

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / March 21, 2021 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Encountering the Life Changing Jesus
Jesus, for the Outsider (Matthew's Story) (Matthew 9:9-13)

Pre-message Updates

Good morning, how ya'll doing this morning? Bob and Jennifer already thanked everyone in the announcements, but I wanted to add a big thanks to everybody who was part of the blessing bags for the teachers of Connally Middle School!

There's much to be discouraged about these days, including another mass shooting this past week, so what a blessing it is to bring encouragement in Jesus' name.

We've already received six notes of thanks for the encouragement from Connally's teachers. Here's what one teacher said, "I want you and your congregation to know that your kindness and support of us at Connally has come at a time when it was most needed. This year has been very challenging, and knowing you care and believe in what we do has buoyed up a lot of spirits on campus. Thank you for listening to God and sharing His love with us. Personally, the thank you card Joshua wrote came to me at a time when I was feeling overwhelmed. It brought back light and renewed strength to me."

What a blessing to encourage others in Jesus' name! We all have those opportunities each week as individuals, together as a church in our community, and God has even opened up opportunities for us to bless others around the world.

So as we celebrate God's work this morning, I'd like to invite Rochelle Meyer up to share about a ministry in South Africa that our church is now supporting. Would you join me in welcoming Rochelle to the stage?

Thanks for sharing Rochelle! God is allowing us to build relationships, serve our neighbors, and share Jesus here through our English as a Second Language ministry, and now also be part of a similar ministry in South Africa! So let's thank God for that in prayer...

Introduction: A story introduces being stuck outside

One morning, as Steph and the kids are leaving for school, I walk them to the back door and say, "I love you, God bless you at school today" as they head in the garage. The morning is progressing well. It looks like they'll be on time to school with a pastoral benediction. ☺

Then someone decides last minute that they need to go to the bathroom, and it's discovered that multiple things have been left inside that we need to retrieve. So now we're rushing around, but we finally get the kids and all the things in the car. I waive goodbye and exhale as they back out of the garage.

I close the garage door, and as I turn to go back inside, the back door is locked. In the rushing around someone had absent-mindedly turned the doorknob lock, not thinking about how I was going back inside. I don't have my keys or phone because I'm only in a t-shirt and boxers. No one needs to see a pastor in his underwear chasing his wife's car down the street yelling, "Wait...".

So I'm stuck outside my house. To make matters worse, it's a chilly morning, not really t-shirt and boxers kind of weather, and our kids school is not just right down the street. So I'm going to be stuck out in the garage for a while.

Relevance: We all sometimes feel like outsiders

It stinks to be stuck outside. We've all experienced this feeling, perhaps literally, like being locked out of your house or car, or perhaps stuck outside relationally speaking.

Maybe you've been treated like an outsider at school or work or home, or even in our society as you receive messages like, "We don't care for your background or culture, it makes us a bit uncomfortable."

Or "We don't really like your personality: you're too quiet, you don't come out of your shell enough, you're not interesting enough." Or instead "You're too loud, too talkative, too forceful, you need to tone it down." Or perhaps "Can't you be more like a neurotypical person?" Sometimes we feel like an outsider because people have kept us at a distance, though we've done nothing wrong.

Other times, we may have made a tragic choice or have a pattern of dysfunction that creates distance between us and others, our own behavior putting us outside relationally. Some of us may even feel on the outside with God, perhaps because of what we've done, or still do.

Orienting to God's Word: Matthew's story speaks to being outside

So this morning we're going to look at Matthew's story: a man who was an outsider in society and with God, and see what it has to say for when we're outside. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the gospel of Matthew, chapter 9. If not, no worries, we'll have the

verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Matthew lived about 2,000 years ago, and along with the whole Jewish nation, endured hard times as the Romans occupied them. Some Jews back then, like Matthew, responded to that hardship by betraying their people as Roman tax collectors.

Being a tax collector back then is not the same as working for the IRS today. Instead, it's like if a foreign nation took over America, and then your neighbor volunteers to work for that occupying power. Your neighbor taking taxes from you and everyone else, sending all that money back to the occupying power, weakening America and strengthening the enemy.

To make matters worse, your neighbor bid money to become a tax collector for your enemies. Why? So they could charge even more taxes and keep the extra for themselves, growing rich at the expense of you and your community. If you rebel, the tax collector reports you, and the foreign military crushes you.

That's what the Jewish tax collectors like Matthew were doing. So the Jews back then despised these traitors like Matthew, treating them as outcasts. Tax collectors were so despised that many Jewish religious leaders taught that even if you were a destitute beggar, you still shouldn't receive money from a tax collector at his office, because it was dirty money.

And many religious leaders taught that if a tax collector entered your house, your entire house became unclean just because of his presence. And also taught that you could lie to a tax collector with no sense of guilt since lying to a tax collector is like lying to a thief who is robbing you. So to his people, Matthew is this kind of despised outsider.¹ Are you guys tracking so far?

Teaching: Matthew's story

Outcast Matthew is invited inside (9) – Now let's pick up Matthew the outcast's story starting in Matthew chapter 9, verse 9. **(9a)**

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth.

In the four gospels, Matthew is sometimes called Levi, like he is here in verse 9. Other times he is called Levi, but it's the same person.

¹ From Mark Commentaries by Darrell Bock (NCBC) & Wessel & Strauss (revised *Expositor's Bible Commentary*).

People back then named “Levi” typically came from the Levites, the priestly tribe of the Jews. As Levi sits at his tax booth in verse 9, enriching himself and the enemy, I wonder if he ever thinks about how life would be different had he chosen to serve as a priest instead of becoming a despised tax collector.

I wonder if Levi/Matthew, regrets choosing financial security over his reputation and relationships. I wonder if he feels a sense of shame about how he’s been using others every time a fellow Jew shoots him a look of disgust for his treacherous greed.

Whatever Matthew is thinking and feeling, as Jesus walks by, something unbelievable happens to outcast Matthew in the middle of verse 9. There Jesus says: “‘Follow me,’ he told him,…”

Jewish religious teachers in Jesus’ day never approached a potential disciple and invited them to follow. It was always the other way around. Disciples would select a teacher and ask for the privilege of being disciplined by that teacher.

So it would be very surprising in that culture to see Jesus invite anyone to be His disciple, but it would be utterly shocking to see Jesus invite a traitor like Matthew inside.

I love Caravaggio’s dramatic painting of Jesus calling Matthew the outsider. Now let’s zoom in on the people. On the left side of the painting, Matthew is seated at the table with some associates, counting their income. Matthew is in the middle of the seated group, with the light brown beard. Do you see him?

Matthew and his assistants are dressed in the modern clothes of Caravaggio’s time, likely reflecting their involvement with worldly concerns. If Caravaggio painted this today, perhaps Matthew would be in an Armani suit, with slicked back hair.

Then Jesus, on the right side of the painting, accompanied by Peter, suddenly bursts in and powerfully gestures to Matthew, extending His arm and index finger as He calls Matthew to follow Him.

The two tax collectors seated on the far left are so focused on counting their ill-gotten money that they don’t even notice Jesus. Like these tax collectors, if you’re focusing only on the things of this world, you’re living on too low of a level.

In contrast, the two younger tax collectors on the right side of the seated group do notice Jesus and Peter. The younger man, who is facing us, draws back into Matthew, and away from

Jesus. The older one, whose back is to us and is armed, leans forward, perhaps threateningly, as a standing Peter gestures to calm his resistance.

Surprised, there in the middle of the seated tax collectors, is Matthew. As Jesus calls, Matthew still has his right hand on the coin he was counting before Jesus entered. Matthew's left-hand appears to gesture to himself, perhaps to say, "Who me?". Or maybe he's gesturing to the guy next to him, saying, "You can't mean me Jesus, do you mean this guy?"²

Gesturing like, "You've got to be mistaken Jesus, you must be looking for some other Levi, one who became a Levite serving God at the temple, not this Levi who betrayed his nation over a love of money."

But Jesus is not mistaken. He's inviting this Levi, this Matthew, who is on the outside with God and his countrymen because of his sin. The painting captures that dramatic moment right before Matthew decides what to do with the unexpected, amazing grace he's being shown.

Does Matthew hold on to the coin he's counting? If he leaves this lucrative tax collecting, someone else will quickly take his place. Let's look at the end of verse 9 for Matthew's response to Jesus. It says:

"...and Matthew got up and followed him."

As Matthew takes Jesus' astounding invitation, the traitor outcast becomes part of Jesus' inner circle, invited inside. Talk about encountering the life changing Jesus.

This isn't just a story for back then. If you know Jesus, Matthew's story is your story, an outsider being welcomed inside with our heavenly Father by His Son Jesus.

If you don't yet identify as a Christian, you're like Matthew in the painting. Jesus is extending His hand, inviting you to start a relationship with Him today, to come inside His kingdom. The call of Jesus is on your life, do you hear it? I'd love to talk with you about that afterwards.

Pharisees proclaim Matthew (and his friends) are outsiders (10-11) – Matthew, having received Jesus' call to come inside His kingdom, is now inspired to introduce others to Jesus in verse 10.

¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

² <https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/c/caravagg/04/23conta.html>. Initially accessed online 2/11/20.

In response to his newfound life in Jesus, Matthew throws a big dinner party so that other tax collectors and “sinners” can meet Jesus too. Perhaps Matthew invited with, “God has come into the world, He’s going to be at my house tonight, come meet Him!” These outsiders come, their curiosity piqued by this Jesus who called one of their own into His inner circle and who warmly welcomes them.

Like Matthew, in response to Jesus’ overwhelming grace in your life, you could throw an awesome dinner party, or invite some friends online to stream our Easter service, to introduce some friends to Jesus. Praise God that He’s also letting us be part of helping refugees in South Africa, “outsiders” in their culture, to learn English and be introduced to Jesus.

In Matthew’s case, not everyone is happy with his dinner party. The poopers of this party are some Jewish religious leaders called the Pharisees. The Pharisees believe the Jews are under Roman occupation because the people aren’t following God’s law well enough.

So the Pharisees made up their own additional rules that they added around God’s laws. And they shun the people who don’t follow their added rules, keeping the so called “sinners” outside.

Here comes Jesus, inviting a tax collector into His inner circle of disciples and sharing table fellowship with all these tax collectors and sinners, and it’s just too much for the Pharisees, as verse 11 shows.

¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

The Pharisees question why Jesus eats with outcasts because eating together back then symbolized intimacy and full acceptance. So Jesus sharing table fellowship with “Matthew’s people” clashes with the Pharisees’ prideful separation from those who don’t measure up to their rules.

I wonder if the Pharisees look right at Matthew as they say in verse 11, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And I wonder if Matthew fearfully thinks, “Will Jesus realize it was a mistake to call me, and put me back outside?” Perhaps, like Matthew, you might wonder, can Jesus really welcome me in with what I’ve done?

I wonder if even the other disciples, all of whom were Jewish, kinda also wanted Matthew back on the outside, since he was a tax-collecting traitor to their nation.

Jesus affirms Matthew is inside (12-13) – Let’s see how Jesus responds to the Pharisees questioning of Him in verse 12. **(12-13)**

¹²On 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.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

As religious leaders, claiming to represent God, the Pharisees should have tried to help people struggling, rather than effectively disinviting them from God’s kingdom by keeping them outside. Ironically, the Pharisees are actually also on the outside with God, spiritually sick, but too blinded by pride to see it and receive Jesus’ help.

So here in verses 12 and 13 Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and affirms Matthew inviting others who are outside. And Jesus is still in the business of inviting modern day “Matthew’s” inside, so let’s keep loving, praying, and sharing with them.

In His response here in verse 12, Jesus begins with a proverb from that day, about how doctors spend their time among the sick, not the healthy. As a doctor spends time among the sick, so Jesus helps any humble enough to admit they’re far from God, struggling with sin, and need Jesus’ help.

Jesus is the Great Physician, who made a home visit to us here as we struggled in this sinful, broken world. Jesus gave us the hard but true diagnosis that we are mortally stained by the disease of sin, deserving of death and judgment.

I know “sinners” here in verse 13 isn’t a politically correct term today, but it describes Matthew’s reality, and ours, apart from Jesus. When Jesus talks about being the only way to God, He’s not saying there are lots of valid ways to God, but I want you to choose My way. No. Jesus is saying, “You’re on the outside, and no one else is coming for you to help you with your sin and death problems but Me.”

Instead of keeping sick sinners like us outside, Jesus the Great Physician welcomes all kinds of strugglers, like Matthew, like me, like you, anyone who wants God’s help, to come inside God’s kingdom and receive welcome.

Jesus died on the cross for us and rose from the dead to give us the cure we need for our sin sickness. The Great Physician didn’t send us a bill for this treatment. No, He paid the whole bill for us with His blood. We receive in faith the gift that we’re no longer on the “outs” from

God because of our sin. Through faith in Jesus, we're now insiders, beloved children welcomed warmly at His table.

Matthew lives inside Jesus' kingdom - Matthew, having received Jesus' amazing welcome here in chapter 9, then keeps living by faith that He really is welcome inside God's kingdom, even with his shady past.

So from this point on in the gospel, Matthew lives with Jesus and the rest of His disciples, receiving Jesus' teaching, seeing His miracles, and participating in inviting other outsiders inside God's kingdom too.

But then Matthew sees Jesus betrayed and arrested, and like the rest of the disciples, Matthew flees, deserting Jesus in His time of great need.

But then Matthew encounters the life changing Jesus after Jesus rose from the dead. And Matthew receives Jesus' forgiveness once more for his new failing and continues sharing the good news that Jesus loves all of us messed up outsiders, and really has welcomed us inside through faith in Him.

Perhaps that's why, as Matthew writes down the stories in the gospel of Matthew, he starts and ends with Jesus' closeness to us, that Jesus really has welcomed us inside. In chapter 1 Matthew talks about Jesus being *Immanuel*, which means "God with us". Then Matthew closes his gospel in chapter 28 with that same promise. There Jesus tells Matthew, and us, to make disciples, and then promises, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Next Step

Like Matthew, we were once on the outside, separated from God because of our sin. But then Jesus welcomed us inside, even with all of our flaws and failings, through faith in Him.

So as we prepare our hearts for Easter, let's live daily in this reality that you really are inside God's kingdom, thanks to what Jesus has done. Like Matthew, you really are inside, no matter how anyone else treats you as an outsider at home, work, school, or in society.

So our next step this morning is to enjoy being inside with Jesus. That's how we can apply Matthew's story to our lives this week, enjoy being inside with Jesus.

That morning when I was locked outside my house, when Steph came back from dropping the kids off at school, she was surprised to see me in the garage, in my underwear. She

quickly let me back in the house, where it was warm and inviting, and it felt good to be welcomed inside.

So let's enjoy being inside with Jesus every day this week. As you experience that closeness with our Savior, as Matthew did, look around for others on the outside, and share the good news that Jesus wants to welcome them inside too. Amen? Let's pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord, but first, love someone in this room.