



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for Pentecost 16**  
September 17, 2023

## A Life of Hospitality

### Matthew 9:9-13

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

<sup>10</sup> And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>12</sup> But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Where was it that you first got a clear picture of the human condition? High school, middle school, elementary school? When did you first become aware of the need to protect your image?

There’s a time that arises in everyone’s life when we begin to consider what our associations do to or for our image. “What will people think of me if I associate with so-and-so?”

There are a lot of things that we put in the way of connecting with others. And it usually comes down to pride, does it not? You wouldn’t have a problem sharing your seat on the bus with a beautiful cheerleader, would you? Or letting the captain of the football team sit at your table? But the kid everyone picks on — not so much.

And don’t fool yourself into thinking that you’ve outgrow it. Adults do the very same things. I know; I live on both sides of this even now. There are those who are quite comfortable being seen with a pastor and others who absolutely are not. And often it comes down to image. Remember Nicodemus? Why did he come to Jesus at night? Because he didn’t want to be seen coming to Jesus. As a member of the Jewish ruling council, it would have been bad for his image.

In today’s Gospel, however, Jesus turns all of that on its head. He calls together the lowliest people and associates with them. He sits down to eat with tax collectors and sinners. No self-respecting Jew would ever be seen eating with the likes of *them*. But even Matthew, the tax collector, had a lesson to teach the Pharisees. Look how he opened his home so that others could come to know Jesus.

And there, in the midst of it all, was Jesus. What was He thinking? Didn’t He know this would damage His already shaky relationship with the Jewish leaders? But think about it. It’s so in keeping with His character.

It started even before the meal. He called Matthew — a tax collector! — to be one of



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His apostles! You know how the Jews hated tax collectors. Those guys worked for the Roman government. At best they represented the oppression of their own people. And, at worst, they were dishonest and greedy and were actually rewarded for robbing their neighbors to line their own pockets. They were not allowed in the synagogue and the rabbis warned people to stay away from them.

But, what does Jesus do? He does *this*. He goes right up to this man – at his tax table! – and what does He see? Does he see a Roman collaborator? Does he see a cheat and a thief, someone taking unfair advantage over his own neighbors? No. He sees someone who needs a relationship with God. And He gives him one with one simple statement: “Follow me.”

Now, we could talk about the power of Jesus’ Word. And we wouldn’t be wrong. We could speculate that Matthew must have seen Jesus before or heard about His miracles, and for that reason he followed. In any case, this is Jesus just being Jesus – living the God-lived life. He saw Matthew and loved him, though everyone else would simply have written him off. And it wasn’t just words. And it wasn’t just Jesus doing His job.

I mean, think about it. Most of you have worked a job at some point. And in your job, you probably had to be nice to some people you’d didn’t want to be. You had to spend time with some people that you would never think of inviting to your house for dinner. You were nice to them at your job because you had to be. You got paid to do that. But, Jesus didn’t call Matthew because He needed diversity among His disciples, or needed someone who knew their way around the books, not just another fisherman. Nor was Jesus trying to get some leverage with another key demographic. He chose of His own free will and graciousness to go to Matthew’s house and eat with Matthew’s friends. He was eating with sinners. And He got caught.

You see, the Pharisees were watching and to them this was a giant red flag. This rabbi, Jesus, was eating with sinners. Seriously? What did that say about Him?

Now, mind you, tax collectors were not guilty of anything illegal, but they were taking advantage of what was legal to get away with what was immoral. Nor was Jesus participating with them in their sin. He was taking the opportunity to connect with their lives so that they could get to know Him and experience for themselves the love of God. After all, why did Matthew invite all these “tax collectors and sinners” to his house? So that they could meet Jesus!

This month, we’re talking about the God-lived life as a life of hospitality. I think we all like to think of ourselves as being hospitable. We’re friendly enough. We’re welcoming to visitors, right? But let’s challenge that for a moment. Are we hospitable in the scriptural sense?

The biblical concept of hospitality is radical. Consider what Abraham did in today’s Old Testament. When strangers showed up, he begged them to let him get them something to eat. And then did you notice what he did? He ran and told Sarah to get 3 seahs of flour and make some bread. That’s 64 cups of flour! That’s more than a dozen loaves of bread. That’s a lot a bread! And it’s a lot of work. But Abraham didn’t just give Sarah work. He



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then ran and got a calf from the herd, slaughtered, butchered, and roasted it – for whom? For strangers, people he had just met, who just happened to be passing by.

The Greek word the New Testament uses for hospitality literally means showing “love to strangers” . . . not *tolerance* of strangers, or even *acceptance* of strangers, but *love* toward strangers. Remember what the Holy Spirit led Paul to write: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Biblical hospitality is showing that kind of sacrificial love. It’s treating others like family – even “strangers.” Think about that. It’s inviting others into your family so that they can meet your Father.

I know . . . we’re really good at coming up with reasons not to bring others into our home. “My house isn’t clean enough.” Or “We just don’t have the time.” And so it goes. But realize, beloved, that all of those reasons are built on pride. “I don’t want people to think less of me because something isn’t perfect.” Or “I feel I’ve got more important things to do,” or, “I don’t think so-and-so is worth the time.” It’s so easy to be the Pharisees here and condemn biblical hospitality as “unreasonable.”

Common sense would say that Jesus shouldn’t have called Matthew because Matthew didn’t deserve it. Jesus shouldn’t have gone to Matthew’s house because Jesus had better places He could be. For all that, Jesus could just as well have stayed in heaven. But He didn’t. And He did call Matthew to be His disciple. He did go to Matthew’s house. He did welcome sinners and eat with them. Jesus lived the God-lived life. And we’re so thankful that He did! Where would we be if He hadn’t? I never deserved to be His disciple. Did you? Be honest. He called you when you didn’t deserve it. And He comes here into our house whenever two or three of us sinners gather together in His name.

Jesus’ call and love made Matthew something new – no longer “Matthew the tax collector,” but Matthew, the “apostle, the disciple of Jesus,” Matthew “the evangelist,” “Saint Matthew,” and so on. Jesus’ dying love makes you something new, too – forgiven. And Jesus’ call makes you something new – a baptized child of God. And He invites you to a banquet with Him – around His altar. In the Lord’s Supper, He changes our relationship with Him and gives us a foretaste of heaven, not because we *had* status, but because He *changed* our status. He lived the God-lived life in our place that He might strengthen us to live the God-lived life to which He has called us.

When Jesus was accused of getting chummy with sinners, He silenced every such criticism quickly. Look what He says in verse 12: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” Great point, huh?! It would be foolish for a doctor to stay away from his patients because they were sick. He exists to help his patients. That’s why you are who you are, with the blessings God has given you. That’s why He put you where you are – so that people will cross your path, people you might not otherwise meet, love, and care for. So, doctor, are you going to run away from your patients? Or is it perhaps time for you to do a little “eating with sinners?”

After all, look what Jesus says next: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” What does this mean?



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This means that He wants us not just to look the part, or go through the motions, but truly to love . . . even strangers, even sinners. For that's who He came for. Thank God for that! Because it means He came for me and for every time I've been less than hospitable. And it means that He came for you, to make you – sinners that you are – righteous. He came to give you His God-lived life and to motivate a God-lived life in you. And do you know what? Through your God-lived life, through your life of hospitality, He will be calling even more sinners into His righteous family. Isn't that amazing!

We said it before. Hospitality means you want people to meet your family so that they can meet your Father. And maybe God will use you and your invitation to make them a brother or sister in Christ. Think about it. People are *loved* into the Faith. They're not *argued* into the kingdom of heaven. They're drawn by love. And love is not just words but hospitality. May God bless you this month as you challenge yourself toward some specific activity of hospitality. I'm excited to see what God will accomplish in you. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen