

When It's Time to See the Doctor

Hosea 6:4-6; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-34

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I know. I can see it on your faces. Every time I read a text like the one from Matthew 9 some of you begin to glaze over. It's all those miracle stories. A woman instantly healed of a medical condition she had for twelve years. A child raised from the dead. Two blind men who had their sight miraculously restored. And then a man who was demon-possessed set free from the demon. They come in rapid-fire succession in Matthew 9. You gave up on these kinds of miracle stories long ago, you say. They just aren't consistent with reality as you experience it, right?

There are many ways of thinking about the miracle stories in the Bible. Some people believe that miracles literally happened in Bible times, and they literally happen today. People were healed of illnesses in the Bible, and people are literally healed of illnesses today. People walked on water in biblical days, and if we only had enough faith, we could walk on water today. In other words, if God did it then, and God did, then God can do it today.

There are other people who would say, yes, miracles happened in biblical days, but they do not happen today. They would say that the era of the Bible was a special time when God worked miracles through special messengers, including Jesus. God did this to offer proof of who God was and of who Jesus was. Once the proof was recorded in Scripture, the need for miracles ended. Yes, Jesus walked on water. Peter walked on water. But if we try to walk on water, we'd better have on a swimsuit.

Still others would say that so-called miracles have rational explanations. What they called demon-possession was actually a type of mental illness or maybe a seizure disorder. The people raised from the dead were not actually dead. They appeared to be dead, and since they didn't have our modern medical equipment, mistakes were often made. Walking on the water was an optical illusion. Some would find rational explanations for all the miracles in the Bible. Still others would say that miracles falls into the

category of myth. Like the stories about Hercules, the miracle stories exist to convey a higher truth.

I now take an approach different from all of these. I've quit trying to figure out whether or not miracles literally happened in biblical days. And I've quit trying to figure out whether or not they literally happen today. I've found that to be a frustrating and fruitless debate. Instead, I now trust that the miracle stories of the Bible are there to teach me something about God and life. Their value to me is found in the lesson they are teaching. I can access that lesson whether they are literally true or not. I find that freeing. So when I get to heaven, if I learn that they all happened literally just as recorded, I'm going to say, "Hallelujah!" If I learn that they did not all happen literally as recorded, I'm not going to get mad and leave. It's not going to hurt my feelings.

So when I come to a text like Matthew 9, I immediately ask myself, "What is this text trying to teach me?" And let me tell you, this text has a powerful message. It has something to do with who needs to see a doctor.

First, we have to go back to the passage in Hosea that Jesus quoted to the Pharisees. Here's the context. Jesus just called Matthew to be a disciple. Matthew is the same one Mark calls Levi. Now, think back to Vacation Bible School. What do you remember about Matthew? He was a tax collector. Now being a tax collector back in the days of the Bible was not like working for the IRS today. You may not have a very high estimation of or appreciation for the Internal Revenue Service, but their workers are honorable federal employees. They are doing honest work that we happen not to like. But they are decent, well-educated, professional men and women.

Tax collectors weren't. Tax collectors were low-lives. Thieves. More like the Mafia than the IRS. Tax collectors were the revenue gatherers for the Roman government. Their job was to collect what the Roman government expected plus whatever else they could extract. The extra was theirs to keep. Tax collectors generally were quite wealthy. They were considered dishonest and therefore despised by the people. Their work put them in contact with the Gentile population, therefore the religiously orthodox considered them to be ritually unclean. It wasn't good to be a tax collector, but once you're in something, it can be hard to get out, even when you want to.

Now, look at what happened. Matthew was sitting in his tax office one day when Jesus walked by and said to him, “Follow me.” Jesus called a low-life tax collector to be his follower! And then the text says, “And he got up and followed him.”

It gets worse. The next thing we read is that Jesus is sitting at the dinner table with *many* tax collectors and others given the disparaging title of “sinners.” The Pharisees saw this spectacle and criticized Jesus, asking, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

In response to this criticism, Jesus quoted the passage from Hosea. This is very important. Here is the full verse from Hosea. God is speaking to the people:

*For I desire steadfast love (or mercy)
and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather
than burnt offerings.*

In a religion built upon the sacrificial system of burnt offerings and other offerings, God said that what God wanted most was not a lot of dead animals, their sacrifices. What God really wanted was mercy, mercy in the way they related to each other. Why? Because that is the way God is. God is merciful. And then God said that God wanted knowledge of God, intimate understanding of who God is. Forget all the dead animals. What God really wanted was mercy and knowledge of God. They took precedence over everything else in the Law of Moses.

Jesus then said something else important in response to that criticism. It’s that statement about the doctor. “Those who are well have no need of a physician,” Jesus said, “but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Now look at what happens next. The miracle stories follow. Remember, their purpose is to teach us something about God and life. There are four: the woman who had been ill for twelve years, the grieving father whose daughter just died, the two blind men, and the demon-possessed man. In the theology of this gospel, all of the people in the miracle stories are

connected to the people at that dinner table with Jesus. The tax collectors and sinners and all of these people in the rapid-fire miracle stories share this in common: they are in need of mercy. In one way or another, they each needed to see the doctor, the Great Physician. They were “sick,” and they knew it. And the good news of Matthew’s gospel is that the doctor made a house call for each of them. He called a despised tax collector to be his disciple. Matthew then called some of his buddies and said, “You’ve got to meet this guy! You won’t believe what he did for me!” Jesus then did the same for a woman with an illness, a little girl who died, two blind men, and a man possessed by a demon. Were they literal miracles? I don’t know. I don’t even ask that any more. Now I try not to miss what these stories are trying to teach me. Those who were the most needy got what they needed.

Matthew 9 is trying to teach us to treat people with mercy. Why? Because that’s who God is. God is merciful because God sees what we know but don’t always acknowledge. Most people are hurting. Like the people in these stories, most people—here at church, at the grocery store, at the ball field—most are carrying around tremendous hurt. Some of it they chose, like being a tax collector, and now there’s no easy way out. Some of it they didn’t choose, a disease that won’t go away, the grief of great loss, blind to life, possessed by obsessions that rule them. And when the people around them fail to treat these hurting people with mercy, that only adds to their hurt. What we end up with is this: hurting people hurting each other.

Jesus taught us how to stop this dysfunctional behavior. It’s about mercy. Quit treating people like low-lives. Quit labeling. And instead try sitting down to dinner with them. Get to know them. Understand them. Show them mercy, like the mercy God has shown to us. And this is what we will find—mercy has the power to redeem. Mercy has the power to restore, heal, and liberate. We will see that salvation flies on the wings of mercy.

If the truth were told, we all need to see the doctor, don’t we? About our own hurt. About our poor choices. The Pharisees did too; they just didn’t know it—or wouldn’t admit it. Don’t be like them and miss the good news of Matthew 9. There is healing power when we are rightly connected to God. God extends mercy to us. May we each be healed and then pass the mercy to others.

Closing Prayer

God of great mercy, how can we say thank you? We have received mercy. Help us to be merciful. Amen.