue. In his spare time, Matthew hangs around with other tax collectors and notorious "sinners," a sordid bunch that doesn't even pretend like they're trying to earn God's favor and work their way into heaven.

On the other hand, there are the Pharisees to choose from: These are serious, strict laymen who have spent years in their study of the Scriptures. They are constantly talking the talk and walking the walk of trying to gain God's favor by the way they live their lives. If Jesus selects a Pharisee, He has a man who is already disciplined and schooled.

The qualifications for discipleship are clear to anyone who reads the Old Testament by faith: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (Ps. 34:18). Or, as we say in the liturgy from time to time, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Ps. 51:17). Or, as Jesus proclaims in the Gospel lesson today, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13). Yes, the Word of the Lord makes the choice clear indeed.

I. Mercy and Matthew

So the Lord picks Matthew; and not only does He pick Matthew, but He goes and eats a meal with Matthew and his "sinful" friends. The Pharisees are scandalized, outraged: If this is the Savior, how could He do such a thing? You see, this is the thought process of the Pharisees:

1. We earn God's favor by doing His will.
2. Therefore, God loves those who do His will more than those who don't. Or, to put it another way: Those who keep God's laws are a lot more saved than those who don't even try. (The Pharisees are experts in keeping the Law; in fact, they've added to it. The Lord commands His people to rest on the Sabbath; the Pharisees will tell you how many steps you can take before you are no longer resting.)
3. Naturally, a devout Pharisee is a better choice than a tax collector of dubious character.

All the same, Jesus picks Matthew; and the Pharisees' reaction follows their chain of thought. For one thing, they despise Matthew; but then again, they did already. More significantly, they despise Jesus. It's not so much the snub -- that He didn't pick one of them. No, the problem, as they see it--is that He's working against them. They've worked out their own plan of salvation, and their plan is that they will offer their good works to God as a pleasing sacrifice to gain His favor. But if Jesus eats with sinners instead of them, He's not a savior who agrees with their plan. He has mercy on those whom **they** despise, and He's offering aid and comfort to

the enemy. He's a threat because He undermines their entire confession of faith. How can He do such a thing?!

Jesus explains to the Pharisees: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." Imagine a doctor who declares that he seeks to practice only on people in perfect health: "Here! Come into my office! Lie back and let me run a few tests and maybe perform surgery. You're perfectly healthy, and I'm going to cure you!" It's a ludicrous idea, isn't it? Healthy people don't have to be cured: They're already free from disease.

But not so hard to believe is a situation we witness too often: One who is sick refuses to admit his illness. Rather than see a doctor who can help, he maintains, "I do not need a doctor, because I am not sick! Doctors aren't for healthy people, and I am perfectly healthy." It's silly, but some will not admit they are sick, even when it is clear to all that they may be gravely ill. And here's an important point: No matter how much positive thinking they put into it -- no matter how fervently they believe that they are not ill, they still are. Wishing doesn't make it so.

So, we have the illustration of the doctor. Doctors don't help healthy people who don't need them. Doctors can't help people who won't admit they are sick. Doctors can help those who confess that they need medical attention.

And so we have the Savior. He has come to save sinners-people who are terminally ill with sin. He is not going to die for holy, sinless, righteous people. For one thing, there aren't any besides Him. For another, sinless people wouldn't need Him to die to take away their sins.

Jesus is going to die for sinners: He is going to the cross to die for the sins of the world. But while He dies for all, not all will be saved. Why? Because of the sin that the Pharisees represent: Many will say, "Well and good that Jesus died for sinners: They need it. But I'm not sinful, at least not so much that He needs to die to set me straight with God. I'm not that sick, so I don't need such desperate measures to heal me."

But once again, we return to this point: Wishing doesn't make it so. Many insist that they are not sick with sin; and many maintain that they are good because they maintain a positive attitude. But one cannot wish away sin any more than one can wish away cancer; one needs to be healed of the disease.

So Jesus says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," quoting what His Father said through Hosea centuries before. Many will seek to get to heaven by offering a sacrifice of good works, good thoughts, good words, because they believe they aren't so sinful: "Look Lord-look what I've done! I've done good things! Therefore I'm not sinful! Therefore I don't need anyone to save me! Your Son didn't have to die for me! I'm making it on my own!"

The Lord does not desire such sacrifices; in fact, they offend Him. When someone declares to God, "I'm good enough to make it on my own," he is declaring, "You sacrificed Your Son for no good reason, because I can save myself!" This robs the Son of His glory and offends the Father greatly.

What does the Lord desire? He desires to have mercy. It is why He sacrificed His Son, judging Him on the cross in our place. He has given His Son the punishment that we deserve so that He can give us what we don't deserve: Grace. For the sake of Jesus, God the Father declares: "Your works do not save you -- they cannot. My Son has saved you. He has lived for you and He has died for you; and I have raised Him from the dead to give you life. I will not save you because of your efforts; but I will have mercy upon you and forgive you for

My Son's sake." This is what He means when He declares, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" -- "I desire to have mercy on you for the sake of Jesus, because your works and sacrifices won't get the job done."

All of this is why Jesus calls Matthew, not one of the Pharisees. The Pharisees don't want Him and His mercy, even though they dearly need Him. As long as they trust in their own sacrificial efforts, they have no need for the Sacrifice.

Jesus therefore eats with the sinners. He is not some sort of counter-culture guru who eats with them to make their sinful lifestyles acceptable; where they are sinful, He will rebuke them. But those sinners are making no attempt to earn salvation by their works. Some make no attempt because they are lost in their sin and have no desire to repent. But some make no attempt because they know they can't make up for their sins. They don't trust in themselves and their sacrifices; therefore, they are ready to trust in Jesus, the Sacrifice for the sins of the world.

So Matthew goes from tax collector to disciple, then eventually to apostle. He humbly records his call in the Gospel he authors by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so that we might rejoice in the Lord's mercy to him. Tax collectors understand numbers, and how much has to be paid; by the grace of God, Matthew believes that he cannot pay the debt of sin. And, by the grace of God, he trusts that Jesus mercifully forgives him.

That's what the people of God are like. Rather than pointing to their own sacrifices (their attempts to please God), they confess their sins and rejoice in His mercy. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17).

II. The Lesson of St. Ida

The desire to trust in our sacrifices is strong: Our old sinful nature doesn't want us to confess our sin, and far prefers us to believe our works gain God's favor. The world is quite bald about it, insisting that we are saved solely by being good apart from Christ. Within Christendom, it becomes a bit less obvious. Some churches will clearly tell you that, along with Christ's forgiveness, you earn God's favor and salvation by the works that you do and the number of prayers that you pray; we easily understand this to be an error. But there is a far subtler version within the Church today, one that creeps in far too often: It is the idea that all you have to do to be saved is believe in Him. That sounds innocent enough, and who will argue?

But what is meant is this: Jesus has died for you and done His part. All that's left is your part: You have to choose to believe in Him. When you have made that decision, you are saved.

Does this matter? Truly, yes. If you must make a decision to believe in Jesus, it means that you must be old enough to understand -- you must have lived a certain number of years. You must have learned a certain amount of knowledge so that it is an informed decision. You must be responsible enough to mean what you say. In order to be saved, you must age, learn and mean it. In other words, to be saved, you must offer a sacrifice of aging, learning and sincerity.

But Jesus declares, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." He saves us because **He is merciful**, not because we live, learn and mean it. This is for our good, and the certainty of salvation. You see, if we must be old enough to understand, how can we be sure we are old enough to understand enough? If we must know a certain amount, how can we be sure we know enough? If we are saved by our sincerity, how can we be sure we are sincere enough? If we are saved, even in part by our sacrifices, how can we be sure we have sacrificed enough? It may not seem to matter now; but it may matter very much to you on your deathbed.

"I desire mercy, not sacrifice," says the Lord. We can never be sure of our own efforts, but we can be sure that this is enough: Christ has died for all of our sins. He is risen, and He gives you forgiveness for all of your sins. And if all of your sins are forgiven, the job is done, and you have faith and life and hope. Not because of anything you have done, but because He has done it all and it is enough.

This is the lesson we learn from St. Ida. Ida was my grandmother, my dad's mom. You don't know Ida, but she could have been any of you. For her baptism, Ida did nothing herself. She was brought to church by her parents. She did not walk--she was carried. She did not speak--her parents and sponsors spoke for her. She did not pour the water -- it was poured upon her. And as all of this was done, the Lord washed away her sins. He joined Ida to His death and promised to raise her from the dead. He gave her righteousness and life and faith. He did these things not because Ida made some great sacrifice, or even a little one. He did these things because He is merciful; and so He has had mercy on Ida on that baptismal day.

Within Christendom, many will object: How can Holy Baptism be of any benefit to Ida, if she cannot understand what is going on? We respond with some related questions: Must Ida understand the principles of nutrition before her parents can give her food? No, even though she has no idea what food does, it still benefits her. Must she understand the concept of blankets and clothing before they will keep her warm? Of course not; they warm her even now. If she is sick, must she understand what the doctor is doing, or how the medicine works, before she can be treated? Again, the answer is no. The Lord provides food, clothing and medicine for Ida for this life, and they benefit her even without her knowledge. The Lord provides faith, forgiveness and life in Baptism forever; likewise, they benefit her without her understanding even now.

This is governed by the Jesus' words: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." You see, if one says, "Ida must be old enough to understand before she can believe," he is saying Ida is saved by a sacrifice. He is saying, "Ida must offer a sacrifice of understanding before the Lord can have mercy on her." But this is not true. Jesus has mercy upon her apart from her doing anything at all.

It is easy for us to understand with an infant; what we must confess as well is that it is equally true for us adults as well. We are saved and remain so solely because of the Lord's mercy.

We are gathered here this morning by the work of the Lord; and gathered by Him, we sing, "Lord, have mercy." This, dear friends, is an important confession of faith. By this verse of the liturgy, we confess that we are not here to impress God by our works and sacrifices; we are here **because** we cannot save ourselves. Rejoice in this as well: As we sing, "Lord have mercy," it is not that we are trying to persuade Him, to talk Him into it. We are agreeing with Him, that this is what He comes to do; He is here not to measure our sacrifices, but to have mercy upon us.

And because He is here to have mercy upon us, you can be certain of this: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.