

## Jesus' Ministry to "Insiders" and "Outsiders"

Text: Matthew 9:9-15  
(cf. Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32)

**W**hat was the focus of Jesus' ministry? Whom did he seek to save? What were his priorities? Was his ministry directed mainly at the people of Israel, the Pharisees, and the religious aristocrats? Or was he mainly sent by the Father to reach out to those beyond the walls: the Jews who were being used by the occupying Romans as tax collectors, publicans and other undesirables--even non-Jews, for goodness sake? Listen to Eugene Peterson's translation:

Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew's house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus' followers: "What kind of example is this from your teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riffraff?" Jesus, overhearing, shot back, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: 'I'm after mercy, not religion. I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.'"

Viewers of the film *The Passion of the Christ* are perplexed as they try to determine just who is responsible for the death of Jesus. Is it the Jewish hierarchy, led by Caiaphas the high priest, or the Roman governor Pilate and his soldiers? Who put Jesus on the cross, outsiders or insiders? The answer, of course, is yes to all of the above. Add to that our own particular sins, which are at least partially responsible for Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

But the point is that Jesus, the Christ, came for us and for all of them. He loved all of them, he ministered to all of them, and he paid the price for all of them in his sacrificial death on the cross of Calvary.

In this particular passage, which is found in all three synoptic Gospels, immediately following Jesus' call of Matthew the tax collector, we have this scene of the subsequent dinner at Matthew's house. Among the guests are Jesus' disciples and Matthew's friends, who included an assortment of other tax collectors and a variety of "sinners." These were people who did not observe the laws of the Jews, and who, though Jews, were considered outsiders by the law-abiding folk. Reclining informally with a group like this was not what was expected of a rabbi acquainted with the Jewish laws and customs. But Jesus had a tendency not to see the lines that people draw. The statement that Jesus was making here was that we should not exclude anyone that God does not exclude.

What an enigma Jesus was to everyone of his day. His disciples always seem to be tagging along behind Jesus in terms of getting with the program of what's important to God and what is not. The religious establishment couldn't find a place for him either, and the ambivalence with which the common people dealt with Jesus shows they were just plain confused. Everyone was baffled, but Jesus knew exactly what his mission was and who was eligible for spiritual parole. The lines that excluded people simply didn't exist for him, and they should not for his church today, either.

When God looks down from heaven, do you think that he sees the lines that we see?

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Do you think that he clearly distinguishes between Jews who meticulously observe the law and Jews who have had a hard time believing in the God of their fathers since the Second World War? Do you believe that he's primarily interested in educated, responsible, dutiful America citizens like us, or do you think his Spirit grieves with what he sees as we judge the rest of the world and do not seem to have a clue about our own sin? Who needs a spiritual doctor these days, the healthy or the sick? Well, guess whose program Jesus is affiliated with?

If we are the body of Christ in the world today, and if the things we do and say must be a sincere attempt to emulate the life and ministry of our Lord, who are the people with whom we should be spending time? Often people tell me that their church does not seem to care about them anymore. Sometimes they say, "The minister spends all his time with the new people. What about those of us who have been the backbone of this church for decades?" I call it the elder brother syndrome. The point is that it is not just about us; God doesn't just care about us; he cares about the rest of the world as well. Jesus calls us to join him in his mission to reach the last, the least, and the lost.

If Jesus returned bodily in our culture today, with whom do you think he would be spending his time? Would he be spending time with religious leaders, or with your own consistory, for that matter? Would Jesus be out and about meeting people who might not be at the synagogue or church this weekend, but who in some ways may be more spiritual than some of us "insiders"? It certainly is true that there are outsiders who really are on the inside track to God and Jesus, while on the other hand there are those who think they are insiders, but who aren't in God's eyes.

People entering the gate of heaven in a long line were told to proceed quietly--they were passing the mansion of people who believed they were the only ones who got in. I have a feeling that the "wideness of God's

mercy" is what Jesus is communicating in the moving passage in Matthew. Jesus made it clear that his mission in the world was to call people who were honest enough to admit their need for salvation, not to cater to those who see themselves as prime candidates for heaven's gate.

Who do you identify with in this story? Are you like Matthew, Jesus' disciples, one of the tax collectors, the sinners, or the Pharisees who observed all that Jesus was doing with jaundiced eyes? If Jesus were here in his bodily form today, what would this story look like? Would the religious leaders of our culture find Jesus' actions reprehensible? Or would they applaud his mission to the "outsiders" and join him in his attempts to reach out and touch others regardless of their social circumstances and their religious or non-religious inclination? Does the way Jesus carried out his ministry here make you feel good, or does it all trouble you? Why?

## Questions:

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1. Who are some of the people in your community you have intentionally or unintentionally excluded, while, upon thinking about it right now, you realize that God may be thinking about them more than us?
2. When was the last time you befriended someone who was not at all religious, but you cared about them?
3. What do you think is meant by this statement: "Evangelism is pastoral care of those outside the church"?
4. Have you been an outsider or an insider as far as church is concerned? Why?
5. When was the last time that someone joined your church who really came from an unchurched, non-religious background? How was that person received?