

James Boice



# REACHING OUT

*Walking with Others by Following Christ*



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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by Following Christ

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ALLIANCE<sup>®</sup>  
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# PIGS OR PEOPLE?

## JESUS AND THE DEMONIAK

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No one has ever come to know God without being changed himself or herself. To know God as the Holy One in that personal way is to have an awareness of the fact that we are sinful. We don't have that apart from an encounter. When we just compare ourselves with other people, we really don't see what sin is all about, nor do we understand righteousness, or grace, or wisdom, or any other of God's attributes. When we see these things, we are humbled, we are brought to the point of confession, and we find in Jesus Christ as our Savior that grace which flows from God's character.

It's within that kind of framework that we will look at several accounts in the gospel of Matthew. We have in these reports of various encounters of Jesus with the people of his day, encounters in which the individuals involved are changed. Different aspects of the changes are presented to us. Sometimes it's positive; generally, it is. As they meet Jesus, they come to see their need. They are drawn to faith, and they pass from death to life. But some of these encounters are negative. You see, when the sun shines, it can do one of two things. If it shines on the ground where seeds have been planted, it can cause those seeds to sprout and produce life. But at the same time, the same sun that brings forth life from the seed in the ground can harden like clay. And we're going to find, as we look at these stories, that those who will not respond to the grace of Jesus Christ are hardened, changed in that way by the encounter.

Matthew 8 tells us of the healing of two demon-possessed men. It took place in the region of the Awareness. We aren't quite certain where this area was. One thing that is certain is that it was a Gentile area, and it was on the eastern side, probably the northeastern side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had crossed over there. And as He crossed

over, these two men who were demon-possessed came out of the tombs.

We have to start with an analysis of the two men. We have to ask what they were like. What had been their experience of life before this encounter with Jesus? First, the obvious thing is that they were demon-possessed. Sometimes it's hard to talk about that in America today because we associate demon-possession with mythology—the sort of thing you might find in ancient lore. In our scientific age we hardly believe these things anymore. What we actually prove by that is how isolated we are in the West. You don't have to be a Christian to believe in demons. If you travel in areas of the world where there are pagan religions, you find that the followers of those religions do not disbelieve in the supernatural and certainly do not disbelieve in demons. Now it's changing somewhat, and the reason it's changing, of course, is that America is becoming so pagan. With our paganism and our falling away from religion, there comes the demonic, and we have certain evidences of that in our culture.

As we read the story, particularly as it is told in the gospels of Mark and Luke, we find that evil forces—a legion of them because that is the name given to this demon—are bothering these men.

Secondly, as a result of their demon-possession, we could say of them that they were cut off from other people. This was physically true of course, but it was also psychologically true. Because of their demon-possession, they had been driven from, or had taken themselves away from, the city and their families. So here was a separation from family, friends, and other human beings as a result of the affliction.

The third thing we find is that these men were violent. They were so violent that people were afraid to go where they were. We're told that at times people had to bind them because they were in danger of harming other human beings. But in the strength of the evil spirits, these men were so empowered that they simply broke the bonds, and so there was nothing they could do about these men but avoid them, if at all possible.

And then the final thing, perhaps a symbolic thing, but I think most

significant—they were dwelling among the dead, which is to say they were living in the graveyard among the tombs.

Now let's apply that. One thing about being demon-possessed is that those who are demon-possessed are unable to break free. This evil spirit is stronger than they are. There are scores of people in our experience who would confess to being possessed by some spirit of evil. For example, a spirit of alcoholism, or a spirit of lust, or a spirit of treachery can empower and overcome people so that even if they want to be free, they find they are unable.

As a result of the bondage, the other things that were true of these men have followed also. They have been cut off from others because in their sin, they have offended others. They have fallen into violence—violence against themselves and other human beings. And there is a sense perhaps, because sin lies at the heart of their bondage, we could say they dwell among the dead. All of us apart from the resurrection power of Jesus Christ could be described as "dead men or dead women dwelling among dead men and dead women." So when we talk about these men, though we're talking about something which is particularly terrifying, we, nevertheless, are talking about an experience that is common to many people of our time. This is an apt description of what it means to be bound by sin. You may not have come under the power of a particularly destructive habit, but you, nevertheless, apart from Jesus Christ, have been bound by sin. It's something from which you can't break free. It alienates you from other people because that is what sin does. It produces violence of one sort or another, certainly violence in your relationship to God, and it puts you among the dead, spiritually speaking. So when we talk about these men, we're talking about something that is serious.

But there is another side of the encounter. We have Jesus.

Now what do we know about Jesus? The first thing we find is that He has authority over the evil spirits. In the Greek language, there are various words that are translated "authority" or "power." Generally, they're variations of the idea of power. There's the word *kratos*, that simply means the sheer naked exercise of physical power. We have

that in such words as "democracy," "plutocracy," "monarchy," and so forth. It has to do with power as it's distributed in various ways. There is the word dynamis, which means "explosive power." It is the kind of power the Holy Spirit exercises when He comes into a life. It explosively drives out evil and changes an individual. There is also the word exusia, which is often translated "power," but would be far better translated "authority" because it's not a question of mere naked force; rather it's a matter of legitimate authority, which comes from God.

Now Jesus Christ, being the Son of God, exercises this kind of authority, exusia, to an eminent degree. When it's said of Jesus that He has authority over all things, this is the word generally that is used. We find three different forms of that in Matthew 8. We see the authority of Jesus over sickness. At the very beginning of the chapter, He heals a man of his leprosy. In the story of the centurion and his servant, He heals a man of paralysis. And in the story that immediately follows that, we find Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever, and Jesus has authority over the fever. So all kinds of physical maladies are healed by Jesus because of His authority.

There is a second kind of authority that He demonstrates, and that is an authority over nature. We see that in the account of Jesus calming the wind and the waves when He and His disciples were caught in the storm in Galilee. This is what amazed them; Jesus had authority even over the elements.

And then, thirdly, the same Lord that exercised authority over sickness and over nature also exercised authority over the spiritual forces of evil against which we struggle, according to the way Paul describes the Christian life in Ephesians. It's that authority we find in this story.

You recall that the Lord Jesus Christ, in the very last words of the gospel says, "All authority in heaven and earth is committed unto me; therefore, go and make disciples of all nations." If He didn't have that authority over the nations, we could go, but we'd have no hope of success. It's because He has authority over sickness, nature, and the evil forces in the nations that we go and understand that He will



bless us as He does.

Now the second thing we learn about Jesus is compassion. The word "compassion," or "mercy," doesn't occur in this story, but in Mark's account, Jesus turns to the man and says, "Now you go and tell other people how I have shown mercy to you," or "how you have found compassion," as some of our versions express it.

Both the authority of Jesus Christ and His compassion are demonstrated. It is necessary that the Lord Jesus Christ have authority in the most powerful sense if the demon is to be driven out. If we're to go and preach the gospel and have any hope of success, it must be by that power and authority of Jesus Christ as well.

Sometimes we hear people talking of "winning other people to Jesus Christ." They say, "Well, let's just love them into the kingdom." Now I understand what's meant by that. It means to show something of the character of Jesus Christ in your relationship to them and that, of course, is perfectly right. But, you see, what I want to say on the basis of this story is that loving them isn't enough, in the same way that making the Word of God clear to them isn't enough.

A person can well understand the Word of God. He can know what he should do. He can even understand the love of a Christian who reaches out to that one, as Jesus Christ Himself would. But he can still be unconverted.

What is needed is the authority of Jesus Christ over sin and evil. That is what drives the evil spirit out. Or to put it in theological terms, the authority by which one who is dead in trespasses and sins is made alive by Jesus Christ—regenerated and brought into the kingdom.

That is what is involved when we talk about an encounter with Jesus. Jesus reached out to this man, not only in His compassion for him and in His power, but He reached out in such a way that the man was delivered. These men in the story were delivered from the demons who, we are told, went out and entered into a herd of pigs that was nearby. As a result the pigs rushed down the hill into the sea and perished.

Now that is an analysis of two of the characters in the story—on the one hand, the demon-possessed men and, on the other hand, Jesus. It is interesting, however, that in this story, there is a third category of individuals involved, the people of the town. Indeed, the real point of the story seems to hinge on them because after the men had been delivered of the evil spirits, the person who was responsible for taking care of the pigs went into the city and told the people what had happened. The people came out to Jesus. When they met Him, instead of pleading with Him to come and bless them, as He had blessed the men who had been possessed of demons, they pleaded with Him to leave their region—that is, to get out of their town.

Now isn't that interesting? Why did they do that? It's because the people were more concerned with things—in this case, more concerned with the pigs, which were a means of livelihood—than they were for those who were delivered from their sin.

I wish I could say that that was only true of the world, but I can't. You know in your heart that's true even of Christians, at least some of the time. It is true that when the Spirit of Jesus Christ comes into a person, we do think differently and we see things differently, but much of the world is with us. We find ourselves preferring many, many things to the well-being of other people.

Often when I speak about the kind of commitment we need in our day, I speak of putting people before programs, and certainly that is needed. We have the programs to serve the people, rather than the people to serve the programs. We have to get that straight. But often we also put our own livelihood or comfort before the well-being, especially the spiritual well-being, of other people.

What is it going to take to get us straightened out?

I want to suggest two things that sometimes happen. First of all, sometimes it's necessary for us to lose the pigs. This is to say we have to enter on hard times and find that we can get along with a lot fewer things than we think we have to have in order to be happy. One of the problems with things is that they tend to ensnare us and trap our souls. The more we have, the more we're ensnared. It's like

a spider spinning a web. One little strand of the spider's web hardly ensnares anything. But when another strand is added to that strand, and another strand is added to that, and another, and another, and another, the spider's web becomes a very strong thing indeed. And that's what riches or possessions do. If we find that we begin to love things rather than people, the time will come when we are ensnared utterly in the possessions. Sometimes in a case like that, what we need is to have the possessions taken away.

There is something else that can happen, and it's this. Sometimes we have to sit down with the pigs. The only other story in the Bible that I know of that has to do with pigs is the story of the prodigal son, and you know what happened to him. He was one who preferred things to people; he certainly preferred possessions to his father's love. He didn't appreciate his home. He said to his father, "Give me that which is mine." And when he had it, he went off to squander his wealth in a far country. He was, as we would say, "out of his mind." He wasn't demon-possessed. The story doesn't say that, but it was the equivalent. He wasn't thinking rightly.

And it wasn't until he had squandered his wealth and had nothing and had to finally hire himself out to a man who owned pigs in the far country and actually sit down with the pigs that he came to his right mind. That's what the story says. While he was sitting with the pigs, he said, "Look, the pigs have something to eat. And here I am so hungry that I would eat what the pigs eat, while back home in my father's house, even the servants are faring better." God brought him to the very bottom of the human experience in order that he might get straightened out and go home.

I don't know whether that is going to happen to you, but I do know that if that would happen to our culture, it would not be bad for the propagation of the gospel. As long as we have much, we are caught up in our things. And if it should happen that many of those should be taken away, we would not suffer for it spiritually. Rather, the church of Jesus Christ in this country would grow increasingly strong.

There is one other thing that comes from the story. Matthew's

account ends merely with the people preferring the pigs to the people. But Jesus, of course, preferred the people to the pigs, even those people who preferred the pigs. In Mark 5 you find at the very end of the story, the sequel to what Matthew tells us in his gospel, a commissioning of this man who had been healed by the Lord Jesus.

It is interesting, isn't it? You read that story in Mark, and you find this man making a good request to Jesus. He had been healed by Jesus, and he said to Jesus, as Jesus was about to leave the land, "Lord, let me go with you." But Jesus said, "No."

Now put those requests together. There was a bad prayer on behalf of the people of the town when they said, "Jesus, we don't want you here. Please go." A bad prayer, but Jesus did it. And on the other hand, here was this man who had been healed, and his was a good prayer—a pious prayer. He said, "Jesus, let me go with you," and Jesus refused it.

Certainly when you find something like that in the Bible, it's meant to quicken your interest. Why was that? Well, the answer, of course, in the case of the man who had been healed, is that Jesus had work for him to do. Jesus was concerned for him, but He was also concerned for the other people. In Mark's gospel Jesus tells him to go home to his family and tell them how much the Lord has done for him and how He had mercy on him. Here was a man who had a message to tell, and there were a people—his own people—who desperately needed to hear it.

I think he was successful. Later in Mark's gospel, at the very end of chapter 6, we find Jesus in an adjoining Gentile territory. Probably this man who had been commissioned by Jesus went to his family with the message—a great message: "I have met a Man Who was able to do what nobody else could do. He's a Man Who has power over evil spirits and gives victory over sin, and He has healed me."

He preached that message with such power to his family, his friends, and his neighbors, that an attitude change took place among those Gentile people. When Jesus arrived in the Gentile area the next time, the people recognized Jesus. Everywhere Jesus went, into

villages, towns, or countryside, the people placed the sick in the marketplaces, and they begged Him to let them touch even the edge of His cloak. All who touched Jesus were healed. Jesus wanted to do a great work in those Gentile regions, but before He did it, He sent His servant, whom He had first of all delivered from the demon.

God works through people, through His servants. If you are one whom He has brought from darkness into light, who is changed, who has found forgiveness, you are the one through whom He wants to speak. You are to go and tell others. And you'll find that as you go, Jesus will go with you, and He will bring a blessing.

## Questions for Application

1. List people you know who struggle in bondage to the kinds of sin and evil that approximate the affliction of the demoniac. Be sure to include both Christians and unbelievers.
2. Begin to pray for these people for a clear understanding of God's message and for God to change their hearts.
3. Pray for yourself that you will change so that people are always more important than material things.



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## OUTRAGEOUS!

### JESUS AND THE PARALYZED MAN

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In Matthew 9 we find an encounter of the Lord Jesus Christ with one of the people of His day. In the context of the story, it actually involves more than the one individual. There was a large crowd around. In the conversation that transpired, Jesus dealt specifically not merely with this man—this paralyzed man, as he's described in the story—but with the teachers of the law who were present.

In this account, we find the first opposition to Jesus. The anger came from the teachers—the teachers of the law, the scribes, the leaders, those who undoubtedly should have known better, but were instead offended. The story is interesting.

Why were they offended? We're told in Mark and Luke that there was a man who was paralyzed but who had four friends. The friends wanted to bring him to Jesus because they believed that Jesus was able to heal their friend.

When they came, they found that Jesus was in a house surrounded by a great crowd. No one was about to part to let them through. So they went up onto the roof, and then simply removed the tiles and very carefully, probably with ropes, lowered their friend on his pallet down into the house—right into the middle of the crowd, where Jesus was teaching. Now that's a very dramatic entrance. Jesus is suddenly confronted with a man in physical need and, more importantly as the story makes clear, in his sin. Jesus looks at the man, saw his faith, and said, "Take heart, son. Your sins are forgiven."

At this point, the teachers of the law objected. They said, "This fellow is blaspheming," or as it is said in greater detail both in Mark and Luke, "Nobody can forgive sins but God only." In other words, if this man is saying, "I forgive your sins," he must be acting as if he

is God. Who in the world does he think he is, talking like that? He must be guilty of blasphemy.

Now, of course, the interesting thing is that so far as they perceived the situation, they were absolutely right. The only One Who can forgive sin is God. And yet here was Jesus saying to the paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven." Jesus was making a claim to be God. It is one of the evidences for His deity. Here is a man Who not only in this situation, but in others as well, went around saying to people, "I forgive your sins." Who but an insane man would do that unless He was actually Who He said He was? The only other possible explanation that people have given is that He was a deceiver.

Those who have examined the evidence carefully conclude, as these teachers of the law in Jerusalem did not conclude, that Jesus really is the Son of God, speaks with the authority of God, and therefore can forgive sin. It's not only that we reach that by a process of human logic; we also reach it by observing what happened in the story. After the teachers had objected in this way—quietly, of course, in their hearts—Jesus, Who knew their hearts and knew what they were thinking, responded by saying, "Look, what is easier to say, after all? It is easier to say, as I just have done, 'Your sins are forgiven?' Or is it easier to say, 'Take up your bed and walk?'"

There has been a lot of speculation about that. On the human level, it's much easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' because nobody really knows whether they are or not. But when you say, 'Take up your bed and walk,' that is where the rubber meets the road. You're either able to do that, or you're not. Jesus wasn't making that kind of contrast. He is saying, "Look, if I am Who I claim to be, it's all equal to Me. One way or the other, I can say, 'You're healed,' or I can say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' because either one flows from My authority as the unique Son of God."

When He raised the question, of course, they didn't have any answer. The teachers knew it wasn't good to get into that kind of a conversation with Jesus. He always won that kind of an argument. Jesus then said, "To show that the Son of Man does have authority on earth to forgive sins, get up, take your mat, and go home." The



man did it, and Jesus demonstrated not only His ability to heal the body, but His ability to heal the soul.

Now I ask why were these people offended? A second question I want to ask goes just a little bit further. Why did Jesus link this man's suffering—his physical malady—to His sin? The ninth chapter of John records the story of the man who had been born blind. Jesus and His disciples were leaving the temple. As they went out, they passed a man by the temple gate, begging. The disciples asked if he was blind because he had sinned or because his parents had sinned. They were making the same kind of connection many Christians do when something bad happens. People who've had terrible things happen to them could tell you stories about Christians who come to them and say, "Well, brother," or, "Well, sister, God has given that to you to teach you a lesson, and what we have to do together is find out what it is you did."

That's what Job's friends did with him. That's not much comfort. Even if it's true, it's not much comfort. And what Jesus said on this occasion is that it was not true. This is not why the man was born blind. It was not a case of his sin; it was not a case of his parents' sin. As a matter of fact, there was no direct connection between sin and suffering at all in this man's case. Jesus said rather, this man was born blind simply so that at this point in history, He could heal him and bring glory to God.

You may find that hard to accept, and it is in some ways. It's much easier to argue cause and effect, such that a bad effect like blindness is due to a bad cause, namely sin. But to say, "Well, it's all for the glory of God" is harder for us to handle, and yet that's what Jesus said.

In the back of our minds we ask the question, if in the case of the man who was born blind there was no connection between his sin and his suffering, why is it in the case of this man that Jesus apparently just assumed the connection? Here's a man who's paralyzed. Jesus said to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven." And that is the equivalent of saying, "You will be healed." Now why is that? I put that as if that's some profound mystery. It's no profound mystery at all. The reason

Jesus said it here is that in this man's case, there was a connection between this man's sin and his paralysis. When Jesus saw him and began to deal with him, he dealt with him not merely on the physical level, as important as that may be, but on the spiritual level because that was primary. What Jesus really had to do was deal with his sin and provide forgiveness.

Now what I want to suggest is that this is the basic problem in the world today. What we do in the world is try to ignore sin and deal with the symptoms. Sometimes that's all we can do—at least that's all we can do, say, in social work, for example. And certainly we want to help the symptoms if we can. If people are suffering, we want to help them. But, you see, the sin problem is the real problem. And the question is, how do you deal with that?

In our society, we do a number of different things. Let me suggest some of the alternatives we choose. One thing we try to do is ignore it. We pretend it isn't there, that it doesn't exist. We'll do that in a variety of ways. You probably have examples of that yourself.

I recently read a book by Harry Blamires. He begins with an analysis of sin as being the root problem in our culture, and then talks about how we deal with it or, rather, fail to deal with it. One of the things we do is this: either we deal with it by looking to the past, or we deal with it by looking to the future. In either case, what we're really trying to do is avoid it. It's the mindset that says, "Well, things are bad today, but they weren't always that way." They want to get back to "the good old days." The good old days—let's get back to the Victorian Age. Let's get back to the time of the great revivals. Let's get back to any time in the past which is better than the time in which we find ourselves now. Blamires says—and says rightly—"That's merely an attempt to escape or ignore sin." You don't solve anything by going to the past because human nature was the same back then as it is today. There were problems then, and the problems had exactly the same cause.

Secondly he notes, "Some people say, let's go to the future. You see, things will get better. Let's just hang on to this idea of evolution. Why, if we just hang in here long enough, things are going to get

better, and pretty soon, all of the problems we have in our day are going to be eradicated." Blamires says that's an attempt to ignore sin also. The problem is sin, and we don't get anywhere by ignoring it.

Now there's something else we do. We try to recognize it. But when we recognize it, we try to blame it on someone else. We have different ways of doing that. We usually use the word "determinism" today to express what we do. That is to say we try to explain why we are as we are by reference to something that is somebody else's responsibility. Sometimes it's genetic determinism. We say, "The reason I'm having the problems I am having is that my parents were so-and-so. They had a disposition to this and, therefore, I have a disposition to this. We try to blame it on somebody else that way. We recognize the problem, but we shift the blame.

Sometimes it's a social determinism. We say, "I'm the way I am because of the environment in which I was raised." Now I'm not denying that those are factors, but it really doesn't help the matter to try to blame it on someone else because the difficulty I face in my sin is not the fact that I inherit a sinful disposition, but the fact that I am sinful. How am I going to deal with that? We have to face it on that level.

There's a third thing we sometimes do, and that's to recognize it but pretend it doesn't matter. Haven't you heard that? "Well, it's true, I'm not doing what I should do but, after all, who cares? Everybody acts that way. I suppose it's just the kind of world we live in. In the end, it doesn't really matter much at all."

But if you say, "The evil I do doesn't matter," it follows, does it not, that the good you do doesn't matter either because really it's just two sides of the same coin? If my doing something bad doesn't matter, well then, my doing something good doesn't matter either. If my doing something good matters, then my doing something bad also matters because at the very least, when I'm doing the bad, I'm not doing the good and so I'm depriving the good in a sort of negative way.

Let's go another step. If the bad I do doesn't matter and the good I

do doesn't matter, then I don't matter. It doesn't matter what I do. I do not count. I do not matter at all in this great scheme of things in God's universe. Some people think that's a way of dealing with the sin problem, and maybe it is but, oh, at what a cost. Do you want to pay that cost—avoid dealing with the sin in your life at the cost of saying you don't matter? That's not the way Jesus dealt with it.

Everybody mattered to Jesus. He didn't ignore the sin. He didn't blame it on somebody else. He forgave the man and that, of course, indicates how He dealt with it. He recognized by acknowledging it for what it was and by bringing it to the surface, but He forgave it on the basis of the authority that He possessed as the Son of God and in anticipation of His death upon the cross. Salvation without forgiveness isn't worth anything. Jesus knew that, you see. If there's a link between the problem and individual sin, then to heal without forgiveness is hardly worth a thing because the basic problem is the sin. And the only way that it can be dealt with is by the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

This is not only true for others; this is true for you—whoever you may be or whatever your experience is. You may be like that paralyzed man, and your sin may have produced an actual paralysis in you—not necessarily a physical one so you can't walk, but some kind of paralysis so you can't move ahead in your life. We often speak of it that way. We say, "I am paralyzed by the memory of the past." We speak of it as trauma, of being incapacitated by the memory of something we have done. Sometimes we speak of it as guilt. We say, "I just can't escape the guilt." You can't put it behind you; you can't get on.

It expresses itself in different ways. Sometimes it expresses itself in self-doubt, lack of confidence. You know people like that. They're just afraid to move ahead. Some people are paralyzed in that they're really afraid of having the sin exposed. They say, "If I step forward, if I try to do a certain thing, somewhere along the line, somebody is going to find out what I have done. And how can I ever live with that? Why, I would be so ashamed, I wouldn't be able to carry on." That is not altogether bad. If you have a sense of shame, you at

least have an awareness that sin is sin. But the way of dealing with it is not to bury it or suppress the memory. That doesn't accomplish anything. The way to deal with it is to bring it to Jesus Christ and have the sin forgiven. And that, in a certain sense, is all that matters.

I see something else in the story. It's buried there in a little sentence that Jesus says to these teachers. These teachers were not paralyzed, at least so far as one could see. They were right out front. They were the leaders. Everybody looked up to them. But when Jesus knew their thoughts and spoke to them, what is it that he said? He said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?"

They assumed that if he was suffering, he was a sinner. Their objection to Jesus was that He assumed the power to forgive the sin. When they looked at that man, suffering as he was, they thought, "That man's a sinner, and his suffering proves it." If they even bothered to look at their own hearts, they would have said by contrast, "And we are not suffering and, therefore, we are not sinners really."

Now you may be in that category. You may be doing quite well. You may look at your brother or your sister, and you say, "There's somebody that has really been handicapped because of what they've done. I can understand how that weighs upon them. They just can't break out of it. I certainly wish I could help them, but I can't. I'm fortunate that I'm not like that. I'm getting on. I'm successful. Why, everything must be alright." What Jesus would say to you is that you are evil also. You need forgiveness, and perhaps you need it most.

You say, "But I'm not paralyzed." No, you're not paralyzed; what you are is blind because you don't really see your heart. The paralyzed man needed healing, but the blind need healing as well. And what you need is the Lord Jesus Christ to forgive your sin in order that you might see yourself properly.

Now at this point I want to hold out something that is encouraging. You say, "Will Jesus really forgive me for my sin?" Notice how he talked to that poor paralyzed man. I like the way he begins. The man was lowered down through the roof. He was laying there in the front of everybody, wondering what was going to happen. Would

Jesus take mercy upon him? Maybe Jesus would say, "Get that man out of here. You're interrupting my lecture." Jesus didn't do anything of the sort. He looked at that man, and he said, "Take heart, son. Take heart. Don't be downcast. Be encouraged. I'm about to do something good in your life."

Wouldn't Jesus say that if He were here now? You may be paralyzed by your sin; you may be blind to your sin. Wouldn't Jesus say to you in a situation just like this, "Take heart, son. Take heart, daughter. Don't be discouraged. I'm about to do something good for you. And what I'm about to do is forgive your sin"? And if somebody is standing by and says, "Who is it that can forgive your sin? Only God can forgive sin." Jesus would say, "That's right. That's Who I am, and that's what I'm going to do." It takes God to forgive sin, and that is what we have in Jesus Christ. It says in the Bible, "A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoking flax He will not quench." You may feel bruised. You may feel that your light for life has almost gone out. Jesus does not blow it out. Jesus kindles it. He causes it to flame once again.

I have one last point, and it's a simple one. You may say, "I have already come to Jesus. I have already experienced that." That is fine. In that case, let me commend to you the example of the four men that brought their friend. If it weren't for those four men, none of this would have happened. You say, "Well, that paralyzed man must have had faith." Yes, I guess he did, but he couldn't get to Jesus. He did have four friends, and the four friends loved him, and they cared for him. They brought him. I wonder if you care about your friends like that. Your friends need forgiveness. It would be beyond belief that in your experience you don't know anybody who needs forgiveness for their sins. You must know somebody. Now how are they going to find Jesus unless you bring them? The Bible tells us that the way faith is passed on is from faith. The phrase is "from faith to faith"—that is, the faith of one praying for and leading another so that by God's grace, through that concern, faith is also born in the one who follows.

You say, "I can't do that. I can't change their heart." That is true. You

can't, but you can bring them to Jesus, and He will do it. And that's a challenge I leave with you. Is there anybody that doesn't fit in one of those categories? You're either paralyzed by your sin, or blind to it, or have a friend that needs forgiveness. If we meet Jesus, we will be changed, and those whom we bring will be changed also.

## Questions for Application

1. List the people around you who are in a similar situation as the paralyzed man. List people who are hurting. Maybe you know someone who is recently divorced or has recently lost a family member.
2. Begin to pray with other believers for opportunities to bring those friends to Jesus for healing.
3. Act on those prayers and begin inviting friends with you to church and other activities.
4. Be prepared to give the Good News yourself.





# 3

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## THE SINNER'S FRIEND

### JESUS AND MATTHEW

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In Matthew 9, beginning at verse 9, we have the story of Jesus' encounter with Matthew, the author of the gospel. This is Matthew's testimony. What he wants to say is that what was true for others was true also for him, and the gospel that he is commending to the people of his day is the one in which he himself believed.

It's interesting to focus on Matthew because the one thing we know about him is that he was a tax collector. He worked for the Roman government under Herod and was one who collected the revenue that kept this occupying power in business. The taxes paid for the troops that occupied the land, subjected the people and, in many cases, took advantage of them. He was an outcast, of course, because nobody liked tax collectors.

In order to understand the story, we really have to take a little bit of time to appreciate what that meant. Matthew was undoubtedly an outcast in three, if not more, ways. He was an outcast because he was religiously unacceptable, because he was politically unacceptable, and because he was socially unacceptable. Each one of those was very, very weighty.

First, let's look at this matter of his being politically unacceptable. He worked for the occupying power. He was an underling of Herod. Everybody despised Herod. Herod had collaborated with the Romans, he was a vassal of their government, and he was the means by which the strong arm of Rome oppressed the Jewish people. Anybody who would in any way link up with that and support and encourage that kind of military occupation was obviously on the outs with the Jewish community. If Jesus had suggested to the disciples that He was going to call Matthew, they would have objected. They

would have said, "Lord, you can't choose that man. All you have to do is look at his politics to see that that's the case."

Secondly, he was religiously unacceptable, that is, he was unacceptable to the religious establishment. Why? Because in his profession, he had to associate with Gentiles. That was just the nature of the job. Anybody who associated with Gentiles was, by that very act, ceremonially unclean. It meant they could not participate in the worship in the temple. We know that the Jews considered this a very serious matter because even at the time of Jesus Christ, when they were doing their utmost to have him convicted and executed before the beginning of the Passover, they would not even deign to enter Pilate's judgment hall because if they did that, they would have defiled themselves and would have been unable to participate in the feast. So they stood outside, and Pilate had to come out to them.

You know how that operates. Here was Matthew, every single day associating with Gentiles. Why, a man like that was as inappropriate for salvation as anybody could possibly be.

Finally, he was socially unacceptable. Tax collectors generally were. Commentators explain that the tax collectors were given a certain figure that they had to produce. Anything they could get over that could be kept for themselves. Those who were good at this job were the people who were the most unscrupulous and most dishonest. If they could collect a lot, they became rich. Everybody knew that. Tax collectors were greedy, too. If you weren't greedy, why in the world would you become a tax collector? Nobody liked tax collectors. Everybody wants to be liked. The only reason why you would possibly take up a profession like that is that you want money more than anything else.

Have you ever noticed as you read through the gospels that whenever the words "tax collector" appear—usually in the King James Version it was "publican"—it is coupled with the word "sinners"? Now what do you do for a living? Are you a lawyer, for example? How would you like it if in popular American speech, every time the word "lawyer" was mentioned, the word "sinner" was coupled to it—

"lawyers and sinners"? That would be almost enough to make you become a doctor.

What if every time the word "doctor" appeared, the word "sinner" was coupled to that—"doctors and sinners"? Why, you'd very soon choose another profession. "Waitresses and sinners," "teachers and sinners"—whatever it is. That is the way it was with Matthew. If you are talking about people in that day who were at the very bottom of the scale of social acceptability, it was certainly the tax collectors.

Now that's important because what this story teaches us is that it is precisely people like that that Jesus came to save. We think, "Well, it was nice of Jesus to come to save people, but certainly He must want to save the very best. After all, He has work to do. He needs the very best possible people to do it." But that isn't what Jesus says. When Jesus was challenged in His choice of Matthew and His association with people of that type, Jesus explained it by likening Himself to a doctor, and it's not the doctor's business to associate with those who are healthy, but rather to associate with the sick. The point is obvious, isn't it? He came to save sick people.

Jesus does the same today. In 1 Corinthians 1:26 the Apostle Paul reminds us of the kind of people God called when He called them: "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth. But rather, God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong; he chose the lowly things of the world, and the despised things, and the things that are not to nullify the things that are." He did that so that there would be no boasting in His presence.

Did you ever hear somebody say, "He doesn't count; he's nothing"? You can't be more disparaging than that. You can say to somebody, "You're not very wise," and they'll say to you, "No, but I'm smart enough to be rich." You can say to somebody else, "You're not very noble." They say, "No, that's true. I didn't have that kind of heritage, but I made it by myself." But if you say to somebody, "You're a

nothing," well, you just can't be any lower. Yet, what Paul told the Corinthians is that that is the kind of people Jesus calls.

That's what happened in this story. Jesus reached down and called Matthew. And after He had called Matthew, He associated with people just like Matthew—and He has gone on doing that through all these centuries, even to our own time. We have a tendency to push that off because we don't want to think of ourselves that way, but actually we need to realize that that is true of us. The very fact that Jesus operates this way should humble us because if we, by the grace of God, have come to know of His salvation through Jesus Christ, it is not because we are wise, it is not because we are noble, it is not because we are strong, but because, compared to others, we are nothing, and God can use the nothing to bring glory to His name. If anything is accomplished as we operate as Christians, it is because of the power of God, and not because of any ability that is in us.

The second thing we learn is that Jesus came not only to associate with Matthew but to save him. At this point we need to go back to the story that immediately precedes this. In that account Jesus forgave the paralytic of his sins. Here was a man who, very desperately, needed physical healing. But when Jesus addressed him, he didn't say, "Son, be healed." He said, rather, "Son, your sins are forgiven," because that was the priority and the most important thing. Here Matthew follows that story with the story of his own calling, and it is a way of saying as clearly as he can possibly say it, that Jesus Christ came to save him. Everybody would agree to that, wouldn't they? If anybody needed to be saved, it was that tax collector because tax collectors and sinners are the very same thing.

How do we know that He saved him? All Jesus said to him was, "Matthew, follow Me," and he did. Testimony occurs there in very few words. I say we know it because of two things. First of all, he immediately began to testify to his new-found faith in Jesus Christ. He brought his friends together to have dinner with Jesus. If a person is saved by Jesus Christ, that is the first way you know it. It's not the only way, and it's not the last way, but it's the first way because when

Jesus Christ puts His new life within their hearts, the first thing they do is express it by some kind of public testimony.

Let me suggest that there is another way in which we know he was truly converted. It is in line with Jesus' testimony to the effect that those who persevere to the end will be saved. Years later, even though we hear nothing at all from Matthew during the lifetime of Jesus Christ in this or any of the other gospels, he is, nevertheless, at the end, after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the expansion of the gospel, writing the gospel. Here is his testimony in these pages. So from the very beginning to the very end, this man, this tax collector, this publican, this sinner, this despised outcast, this one who is utterly unacceptable to nearly everybody but the Lord Jesus Christ, this man from beginning to end is testifying to the One Who saved him.

I want to apply this in some practical ways. First of all, this story, if we understand it and if we are saved, should make us grateful for our own salvation. Are you thankful? Do you marvel at the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ saved you? I think often we don't, and the reason we don't is that we think we're the kind of people that deserve saving. We don't want to put it this way because we know we're not supposed to boast. But really, deep in our hearts, most of the time we think that Jesus is pretty fortunate that He got us. But God did not choose you because you were great, but because you were not great. And if you understand that, then the first result in your life is that you're going to be thankful to the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation.

The second thing is this: It gives us a pattern for our evangelism. Jesus certainly set the pattern. When Jesus went to Matthew's house and began to have dealings with these disreputable people, outside in the street there were the Pharisees and the other reputable people. They were the people who lived in the nice houses, had the good jobs, and were highly respected. They looked in and they said, "Is he in there?" And then they got His disciples, and they asked, "What is your Master doing associating with these people?" They were not only disparaging him; they were disparaging them.

Jesus had an interesting response. He said, as I said earlier, that it's the job of doctors to care for the sick. But then He says something which Matthew records, although Luke and Mark do not. Jesus said: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" He's quoting from Hosea 6:6. There is a situation which God is remonstrating with the people of Hosea's day. They thought they were good people. They thought they were so good, so obedient, and so holy that God should be blessing them. As a matter of fact, they were even profuse in their repentance, except it was a false repentance.

God says to them, "Look, learn this: What I desire is mercy and not sacrifice." They were coming with their sacrifices, and they were even so arrogant as to say to God, "God, if you're unhappy with us, just tell us what you want. If you want sacrifices, we'll bring sacrifices. If you want lots of sacrifices, we'll bring lots of sacrifices. Why? Because we're good people, and good people do that sort of thing." What God said to them is, "You're not good people at all. All that is outward formality, and what I want is mercy in the heart."

That's what Jesus tells them to go study. They're looking down on Him because He's associating with those sinners, and He says, "Look, if you want to understand the mind of God, read in your holy books—those books you know. Read in Hosea, and try to figure out what God means when He says, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'"

You say, "Well, I want to serve God. That's why I'm in church. Why, that's why I give money. Why, that's why I do all sorts of things"—good, good, good, good. Every one of them is good. But, you see, you can do that without a trace of the character of Jesus Christ. Devils can come to church and do those things. But only those who are touched by the Spirit of Christ have a heart of mercy, which, because it is a heart of mercy, will reach out to those who need mercy. Just go to the person who is rejected by others and show interest in them.

It's not just that Jesus dealt with the poor; Jesus dealt with all the outcasts because they were outcasts, because they were the nobodies, because they were the ones His Father chose to work with. If we're

going to follow the Lord Jesus Christ in that, we have to reach out to such people.

Why is it that we don't do it, or why do we find it so hard to do? There's a very clear answer to that. We don't do it because we don't think that we are like them. Or to put it in other terms, we really don't think that we are sinners. We're not tax collectors, we're not publicans, we're not like this tax collector here. We think we are not sinners like they are.

We really do think that. And because we think that, we do not go to those who, in the sight of God, are in need. If we understand that we are sinners, it would not be difficult for us to go to those whom other people have cast out.

Finally, let me apply this in this way: There is hope for the outcast. I don't know your heart. I don't know what you're laboring under, but many people have experienced rejection of one kind or another, and you may be one. Maybe you've been rejected by your family. Maybe you've done something that has caused their rejection. Maybe you have disgraced yourself in their eyes in some way. Maybe your father has said, "You're not welcome in this house anymore." Your mother has said, "You've broken my heart. Don't come back." Maybe you've disgraced yourself at work, or with your children, or children with your parents, or in some such way. You know why you've been suffering under that. Here is hope for you because the gospel of Jesus Christ is for people like you. Indeed, it is people exactly like you that Jesus calls.

You say, "I've been cast out. I can name dozens of people that really don't like me and wouldn't want me around." Jesus wants you around. And not only does He invite you, He commands you, because He's the Lord. He has the right to do that. And what He's saying to you is, "Follow Me." There it is. I say it in His name. Jesus is saying to you right now, "Follow Me."

What you have to do is what Matthew did. You have to get up and follow Him. It's true that when He says, "Follow Me" He calls you to a hard way. We live in a world in which His cross is opposed and

His kingdom is resisted on every hand. And if He calls you to follow Him, He calls you to a way of hardship during this life, but He also calls you to the banquet.

## **Application**

Who are the people in your circle of influence who are shunned by others? Start with one or two people. Begin to pray for these people, and look for ways to build up a relationship with them. Then be ready to give the gospel to them, and from there continue the friendship whether or not the person makes a profession of faith.



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