

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat and go home." Then the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man. (Matthew 9:1-8)

A paralyzed man is brought to Jesus, and Jesus makes a seemingly unrelated statement, "Your sins are forgiven." What does sin have to do with the paralyzed man? In Jesus' day, there was a belief that sickness was tied to sin. In other words, you must have done something to anger God. It was a false belief then as it is today. God doesn't punish you or "get back" at you. On the cross, Jesus bore the punishment that we deserved because of sin. But in this scene, the cross is not yet, and sin needed to be dealt with.

The teachers of the law—the people who know all about sin and forgiveness—accuse Jesus of blasphemy. To blaspheme is to claim the authority to speak for God. Jesus is claiming to do what only God can do—forgive sin. Jesus affirms that they are right that it's easy to claim forgiveness, but Jesus wants them to know that forgiveness is happening through Him.

Jesus heals the man, leveraging their false belief of sickness linked sin to declare that something true. What is true is that the paralyzed man, this one whom so many have counted as an outsider, can be restored to relationship with God. God is not **against** him, but God is **for** him. And if God can forgive this outsider, then something profound is happening in front of their eyes: God's kingdom has come.

That's what we see in their response. Interestingly, Matthew doesn't give much detail on the healing, but instead draws our attention to the response of the crowd. The people praise God. They praise God because what belongs to God in heaven—forgiveness—is happening here on earth in Jesus. Forgiveness is possible. Outsiders can become insiders.

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." (verses 9-13)

In order to understand the problem that the Pharisees had with Jesus, we need some context on sinners, tax collectors, and Pharisees. "Sinners" is a technical term, a Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "wicked." The idea is not people who make mistakes, but sinners were people who blatantly, systematically lived outside of God's law. Moreover, how they lived declared their belief that there is no God.

Linked with sinners were tax collectors. Tax collectors were Jews who worked for Rome by collecting tax. They were hated by fellow Jews because they exploited their own people and they collaborated with the pagan oppressors. Tax collectors were excluded from the synagogue and thought of in the same way as a murderer. These are the people with whom Jesus is spending His time. Jesus, who claims to act and speak for God, is giving His attention to people who are anti-God. And the Pharisees have a problem with that.

The Pharisees are often misunderstood. The Pharisees were one of several renewal movements. They longed for God's kingdom, and they believed that obedience to the law was the way for it to happen. In fact, some Pharisees believed that if the entire nation followed the law for one day, the kingdom of God would come.

Both the Pharisees and Jesus shared the similar desire for people to repent. Jesus called people as they were, but didn't leave them that way. He continually called people to leave behind what wasn't part of life with God. The conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus was this: the Pharisees made it difficult for people to repent, while Jesus removed the barriers.

We see this in Jesus' actions with Matthew and his friends. Jesus invites the man everyone hated to be a part of God's revival. He spent significant time with people who wanted nothing to do

with God because they were people who desperately needed to know that God is merciful. Nothing could stand in the way of people coming to God.

That's what was so distinctive and fascinating about Jesus; He was generous to people on the outside. This is why He came. He says that He came to call outsiders to be insiders. The word "call" is the same word in Greek for an invitation to dinner. Matthew invited Jesus to dinner, and Jesus invited Matthew to a restored life with God. That doesn't mean that Jesus ignored insiders. Rather, He challenged insiders to rethink compassion. That's why He brings up Hosea 6. "Go and learn" was a rabbinic form of speech which means to take careful consideration of how to apply the truth. Insiders are invited to join Jesus on mission.

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." (verses 14-17)

This may seem unrelated to the two stories we just read, but this scene connects the two together. Fasting was about two themes: repentance and renewal. To fast was to repent of sin and to look with hope for God to bring a new day. Fasting was common; the Pharisees fasted Mondays and Thursdays, and John's disciples fasted. But why didn't Jesus' disciples fast?

The reason that His disciples didn't fast is because Jesus represents the coming of the kingdom of God. History culminates in His arrival. Jesus uses two images to highlight this reason. First, a bridegroom invokes the image of a wedding celebration. In Jesus' day, a wedding was a multi-day, ongoing feast. One of the images of the kingdom of God is that of a feast (cf. Matt 8.11). The prophet Zechariah spoke of a day when fasts would become feasts (Zech. 8.19). That day has been inaugurated with the arrival of Jesus.

The second image is of new/old wineskins and cloth material. New things are happening in Jesus that are different than the past. Jesus is a turning point in history, and so there is a new way

to live. Forgiveness is possible. Outsiders can be insiders. God is restoring people to Himself.

Paul talked about this transformation of outsiders becoming insiders. In his letter to the church in Colosse, he wrote: *"the Father, who has qualified you...For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."* (Colossians 1:12-14). If you're not a follower of Jesus, your heavenly Father invites you into a new kind of kingdom. He makes the way possible through Jesus. If you are a follower of Jesus, don't lose sight that you were once an outsider. Your heavenly Father qualified you and made the way possible for you to be an insider through forgiveness in Jesus.

How can we join with Jesus to see outsiders become insiders? Here are some questions for us to consider. First, who are your outsiders? Who are the people that you look down upon, the coworker that you gossip about, the person who isn't worth your time? Jesus died to save the person you keep at a distance. The person who isn't worth your attention was worth the life of God's Son. Maybe we miss living like Jesus because we avoid the people that Jesus embraced. Second, what barriers do we have as a church that make it difficult for outsiders to become insiders? Growing up in the church, being around church in several parts of this country and countries beyond this one, the temptation is the same—to keep to ourselves what was meant for everyone. As a staff, we're continually asking how we can create an environment where everyone, whether you're a follower of Jesus or not, can choose to belong.

Need of Jesus (*Valley of Vision*, 102)

*I was a stranger, an outcast, a slave, a rebel,
but thy cross has brought me near,
has softened my heart,
has made me thy Father's child,
has admitted me to thy family,
has made me joint-heir with thyself.*

*May I always see thy beauty with the clear eye of faith,
and feel the power of thy Spirit in my heart,
for unless he move mightily in me
no inward fire will be kindled.*