

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: The Cure

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Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'^(a) For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Transcript:

It is so great to have you joining us. Thank you for joining us for worship this Sunday. We miss you. We are hoping to get back together as soon as we can, but thank you for being here this morning so we can worship together in all the various places that we are. We are connected by one Lord.

The scripture comes from Matthew chapter 9, starting with verse 9, and it says, "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's 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.'"

Holy Spirit, use these next few minutes to help us know what this verse, this scripture means and how it applies to our lives, and the greater things that you can do through these truths. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, when all the COVID shutdowns first started happening, I was in Rwanda with a team from this church, many of the people that you just saw there worshiping, leading worship. And I was in Rwanda. Stuff was getting shut down there as well, and flights were being canceled and we were kind of getting worried, like, "Are we going to get stuck here or are we going to make it out?"

But we finally got out on one of the last flights out of Rwanda and the plane was just packed, completely full, during a pandemic. And the flying time is 22 hours in the germ tube in the sky, and the guy right next to me had this really nasty cough. He didn't even cover his mouth when he coughed, and I just had these pictures of contagion and plague everywhere in the plane. And when we finally got home, I took a 30-minute shower, which I know makes no difference, but it made me feel better. I think we are all just a little more germ-conscious these days because of COVID, and the passage, the scripture that I just read, I think probably resonates a little bit more deeply with us in some ways because of COVID.

When Jesus says, "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick," sickness and health, that's kind of what we've been dealing with most of this year. And as Pastor Daniel Hill says, "It's significant that when Jesus talks about sin, he doesn't use a metaphor of good or bad, he uses the metaphor of sick or healthy," and there's a world of difference between those two things. And greater things are possible when we start to understand our lives and sin in a sick/healthy paradigm versus a good/bad paradigm. More life happens, more genuine transformation happens, more healing happens when we understand our sin that way and our lives that way.

So let me walk through the story, make a couple observations, and talk about how this ... the greater things that can happen, when we really understand what Jesus is talking about here. The story starts, "As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth." So let's pause right there, okay? Tax collectors back then collaborated with the occupying Roman army to overcharge their fellow Jews, and then they would pocket the difference on their taxes, and they got very rich doing it, using the power of the Roman state to basically rip off their fellow Jews. And so they were not liked people, tax collectors. They were considered traitors, they were considered thieves, and they were considered complicit in the brutal colonial power, colonialism of the Roman Empire.

Tax collectors were so despised that they were not allowed in the temple or the synagogues, and not only they weren't allowed, their families weren't even allowed in the temple. And Jesus is about to make Matthew his disciple, put Matthew on his leadership team, which was a bold move because one of the other people, one of the other disciples, is named Simon the Zealot. Zealots were terrorists committed to the violent overthrow of Rome. And one of the things you were supposed to do, if you were a Zealot like Simon, was stab a tax collector like Matthew to

death. So this is an interesting small group that Jesus is putting together, right? Hopefully it's not what you're experiencing in your all-in groups.

The story continues. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Matthew got up and followed him." And that might seem kind of odd to us, like, why did Matthew respond so quickly? He doesn't even say, "What's your name? Where are we going?" And there may have been a lot more to the conversation than got recorded, but one of the things this text is trying to show is that Matthew, the whole way through, his whole life, he's been judged. He's been ostracized. He's been shamed. The only thing he's ever heard is, "You're bad. You're bad to the bone, Matthew. You're a bad, bad man." And he deserves it. He deserves it. He is part of the colonial system that is oppressing his fellow Jews.

But Jesus sees something of value in him, sees something worthy in him and wants him for his rescue mission. And so in one sentence, Jesus communicates to Matthew, you are loved, you matter, you have worth, you have dignity, and I have a purpose for you. And so the very next verse says, "While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' came and ate with him and his disciples." So apparently Matthew got so excited about the new life that Jesus offers that he invites all of his tax collector buddies and other people who've been labeled as sinners, and maybe that means adulterers or prostitutes or looters or who knows what that means, and he throws a party and says, "Come meet Jesus because he's changed my life."

And this is evangelism at its best. It's just natural for Matthew. Matthew thinks, "This Jesus is a game changer, and if only my friends could meet him, their lives would be changed too," so he throws a party for people to meet Jesus. And some of you are actually starting to do this. Some of you are starting to watch our church services with some of your neighbors who wouldn't normally go to church, but they'll come to your house. And you're figuring out how to do that safely with COVID and all of that, and maybe share a meal, maybe provide some activities for the kids. It's like a house church. That's awesome. Way to go. Well, that's kind of what Matthew does, right? He throws this party and there's food and there's laughter and everyone's having a good time.

And then the text says, "When the Pharisees saw this .." Oh geez, right? Here come the religious people. Pharisees were religious leaders, stamping out fun wherever they found it. They come along and they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Well, maybe because there's no other kind of person to eat with than a sinner, right? If you're not going to eat with sinners, you're not even going to eat alone, because guess what you are? Religious people are so very, very irritating sometimes, and they have always been a problem for God, and Jesus is about to flip the script on them.

He says, "On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice, for I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" He switches the paradigm from the Pharisees good/bad model of sin to a sick/healthy model.

Now, don't get me wrong. Sin is real. Sin causes damage. But the way Jesus understands sin is different than the religious people. Jesus always showed compassion to sinners. In fact, there's only one group of people Jesus ever yelled at, only one group of people he ever yelled at. Can you guess who? Religious people. Religious people, maybe like you, maybe like me. We sometimes get on his nerves because sometimes we care more about our traditions than people or because sometimes religious people get kind of judgmental, "You're bad. You're bad. I'm good. You're bad." Right?

But on that last one, it's not just religious folk that do that. Everybody does that. Everybody has this model in their mind where they think, "There are good people in the world and there are bad people, and I'm one of the good people. And if only there were more people like me who thought like I did and behaved like I did, then the world would be a better place." Everybody is judgmental, not just Christians. And if you don't believe me, just look at our political dialogue right now. We are judging each other, shaming each other when we disagree with each other, and our conversations far too quickly and far too easily devolve into, "Oh yeah? Well, you're Hitler." "Oh yeah? Well, you're Hitler too." "Well, you're double Hitler." "Well, you're Hitler's cat and that's worse." Right? Everybody is judgmental, everybody.

There are good people and there are bad people, and I'm a good people. Everybody thinks that way, except Jesus, who says to Matthew, "You're not bad, you're just looking for meaning. You're not bad, you're just looking for belonging and community. You're not bad, you're sick." Now again, don't hear what I'm not saying. There are behaviors that are destructive and they need to stop, and sometimes we need to stop other people from those behaviors because they're going to hurt other people. But how we understand sin matters, because see, if I think, "Well, someone that says this behavior is bad, and if you do this behavior, you'll be bad too, so don't do the bad behavior." Guess what I suddenly want to do? The bad behavior, right?

When our youngest was little, she used to leave her socks all over the house. And there was this one time my wife told her, "Don't take off your socks." And she sat down, and she's three or four years old, she sat down, looks Christina in the eye, and slowly pulled off one of her socks. You tell me not to take off my socks? I'm going to take off my socks. That's human nature. That's you, that's me. Tell me "it's bad" and I suddenly want to do it. But if I think this behavior is not healthy for me, it's not healthy for others, that's a little different, right? It removes some of the shame of good and bad, and it makes me more motivated to pursue healthy behavior for my own good. Greater things are possible when we move from a good/bad paradigm to a sick/healthy paradigm in a couple of ways.

Let me list just a couple of ways greater things happen. First, in a sick/healthy paradigm, we go from Jesus as crutch to Jesus as cure. In our American convenient Christianity, we often kind of use Jesus as a crutch to prop up our lives, when we expect Jesus to solve our problems for us, rather than give us the strength to overcome them ourselves. Or, when we see Jesus, sort of his role in my life is to maximize my life plan and help me be successful in school or work or

socially or whatever it is. That's Jesus as crutch. Prop up my life, prop up me, prop up my goals, my agenda.

Here's the thing. Jesus has no interest in being your crutch. He wants to be your cure, and there's a difference. A crutch keeps us crippled. A cure sets us free. A crutch is on the outside. It's superficial. It's external. A cure goes all the way down, deep into our hearts to change us. Matthew takes Jesus deeply into his life, leaves his job to follow Jesus, includes his friends in following Jesus, all the way deep into his life, where sometimes we like to keep Jesus more external, like a crutch, right, rather than medicine we drink that goes way deep inside of us. Jesus, you can talk to me about how often I go to church, but not about how I treat others at school or work. That's my business. Jesus, you can tell me that I need to pray more, but you can't talk to me about how I spend my money. That's mine, Jesus. Jesus, you're Lord of my religious life, but you're not Lord of my internet browser.

But see, here's the thing. If Jesus isn't Lord of all, then he's not Lord at all, which brings me to the second way greater things happen in a sick/healthy versus good/bad paradigm, and that is we go from sin management to transformation, real transformation. The Pharisees are thinking ... Their idea of sinners is, there's good behavior, bad behavior, and sinners do bad things. Jesus says, "Your view is way too shallow. Good and bad, that's about behavior, but not the root of the problem that drives the behavior in the first place." And what's so deeply unsettling to religious people is that you can obey all the rules and still be sick on the inside. You can be a very well-behaved sick person, and that just freaks religious people out. They hate that, right? It's like pulling weeds. You can pull the external weed, but if you don't get the root, we just going to come back.

I'm pretty much hopeless when it comes to anything electronic. I just can't figure it out, even my TV. And so when something doesn't work, my go-to strategy is just to turn it off and then turn it back on again, hope it works. Right? And then if that doesn't work, I put duct tape on it, because why not? In fact, that's kind of my approach to lots of stuff. A couple of years ago, one of our kids got into a minor car accident and it pried the fender away from our car, so I just duct taped it. I just duct taped it together, and that's how we drove our car for years, duct-taped-together car. People would be looking at it like, that car is taped together, right?

That's sin management. We haven't really fixed the problem. We're just taping it all together to try to make it look good to try and to just hold it together, but we're still broken. We're still sick. Jesus has greater things for you than sin management. Jesus' dream for you is not that you behave. Jesus' dream for you is not that you behave, it's that you become. Jesus' dream for you is that you not behave, but that become like him. Behave is way too small of a goal for the God of the universe. Jesus says, "As you get closer to me, I will begin to change you," and I have found this to be true. The more I know Jesus, the more I want to be like him. Not because I want to look good on the outside to him or to other people, but because he changes my desires.

Now, all of this takes time, and we never get over sin completely, a hundred percent. And there are setbacks and there are relapses, but we do get, as we follow Jesus and get to know him

better and get closer to him, my experience has been, we do get better over time. Some sins we conquer completely, and other sins have far less power over us to control us. From crutch to cure, from sin management to transformation.

Third, in a sick/healthy paradigm, we move from fear of exposure to the freedom of forgiveness. See, in a good/bad model, I'm always trying to make sure you think I'm good, so I'm going to do sin management to make sure you think I'm good, right? Whatever it is, money, career, grades, morally trying to look good, because I don't want to be a bad person. But if you understand sin as a sickness, not a referendum on your worth as a human being, there's more freedom from fear of exposure in that.

I started to figure this out in my divorce because for a while, for a long time, I blamed my first wife for that divorce. "She's bad. I'm the good one. She's the villain. I'm the victim," but that dog don't hunt, because I had plenty to do with that divorce. And slowly I began to realize over time, it's not so much a question of good or bad, who's good, who's bad, it's more a question of we are sick. We have this sickness called sin and selfishness. And as I began to see it that way, I could own my part of that divorce a little bit better because it didn't feel like a referendum on my worth. It felt like something I have that needs a cure.

This paradigm would change how we talk about race in our country. Because if we see issues of racism just in terms of behaviors, right, there are bad behaviors and there are good behaviors, and I don't do the bad behaviors because I'm a good person, we're going to stay locked in cycles of accusation and defensiveness. Because I'm going to feel like you're saying I'm a bad person, and I'm not a bad person. I want to be a good person. How dare you suggest I'm a bad person. But if I realize I live in an infected culture where there are all kinds of racial stereotypes in the air, like a disease that we all get, well, that dials down some of the accusation, defensiveness, tensions, so we can have more meaningful conversations and forward progress, because I'm not myself from being a bad person all the time.

We're talking about a sickness that we have, which brings me to my last point. We go from crutch to cure, from sin management to transformation, from the fear of exposure to the freedom of forgiveness, and finally from criticizing to community. In a good/bad model, we criticize, "That's bad. You're bad. You're good. You're bad. You're good." That's what the Pharisees do. But Jesus says this, "Go learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice." That is the mark of having received Jesus isn't that you do better sin management. That's not the mark of having received Jesus' grace. It's that you're being transformed to be like him, and that you're understanding that you need Jesus' grace just as much as everyone else, so who are you, who am I to judge?

And the reason that we can be Holy in God's sight and see other people that way is because Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross. Justice has been served, so I don't need to mete it out with my own judgmentalism, which means the mark of having received Jesus' grace isn't your piety, it's your community. It's your ability to be with people who are very different than you, morally, socially, even politically, right? Because in a good/bad model, the steps to being

included in the community go like this. In the good/bad model, behave, believe, belong. If you behave the way that we behave, if you behave right, and if you believe everything that we believe, then you can belong to us and be part of our community. But in this story, Matthew belongs before he believes, and he doesn't behave, he becomes. So the biblical order of being included in community is not behave, believe, belong. It's belong first, and then you start to come to believe, and then not behave, right, because that's too small of a goal. But then B, becoming, because this is a process, B, becoming like Jesus.

Where do we find Matthew's story? Notice where we find Matthew's story, in the gospel of Matthew. And many scholars think it's the same Matthew, the outside tax collector brought so deeply into the community, not criticizing ... not being criticized, but brought deep into the community, so deeply, he writes one of the four gospels.

So, for your homework this week, first admit you're sick. It's called confession, right, which is hard to do. I hate to go to the doctor. I hate to go to the doctor because hey, who has time? But D, I hate to go to the doctor because I don't want to admit that I'm sick. Nobody does. That's hard, but that cost me.

That actually cost me, because five years ago, for years, I didn't go to the eye doctor, until finally about five years ago, I went and I discovered that I had glaucoma. That's different than the cataracts that I had removed. Glaucoma slowly makes you go blind, and I've lost a big chunk of vision in my left eye and a little bit in my right eye, and that will never come back. And the first doctor I had was very blunt about it. She said, "Because you haven't gone to the doctor and we didn't catch this sooner, now you're partially blind in your left eye, a little bit blind in your right eye. And if you don't get this under control, you're going to be completely blind and you'll never be able to do the things that you love, and you'll be an invalid for the rest of your life." Like, "Whoa, get a bedside manner."

But her bluntness woke me up and helped direct me to the doctor that I now have and it's under control. I'm sick, and if I don't deal with it, it's just going to get worse and cause more damage. And it's the same with our sin.

So pray, "Jesus, show me where I'm sick. Show me my sin," and the reason we can pray that is because of the sure and certain hope that when we do, God is not going to reject us, but He's going to say, "Welcome home, son. Welcome home, daughter." And the second thing you need when you're sick is a doctor and his name is Jesus, so draw closer to him and we'll talk more and some upcoming sermons about how we actually do get closer to him. But always for now, always start with the big four, prayer, worship, Bible, community.

A man I know, when he was in his late 20s, didn't drink all the time, didn't drink every day, but when he did drink, he got really drunk. But he didn't think he had a problem because he didn't drink all the time. But he was also part of the pickup scene in bars, so he would go to bars, he'd meet women, and then he would sleep with these women and then be in a short-term relationship for a couple of weeks and break up with them. And it just caused a lot of pain. His

body was writing checks that his heart could not cash, and it hurt some of these women and it left him feeling empty and unconnected. It was destructive behavior.

Well, he finally met a woman that he really loved, like, this could be the one. She could be the one, but then one night when she was out of town, he went to a bar, got drunk and had a one-night stand. His girlfriend found out about it and broke up with him, and that was his wake-up call, where he's like, "Do I have a problem?" So he started to go ... He went to an AA meeting and he said it was really weird because everyone there was at least 30 years older than him, so it was awkward. But after the meeting, he decided that he needed help.

He began to do the 12 steps, one of which is to make amends, so he met with every woman that he'd ever hooked up with to apologize to them, to say, "I didn't treat you right. I didn't relate to you as a whole person. I hurt you, and I am so sorry." He said the first time he went to AA, it was kind of weird and awkward, but then a couple of weeks later, he finally said, "Hello, my name is Kevin and I'm an alcoholic." And he said, in that moment, he suddenly felt the presence of Jesus right there with him. He said he'd gone to church his whole life, but he said he'd never experienced Jesus' presence and his grace until that moment when he finally admitted, "I'm sick. I got a problem that I can't fix on my own. Jesus is going to have to help me do this. And he loves me and he's not judging me."

Well, it took him a while, but he eventually was able to get sober. But more than that, whereas Jesus was always just a theory and stories before that, now Jesus is very real to him. In fact, one night in his Bible study group, he said they were talking about the need to surrender stuff to God, and he said, "But we just kept talking about theory, right, the theory of surrendering things to God, the theology of surrendering things to God, but never got out of our heads." And he said, finally, he said, "This is all crap. You were just talking theory, and what I need to do is surrender alcohol and surrender how I'm treating women." And then all the other people in the Bible study went, "Well, now that you mention it, we got some of our issues too." So they all got honest, and he said it was the first real Bible study that they had.

He eventually started dating another woman, and after a couple of months of dating, she told him, "You know what? I feel safe with you because the way you look at me is different than other men. It's like you want to know all of me." And he said, "Well, you're the only woman that's ever been able to say that in my life." But he was being changed.

They eventually got married. He started leading a Bible study of high school guys, because he said, "No one showed me how to be a godly man, and I don't want them to have to figure it out either on their own." And he loves mentoring these guys, helping them become godly men. He found it very rewarding. One time in his office, he asked a woman, "How are you doing?" just casually, and she asked a question back, and he said, "Oh, I have a wife now, and she's taught me that sometimes when you answer a question with a question, it means something's really going on that's hard, so what's really going on? I'm here to listen." And she went on to tell him that she had cancer and she was afraid, and he was a listening ear, something he never could have done before. He was a different man.

Now, all of that took years, right? It didn't happen overnight. All that took years, but he was transformed. He was changed. He had meaningful relationships, making a difference in the lives of these high school guys, mentoring them, and had found it very rewarding. He was sick, and Jesus wasn't his crutch propping up his life, Jesus is his cure. And he's not doing sin management, he is being transformed, free to admit his sins and be connected in community with people he never would have been able to be in community with otherwise.

How is your sickness showing up in your life? How is it affecting your relationships or school or job? Jesus offers so much more than just sin management. Jesus says, "No matter what your record is, no matter what you've done or what's been done to you, no matter much shame you feel or how defiled you feel or how stained you feel, I can make you whole. I can make you new. I can heal you. I can transform you."

There is a cure that makes the wounded whole. There is a cure that heals the sin-sick soul and his name is Jesus. So, Lord, thank you that you take us just as we are not as we should be. Thank you, Lord, that you heal us, you change us, you transform us. And so Jesus, we come to you with our stuff and we say, "Lord, here's my sickness. Here's my sin." And we also say, "Lord, show me the sin I don't see in me." And then Lord, we will give it to you because we know that you forgive, we know that you love, and we know that you make new. In your name, amen.

Discussion Questions: Please Read Matthew 9:9-13

- (1) Looking back, how did it go last week?
- (2) What stood out the most from the sermon this past week?
- (3) What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- (4) What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?
- (5) Which of the four "greater things" from this scripture and described in the sermon (also listed below) do you most need? Explain.
 - a. From Jesus as crutch to Jesus as cure
 - b. From sin management to genuine transformation
 - c. From fear of discovery of our flaws to freedom of forgiveness
 - (4) From criticizing others to community
- (6) In light of what we've learned (application):
 - a. How might God want us to apply this to our own life and the lives of the community this week?
 - b. Who needs to hear this message/good news?