

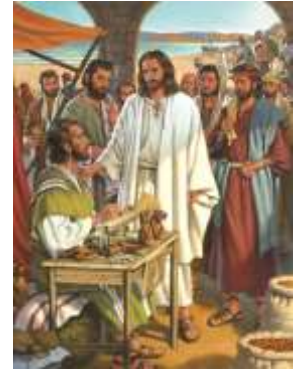
Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020

# Show Mercy, Don't Condemn

## Matthew 9: 9-13

*Rev Alex Rodgers*

Imagine, if you will, that I, your minister, have been seen by someone in the bar of the dingiest, seediest pub in Adelaide. Further, imagine that I am sitting with some of the local prostitutes on my left, and on my right is a sprinkle of the most notorious, well known, bkie gangs. Opposite, and seemingly very much at ease, are a few of the area's drug addicts and pushers, and next to them, one or two criminals just out of gaol. Leaning over my right shoulder and whispering in my ear is the shonky accountant who looks after the books for the baddies, and over my right shoulder, the lawyer that all of the criminals get to defend them when they are in court, and whom they consult when they want to make sure they don't end up in court!



How does the image look to you? Is it the sort of thing you might expect?

Some might try to find excuses. "He's only there because he is trying to convert them, make them realise their sins. He's not really having a good time!"

But then a video appears of the gathering in the pub. And guess what? There is the minister, surrounded by all these terrible sinners and your minister is actually enjoying himself! There is much laughter, a great deal of small talk; everyone is getting on like a house on fire!

What wonderful gossip would arise! Morning coffees throughout the area would be filled with all sorts of comments and "I told you so's" and "I always knew he was a bad one!"

How would you feel? What would you think?

The first part of this reading from Matthew describes Jesus in a similar vein.

Jesus has called Matthew, the tax collector, to be one of his followers. This was Jesus choice. He thought Matthew was the right person for the job. Remember, tax collectors were amongst the most hated people at this time in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. They collected the Roman taxes. The way it worked was that the Romans appointed tax franchisees, like modern day business practice for companies like MacDonalds, Bakers Delight etc. The Romans charged the tax collector the amount of tax they wanted and then the tax collector, often having sub-franchised the work out to others, paid the Romans.

The trick was that the tax collector could tax people whatever he wanted! As long as the Romans got what they wanted they didn't care what more people had to pay. Consequently these tax collectors like Matthew, taxed people exorbitant amounts and made themselves huge fortunes. No wonder that they were hated.

### **Yet Jesus chose one to be a close follower.**

But that's not where the story ends. The gospel goes on to say that very evening Jesus attended a banquet with, not just Matthew, but "many" tax collectors". But worse! Not only are there many tax collectors, but also sinners! But worse yet! They were having a party! The Greek word used which tells us that this was a party or a banquet, describes the way they were sitting – reclining on special lounges, as they did at dinner parties. **Sharing such meals was an important sign of fellowship. They were enjoying themselves. Jesus was enjoying himself.**



And to the religious authorities this was an absolute scandal. It broke a great many of the religious dietary laws and laws of association. What Jesus was doing was a scandal, and the religious authorities turned to the disciples and asked them exactly what they thought they were doing? Not only were the tax collectors stealing from the people, but they also worked for the hated Romans – they were also collaborators.

In every way Jesus and the disciples were being scandalous and religiously suspect in the eyes of the pious, law fearing Jews. Here we clearly see that Jesus had a real connection with those we would call bad people! This is a great lesson and example for the Church.

Jesus and the disciples were diametrically opposed to the way the religious authorities wanted to relate to these so called bad people or sinners.

**Jesus touched their lives with his. He did not condemn, he accepted them for who they were.**

He did not rant or rave against them, rather he sat down at a party and listened and talked to them.

When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do." <sup>13</sup>Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.\* For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.'"

He did not reject them as evil or lost, but laughed and lived with them as fellow travellers on God's earth. He did not demand change, but encouraged reform with love and tolerance and total acceptance.

It has long been a matter of debate as to which is the best approach in dealing with those who have been living their lives in a negative way, how best are these people reached?

You have often heard me refer to my maternal grandmother, my granny. Her husband, my grandfather committed suicide just before the war. My granny said he had got himself caught up in gambling, and he became addicted to it and he was probably an alcoholic.

Both of these things got on top of him and he saw the only way out was to take his life. She said his life was made hell, not only by those to whom he owed money, but also his family and friends. They called him weak and apparently tried to make him change.

Today, the way we relate to people like my grandfather is to try and accept them as they are, and encourage and help them overcome their problems. Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, for instance are famous for their ability to help people through their addictions and learn to live productive lives



Perhaps it is a lesson for all of us today.

Jesus really did live out what he preached.

If we know people who are caught up in a lifestyle we might call bad or evil, perhaps we need to try to be positive and accepting, rather than judgemental and alienating.

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."



And remember too that when Jesus says that he came to heal the sick and not the well, he wasn't saying that there were some of us who are perfectly well and therefore were not in need of his love, but rather he was making the point to the religious authorities that everyone is in need of the doctor.

**All of us, to some extent, are in need of Jesus' love and forgiveness.**

**Compassion, acceptance, tolerance are all the signs of the working of the Spirit in human affairs.**