

Matthew 9:9-13 As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

I read a book written by Andy Stanley, a pastor of North Point Community Church in Atlanta. The name of the book is "Deep and Wide." His father is Charles Stanley, the pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in Atlanta. His son, Andy, started a second church on the other side of town. When he started that church, he was intent on not just attracting Baptists to his congregation. He wanted to reach out to unbelievers.

What would your church look like if you designed a church that wanted to reach out to unbelievers? If you were instructing your greeters to greet people that came through the door, what instructions would you give them, if you wanted to reach out to people who had never walked into a church before in their lives?

What would your worship service look like, if you designed a worship service for unbelievers? How would you make what you are doing very clear so that someone who had never been in church before would understand what you were doing? What kinds of hymns would you choose to sing? Would you invite someone who had never gone to church to Bible class at your church, or at the local coffee shop?

If you sent people out into the community to share the gospel with people, where would you go? How would you do that? How would you engage someone in a conversation? I think if I wanted answers to those questions, I wouldn't necessarily listen to everything that Andy Stanley says in his book. What he does in his church in Atlanta may not translate well to what we would do in our church in St. Peter.

I would listen to Jesus. Jesus' ministry was notably different from what was happening in the synagogues in his day. He had a "**deep and wide**" philosophy that saw in every person he met a soul to be saved. He met with a Pharisee, named Nicodemus, in the middle of the night. He approached a not-so-virtuous woman at the well in Samaria. In our story today, Jesus approached a tax collector at his tax collector's booth.

"Deep and Wide"

This story took place during Jesus' ministry tour in Galilee. He was near the town of Capernaum. This city was an important link in the regional and international trade. It linked trading routes from Damascus and the East to the road which led to Egypt. It was a crossroads for many different people. It was a perfect place for a Roman toll booth, or tax booth. It was also a perfect place for Jesus to teach people who met at this bump in the road. I have to believe that before Matthew answered the call to become one of Jesus' disciples, he must have

been listening in on one or more of Jesus' sermons while he manned the tax booth on the side of the road.

Why were tax collectors so hated? Rome avoided running local tax booths directly. Instead, she would auction off a certain region for tax collection. Romans of the upper middle class would form stock companies and bid for a region - usually for five years at a time. They, in turn, would farm out each portion of that region to tax commissioners. The regional commissioners would recruit the local tax collectors. And everyone would skim something off the top of the proceeds.

These local tax collectors were usually quite well educated. They were able to speak the language of the empire and the language of the region - perhaps a little of this and that as well. As a rule, Jews were hired to tax Jews. Once Rome received the money it demanded from the region, the middlemen made a profit from what was left. Anything beyond that was gravy for the tax collector. Nearly everything was taxed - durable goods, consumables, slaves, and land. Tax collectors would often inflate the price of the merchandise and tax it accordingly. It was legalized extortion - with Roman legions to back up this crooked collection agency. Can you understand why the rabbis put the tax collectors out of the synagogue?

This was the world in which Matthew lived. The people in the town he lived hated him because he worked for Rome. People he taxed hated him because they knew he was cheating them. He didn't even have a church he could call his own! Yet this was the man Jesus chose to be one of his disciples! This was the man in whose home he chose to eat, surrounded by all of Matthew's dirty friends! I can almost understand why the Pharisees asked the question they asked: **"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"**

That's a good question and one which we should answer. Picture in your mind what kind of party a tax collector would throw if he wanted all his tax collector friends and the other low life of the town to show up. Matthew was about to hit the road and live a life of a traveling missionary. I bet he went all out on this party. The food was great. The wine was the best. And it probably lasted all day.

Jesus didn't just stop by, pay his respects and leave. Jesus was the center of the party. Jesus was the reason for the party. Matthew had been listening to Jesus preach and teach by the side of the road. But when Jesus came over to his tax collector booth and invited him to come along and join his followers, Matthew knew in his heart who Jesus was. He was the friend of sinners. Jesus was his Savior.

So why did Jesus go to a party with sinners and tax collectors? Because this is the very essence and nature of our God and Savior. The river of God's grace runs deep and wide. Listen to some of these passages that teach the truth of what we see in Jesus in this story.

Ezekiel 33:11: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.

Exodus 34: 6-7: And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

1 Timothy 2: 3-4: God our Savior ... wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Matthew knew that Jesus' forgiving love was bigger than all his sins. Jesus' forgiving love was bigger than all the sins of all his sinful friends put together. So why not throw a party and introduce Jesus to all of his friends?

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" the Pharisees asked his disciples. The Pharisees wouldn't be caught dead at this kind of party. They were afraid that the sin of these tax collectors might rub off on them and they would become unclean. It is interesting that they asked Jesus' disciples the question. They were hoping to put doubt in the disciples' minds so they would give up following Jesus.

Jesus has an answer for their question. **On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."** Jesus quotes a verse from Hosea to defend his actions. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," God said. ***In other words, it is not what we do for God that is important, but what God has done for us.***

And that's why the Pharisees missed the point. They thought that they were better than others so that God must be pleased with their actions. They loved to point out how terrible the tax collectors and sinners were, because it made them look so pure and holy in their own eyes.

Do you hear the sarcasm in Jesus' voice? **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** The Pharisees were indeed sick, and because of their self-righteousness, they were even sicker than the tax collectors and sinners.

Do you realize how sick we really are? Sometimes Christians who have been Christians for a long time can begin to look like the Pharisees in our text. It gives us pleasure to point out all the sins of all those sinful people out there in the world. We frown when someone is living in adultery. We check the police column in the paper to see who got a DUI this week. We love to judge others – especially in our minds. When we are having a spat with our spouse we can mentally remember all the different times that he or she disappointed us. We create this mental rap sheet of the other person's sins so that it makes us feel good about ourselves.

Do you realize how sick we really are? Listen to what the Bible says. **"Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."** Romans 3: 9-12 We can look down our noses at others, but that doesn't make us right with God. The Pharisee is just as sick as the tax collector – and so are we.

The good news is that we can throw a party and celebrate for the same reason that Matthew did in our text. God's grace to us in Christ runs so deep and so wide that it includes me, and you, and every person in the whole world. That's a message I need to hear every

single day. It's a message Matthew wanted to hear every single day – so he left his lucrative tax booth and went off to follow Jesus.

We cannot get enough of this gospel message. In my old brown catechism that I had as a confirmand there was one page that had about a dozen passages that reminded me that God forgave all my sins. I had it marked and referred to it often. It wasn't long before I had those passages memorized, and I still use them today when I pray. "Heaven Father, the bible says you reconciled the world to yourself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. Forgive me according to your promise." It's that deep and wide gospel message that keeps us from becoming Pharisees.

So when are you going to throw your party? That's how Matthew shared his joy in the gospel with his friends. We had an elderly lady in the congregation some years ago named Pauline Delzer. Pauline always had a love for souls. When she lived in the apartment complex, she invited me to come up to her apartment to meet her neighbor. Her neighbor was a single mom whom she made friends with, and she wanted to introduce her to me just to see where that might lead. Later she was in an assisted living facility and she made friends with a member of the church who had long been an inactive member. When we brought her communion, Pauline made sure her friend was always there.

So when are you going to throw your party and invite your friends? God's grace to us is deep and wide, enough so that God's embrace includes even sinners like you and me. Whom can we reach with the gospel? How can we make our church a church where even the unbeliever feels welcome?

[We] pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen [us] with power through his Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And [we] pray that being rooted and established in love, we may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that [we] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Amen. Ephesians 3: 16-19