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“Amazing and Outrageous Mercy”

Text: Matthew 9:9-13 (Ephesians 4:7-16; Ezekiel 2:8 - 3:11)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's a good thing Matthew was not an NFL football player. If he had been, it seems he wouldn't have had *any* chance of being an apostle or evangelist. We don't like the IRS, the tax collectors, in our day and age either, but what is happening with Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson, those football players in the news so much recently, seems to be taking things to a whole new level. Some sins, it seems, are forgiveable; but what these men did is not. The hue and cry that is going up wants not only to banish them from football, but it seems, from humanity. And anyone who does not join in with the chorus of outrage and *no punishment is punishment enough* for what they did, is just as bad as they are. They too must be gotten rid of so we can *purify* our society of people like this. Self-righteous indignation is running amok.

Now certainly, what Ray Rice did in punching his fiance in that elevator is wrong. What Adrian Peterson did in disciplining his son seems, from the reports that have come out, too much. And when laws are broken, there is calling to account and punishment. That is right and what the authorities are for. But the public outcry and the bandwagon of blame and condemnation is now so crowded it makes the Metro at rush hour seem spacious! There is no room for mercy or forgiveness - we simply cannot have these men anymore in football, in public, or in our midst.

Now imagine if Jesus had come up to one of them, as He did to Matthew that day, and said **“Follow me.”** I want you to be My disciple, and then apostle and even one of My four evangelists. Imagine the outcry then!

Well that's why the Pharisees were so outraged and indignant at Jesus. They were the good guys, not Matthew. They weren't the ones turning on their own people and collecting taxes for the occupying power in Rome. They were the ones going to church every Sunday and trying their best and teaching others to be good and upright . . . but Jesus keeps hanging out not with them, but with the wrong crowd! **“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”** Or, to modernize that a little: Why does He eat with wife beaters, child abusers, prostitutes, pornographers, murderers, abortionists, and all the people we know - we KNOW! - are really bad sinners and this planet would be better off without. *Those* people that should be disqualified from the human race.

Ever thought that? Played the Pharisee? Sure you have. The “there are sinners and then there are the really bad sinners” game. And we know what side you’re on, right? But what if a secret video came out later today for all the world to see, showing all those things you’ve done, you’ve thought, you’ve desired, you’ve spoken. Opening your heart, your closet, for all the world to see. The words that hurt more than any fist could. The murderous anger and bitterness and hatred you use like a club, not just a switch. The impurity of your thoughts and deeds. The forgiveness you are so quick to desire and so reluctant to give. The vile impulses you condemn in others but that keep living on in your heart. So while we’re disqualifying people from the human race . . .

And yet Jesus is here today, *with us*, still eating with tax collectors and sinners. He’s seen your video, from first to last, beginning to end, every last second of it. But He didn’t shun you - your physician is here for you. Your Saviour is here, to have mercy. To call sinners like you and me not to a righteousness you better start doing and achieving for yourself, *and here’s how* - but to His righteousness, done by Him and given to you. To forgive your sin and raise you to a new life.

For Jesus knew what the Pharisees didn’t - that He hung out with tax collectors and sinners because on this earth, there is no one else to hang out with! The Pharisees didn’t think they were, and so didn’t go to the doctor. And even more than that, didn’t even want to be in the waiting room filled with icky sick people.

But just as God sent prophets like Ezekiel to call people to repentance, to preach to them of their terminal sickness, so He always does, giving (as St. Paul said) ***apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers***. And calling to fill these offices not “the good people” but folks who know something about the need for mercy and forgiveness, because they’re sinners too. People like Paul and Matthew. To say: There’s healing here, *for you*. There’s mercy here; forgiveness. *For you*. Hear it in your ears, feel it on your head, eat it and drink it. The Great Physician knows what you need to live, and He’s here giving it.

Maybe the mental picture you have in your head of this is like those doctors who go to Africa to help those people stricken with Ebola, but then wind up catching the disease themselves. But that’s not what happened to Jesus. Jesus did much more than that, for it was no accident. He came and said: *I will switch places with you*. I will be the sick one and you the healthy one. I will be the outcast and you be the son. I will be the they rage against and you be the good one. I will be the condemned and you be set free.

And that’s what happened on the cross. He was gotten rid of, banished, disqualified from the human race. And not just by man, but by God. Yes, for as Isaiah put it in those words we hear every Good Friday: *He was despised and rejected by men*, yes, but also, Isaiah continues: *we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. [For] he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. For the Lord has laid on*

him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:3-6). Or as Luther would put it, and I am paraphrasing: Jesus became Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson and Matthew and Paul and the Pharisees and you and every other vile and outrageous sinner on the cross, to die for your life, to be banished for your acceptance, to be shamed to cover your shame. Or, maybe we should say today, erase your video.

Which is pretty amazing mercy. Which is not to minimize the seriousness of sin or to excuse sinners - no woman or child should be abused. But in the same way no spouse should be left, no child murdered in the womb, no friend betrayed, no journalists beheaded, no refugees forced from their homes, or no any other heinous sin we see in our world today and which should be outraged against just as much, not just a select few sins that are in vogue to rail against. No, sin is sin in all its ugliness and seriousness. **But knowing that exalts even more our Saviour**, whose outrageous mercy, we are seeing again, is not of this world, but a mercy that has *come into* this world and is for you.

And that mercy uttered those two little words that completely changed Matthew's world that day: ***Follow me***. Matthew saw some pretty amazing things after that, and then was given the gift of being an **apostle** - one of the twelve specially authorized and sent out to proclaim Jesus' death and resurrection to all sinners great and small; and then of being an **evangelist** - one of the four to write a Gospel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a word of mercy still sounding around the world today; a word still read in churches and homes everywhere. Matthew the tax collector, went from recording and keeping records of taxes owed and paid to writing of sins forgiven and remitted and off the books.

What a gift that was for Matthew, for he surely didn't deserve it. A gift so precious that he would later not fear giving up his life for it, killed, it is said, on this day by the sword. For Matthew knew that though the world kill him, they could not take his life. That was safe in Christ. Forever.

And so it is for you. Called to follow Christ. Called to live His mercy and forgiveness, for yourself and for others - those Rays and Adrians in your life, maybe who have even hurt you. And called to repent for when you don't. Given the amazing gift of being a child of God - a gift completely and utterly undeserved.

And you know, it is not too hard to imagine the world turning against us - for the crime of being Christians - in the not too distant future (if it's not happening already), for our preaching against those sins the world loves and preaching forgiveness for those it hates - the world considering us either unloving and intolerant and bigoted or too loving, too tolerant, or too forgiving, and who must, therefore, be purged from this earth and disqualified from the human race. Making us the next Ray Rice or Adrian Peterson. If so, Matthew - who knew a bit about that himself - has a word for you: *Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted*

the [apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers] *who were before you* (Matthew 5:11-12).

For like Matthew, they can shun you, they can persecute you, they can mock you, they can kill you . . . but they cannot take your life. That is safe in Christ. Forever. And baptized into Christ, absolved by Christ, and fed by and with Christ, His words to Matthew are now His promise to you: you will follow Him, through death to life everlasting, and take your seat with those tax collectors and sinners of every shape and size and kind, healed and forgiven, at His feast which has no end. For those are the people with Christ. On earth and in heaven. Not ***those who have no need of a physician, but those who are sick***, infected by sin, and who need - and have - a Saviour. Like you. A Saviour with amazing and outrageous mercy.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.