
JJ¹

Edward Snowden and Bowe Bergdahl are two names we wouldn't be familiar with except for one thing in particular that they share. Both are considered to be traitors by many in our land. Snowden leaked classified information, jeopardizing intelligence operations and possibly lives. Bergdahl deserted his post in Afghanistan, which not only resulted in the loss of time and resources, but even lives were lost trying to find him.

What if these two men showed up here and wanted to join our congregation? Would you welcome them with open arms?

While I'm pretty sure neither are going to show up here, that situation isn't very different from what we find before us in all our readings today. A murderer (Moses), a persecutor (Paul) and a tax collector (Matthew). Almost sounds like the beginning of a bad joke! Each one was a traitor in one way or another. Moses betrayed his adoptive country, Egypt, when he murdered an Egyptian guard who was beating a fellow Israelite. Paul, at that time Saul, had been a Pharisee among Pharisees and chief persecutor of the Way, suddenly betrays his fellow Pharisees after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus.

And then there's Matthew, also known as Levi. An Israelite and of the tribe of Levi meant that he was eligible to serve as a priest of God. Instead, he chose to go in nearly the opposite direction. He was a tax collector. That meant he was a traitor to the nation of Israel. He worked for the occupying Roman government. He collected taxes that supported a pagan ruling class; funded the army that currently occupied their land and conquered others; and used tax revenue in other shameful and wasteful ways. (Sound familiar?) Not only that, Matthew's own income came at the expense of his neighbors. Maybe Matthew was like many other tax collectors, lining his own pockets all the more by collecting more than needed or through extortion. This was the profession Matthew had chosen. A comfortable life, but one whose circle of friends was much smaller than those who despised him.

Matthew lived in Capernaum. Several of the disciples Jesus had already called, like Peter, lived in Capernaum or neighboring villages. Matthew would have been their tax collector. Have you ever considered the dynamic that must have brought to the group of Jesus' disciples? A bunch of average Joes, several of them fisherman, and a former tax collector! But as you

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

read through the Gospels, you never catch even a hint that this was a problem. But for the Pharisees, that was another story.

As always, the devil and his cohorts are trying to rain on God's parade of grace through the world. Jesus had just ruffled their feathers in Peter's house. It was there Jesus first healed the heart and then the body of a man who was paralyzed. This was the man whose friends had dug a hole in Peter's roof and lowered him down to be healed. Jesus leaves the house, takes a walk and goes right up to Matthew's tax booth. If the Pharisees weren't shocked before, now they would be. Jesus walks up to Matthew and simply says, "Follow me." What does Matthew do? He immediately gets up, leaves everything and follows Jesus.



Just put yourself in Matthew's place. Maybe the life he had chosen was leaving his heart filled with guilt and despair. The life he thought riches would bring him, left him empty inside. Maybe after years of collecting taxes from his neighbors and taking more than he should have left his heart filled with guilt. Maybe now he thought it was too late for him. Maybe he looked at Jesus and saw hope, but thought Jesus would never come to him, never love him.

Imagine Matthew's shock and joy as Jesus walks to his booth, and instead of handing over worldly riches, gives Matthew eternal riches!!! "Follow me." In other words, "Matthew, I came into this world for you! I have come to heal your soul, not through works of your own righteousness and sacrifices which these Pharisees have been peddling to you your whole life. I come to heal your soul with my forgiveness which I provide for you freely. I will carry out the works of

righteousness. I will make the sacrifice by sacrificing myself. I do this because I am the One True Gracious God, showing you my undeserved love. I give this all to you, because I am the God of mercy. I have seen you in your wretched state of guilt and despair, and I set you free. And not only that, I call you to carry out A MINISTRY OF MERCY on my behalf as one of my Apostles."

How thankful was Matthew? Luke tells us that not only does Matthew follow Jesus, he leaves everything behind and throws a big banquet of thanksgiving where he invites all the people from his circle of associates, the other tax collectors and marked "sinners" of society, to meet the One who set his heart free (Luke 5:27-32).

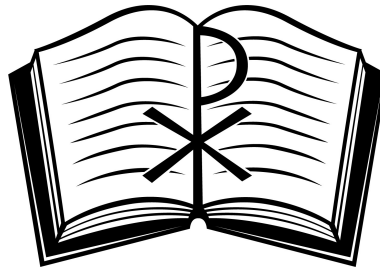
It's during this feast that the Pharisees invite themselves, not to rejoice with

Matthew, but as I said before, to try and rain on God's parade of grace and mercy. The Pharisees said to Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Do you see how small and cowardly they are? They don't confront Jesus with whom they have a problem. They go and complain to his disciples. Where the Pharisees tried to avoid direct confrontation, Jesus meets them head-on once again. When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus' response to the so-called teachers of Israel is to go back to The Book—to go learn what Scripture actually says. The Pharisees knew all about the externals of sacrifice, but neither what the sacrifices taught or pointed to. Neither did they know mercy. Jesus wanted to show them that their form of righteousness made them nothing more than whitewashed tombs. Jesus wanted to show them that the only thing that needed sacrificing on their part was their own egos and self-righteousness.

The Pharisees' time is done and gone, but yours isn't. So what about you? Are you merciful? Could you receive a Bergdahl or Snowden as a brother? Have you performed external works of righteousness at the expense of acts of mercy? Maybe while serving as usher or some other offi-

cial role in our congregation, you went about your responsibilities all the while sacrificing an opportunity to greet or help a visitor. Maybe you do well to be at church early and sit in your pew the whole time with rapt attention, but can't find it in yourself to help a mother or father who is here in church without their spouse wrangling little ones, by offering to watch the kids so they can commune or step out to calm a crying baby. Maybe you make sure you're in church regularly, but fail to be like Matthew and mercifully invite others to come and see Jesus.



Friends, you've all been set free from selfishness and self-righteousness through God's mercy. The same mercy shown to Matthew so long ago. And you were shown that mercy through **A MINISTRY OF MERCY**. For most of you, you have been in contact

with this ministry for most of your lives. It's been through men like Moses, a murderer; Paul, a persecutor; and Matthew, a tax collector. It's been through sinful people who have been shown the same mercy you have.

But you know what, for most of you, this **MINISTRY OF MERCY** didn't start here in this sanctuary or one like it. It did not start with a minister such as myself, called into the public ministry. For most of you, it started where God intends it to start—in the home.

In this ministry you are taught about Jesus and his mercy, not just by being pointed to a stable at Christmas instead of Santa; or to an empty tomb on Easter instead of bunnies. You were shown mercy and what it means to be merciful when your parents forgave you. Even more striking, when you witnessed your parents forgiving each other, or got down on their knees to ask for your forgiveness.

Now, if this wasn't part of your upbringing, I'm sorry it wasn't. I'm sorry that your parents either didn't know Christ at all, or didn't know Him well enough that too much of the Pharisees lived in them, giving you a childhood lacking in mercy and filled with rules that when broken left you only seeing anger and disappointment from your parents and not forgiveness. If that was the case for you, you don't have to repeat the pattern because Jesus has shown you another way. You are a product of **A MINISTRY OF MERCY**.

Jesus has called you. Jesus is the Great Physician who has healed your sin-sick soul. He has called you, not to produce your own righteousness, but he has called you that you would repent and freely receive his righteousness. In response to this, he simply calls you to follow him, like a thread follows wherever

the needle goes. And part of that following, friends, is taking part in his **MINISTRY OF MERCY**. Mercy that sees all people the same...people who are all equally lost and equally loved by their Savior. Yes, even a murderer, persecutor and tax collector. Yes, even you! Amen.

SDG²

² SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

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