

## Matthew 9:9-13 – Pentecost 2 – Mercy, Not Sacrifice – June 7, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

Jesus called twelve Disciples to Himself. Twelve—the number of God’s people—the number of the Tribes of Israel. And the number gives us a sense of what Jesus is doing. He is Israel, finally doing all that Israel was unwilling and unable to do.

I have always enjoyed those *on the street* interviews. They stop people and ask how much debt they have—questions about history or geography—or if they know the 10 Commandments. It is amazing what people do not know.

But my question for you is this: how would you do with the Twelve Disciples? If I asked you at the door today to name the Twelve Disciples, how long is your list? Let’s see if we can nail them down with a little help from Matthew’s Gospel.

In Matthew 4, Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John—the inner circle of Jesus’ Disciples. In chapter 10, we have a full listing of the Twelve. We add in Philip, Bartholomew (also known as Nathaniel), Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus (also known as Judas, the Son of James), Simon the Cananaean (also known as the Zealot), and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ, of course. But between the first list of four and the full list of twelve, Matthew places the account of his own call to follow Jesus. And we will give most of our attention to Matthew today—and his conversion.

In one of his paintings of the crucifixion, the Dutch artist Rembrandt portrayed all of the expected characters—Jesus, the thieves, the soldiers, the crowd, the women. But down in a corner, Rembrandt placed his own face in the crowd. He saw the cross as his story too.

And Matthew does something similar. This is his signature on this Gospel. But more importantly, it shows that he was one of the sinners that Jesus called. He personally needed to be rescued from the life that he had been living. And here I want us to notice two things: Matthew’s reaction and the Pharisees’ reaction.

Matthew was a tax collector. And there’s nothing to be proud of here. Tax collectors grew rich by extorting the wealth of their own people. And although Matthew was Jewish, his task served the interests of the Roman Empire—and of course, his own. Roman tax collection was a highly charged political issue. And you know how well we talk about politics. Remember that even Jesus is asked about this later—whether it was right to pay taxes to the evil empire. From the Pharisees to the Zealots, almost everyone detested the treasonous Jewish tax collectors like Matthew.

But on a personal level—really on the more important level—tax collectors chose a way of life that clashed with God’s Law. They rebelled against the Commandments—especially the first and seventh commandments. Their lives kept them from the synagogue—and right relationships with their neighbors. And sin generally just does that to us—regardless of what it is.

And so, it is surprising when Jesus stops and talks to Matthew. When Jesus sees Matthew sitting at his tax booth—doing what he was always doing—Jesus summoned Him to put all of that aside and follow Him. It’s a brief encounter. And maybe Matthew had heard of Jesus already. Since Jesus made Capernaum his home at this point—and Matthew worked nearby—he may have been listening to Jesus before this moment.

But even so, this change with Matthew is actually quite radical. There are three quick things to notice. Matthew got up and followed Jesus. Matthew left everything to follow Jesus. Matthew brought his fellow tax collectors and other sinners to join Jesus around the table. These are all clear marks of repentance.

But this is where the trouble starts with the Pharisees. They objected because they think Jesus was approving of this ungodly tax collectors' way of life. For them, Jesus was presenting Himself as a Teacher and a Rabbi. Why then would He want to share fellowship with such people? Isn't this just a blessing of their sin?

Now, at this point, they don't dare to address Jesus directly. They are willing to criticize Him—but not to His face. They go to the Disciples instead. They ask, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

But Jesus overhears. And although the Pharisees intend this as criticism, this is actually a good question. They phrase the question with a verbal mood that suggests this is an ongoing practice. They viewed this as Jesus' habit—spending time with sinners. And they are not wrong.

And so, Jesus explains. There is a reason for His behavior. But it is not what the Pharisees believe. He was not blessing the sin of tax collectors and sinners. He was not affirming their pride. He was calling them to something else entirely. When Jesus called Matthew, he had to leave his old way of life. There was no more room for his sin of choice. Jesus loved Matthew—but He also transformed Matthew.

And Jesus explains this in two ways. First, Jesus makes a comparison. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

And this has far-reaching consequences. Sin is a disease. And Jesus invites us to see Him as a spiritual Healer and Physician. Remember that even the miracles of Jesus make this point. He heals the paralytic earlier in this same chapter. Sure, these miracles show us what Christ will do for us on the Last Day as He restores us completely in body and soul. But they also served as signs regarding what He was doing about sin.

The Reformers talk about sin as an original disease. The Apology to the Augsburg Confession says it this way, “Original sin contains these diseases: ignorance of God, contempt for God, not having fear and trust in God, the inability to love God. These are the chief faults of human nature because they conflict with the First Table of the Ten Commandments.”

Original sin is like an infection that needs to be eradicated. It is a disease that needs to be cured. And the symptoms are not who we are. They don't define our humanity.

And so, Jesus gathering around the table with sinners has the purpose of bringing healing. Jesus is the great Healer, bringing deliverance from sin. He sets us free from sin—but so that we would continue in it no longer. In eternity, sin will be gone. And in Christ, we have started down the path of eternal life.

It is as John says in 1 John 3, “You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.” Jesus' fellowship with sinners is giving sinners what we need—freedom from sin's infection. He doesn't bless our sin—He cures it. He takes it away and blesses us.

And then, Jesus quotes from Hosea—our Old Testament reading today. This might be a little more confusing. He says, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Now, Paul tells us that no one is righteous. In Romans 3, he says, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

And so, when Jesus says He didn’t come to call the righteous—He means the Pharisees—those who consider themselves perfectly righteous—even though they are not. They are sinners too—they just refuse to see it. But what Jesus means is that He comes for those who need His help—those who will recognize they need a Savior—rather than for those who think they don’t need His help.

But let’s also make sense of this Hosea text—because it can be misunderstood. “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” And here, permit me a little detail, because I think it matters. We don’t want to read this overly literally. We want to hear Jesus’ intention.

This sentence is an example of dialectical negation. I am sure you were thinking the same thing. It’s a form of exaggeration. One side is completely negated, “I do not want sacrifice,” in order to emphasize the other, “I do want mercy.”

The larger biblical context helps us to read this well. God had given the sacrificial system to His people. It was the means of atonement that He set up. Perhaps we can rephrase this without the dialectical negation. And allow me a little latitude for a mildly awkward translation. It means something like this, “I do not want only sacrifice, but more importantly, I want mercy.”

Again, this targets the Pharisees. They were well-satisfied with themselves. And they were quick to condemn those who failed to measure up to their finicky standards. But the outward performance of worship does not please God when we lack a heart of faith and mercy. We can’t just come to church and then treat others with cruelty. And with this, Jesus looks for the self-satisfied Pharisees to show compassion to the outcast tax-collectors and sinners instead of rejecting them so firmly. He wants them to see their own sin too.

And if you think about it, this all happens with Jesus again and again. The Samaritan woman at the well. Zacheaus. And maybe especially we see this with the woman caught in adultery. You know the story. In John 8, John tells us “Jesus stood up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.’”

There is no room in the Church for the Pharisaical attitude. We don’t see ourselves as better than others. We don’t judge those who struggle with a different set of sins. We avoid pride. We humbly work on our own sinful desires. We are the tax collectors and sinners, too.

But we also don’t bless those sins the culture finds interesting at the moment. Tax collectors and sinners are changed by the Gospel. We hold to God’s revealed Word.

But then, most importantly, we follow the call of Jesus Christ. His call makes all the difference.

Matthew was a tax collector. He was a sinner. But at the call of Jesus, he leaves it all behind. He became a Disciple—an Apostle—an Evangelist—a Witness, much like the others of the Twelve.

And now we know this list a little better. Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew (who is Nathaniel), Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus (who is Judas, the Son of James), Simon the Cananaean—the Zealot, and then of course, there is Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ. Sadly, his end is far different.

Matthew's encounter with Jesus changed the whole direction of his life. It changed his habits. His interests. His passions and desires. He could no longer live as he did before. Being a follower of Jesus Christ meant that he had to leave the Tax Collector's booth. He had to quit his job. Grace is the way of Jesus. He desires mercy for us—and from us. But grace changes everything.

I like the way Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 6. He brings my thoughts together better than I have. We will find Matthew's struggles with sin on this list of vices from Paul. I think we will find our own struggles too. But pay attention to the resolution at the end. God is not content to leave us in our sins. And that is terribly good news. I'll leave things right here today.

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*