

Taste God's Friendship

✝ **medicine for the sick** (vv.9-12)

✝ **mercy for sinners** (v.13)

Thanks to the Father¹ who gave us His Son and sends us His Spirit, 'til our work on earth is done:

On this Sunday designated as "Father's Day," it's good to recall at least one happy memory from childhood. Some may not know where to begin. But even after surviving a traumatic youth one man still said, "I remember Dad's bear hug." Another could see a smile and hear those treasured words, "Now you're cookin'!" If your family was well off: "...cookin' with gas!" But let's face it. For some, any good memories may be hard to find. Lessons learned may be negative like a seminary student "wishing I had my earthly father's blessing," and supervising pastor: "But you have your heavenly Father's blessing!"

That is, in fact, the cure for any hurt and heartache on this special day, plus icing on the cake or sauce on the BBQ for your happy memories. Here find **medicine for the sick**. Here find **mercy for sinners**. Here is where your heavenly Father's blessing finds you to **Taste God's Friendship** in His Son.

✝ **medicine for the sick** (vv.9-12)

Would your father be proud if you had a job like Matthew-Levi? It was certainly a high paying, vital occupation in that time and place. Convoys of camels coming out of the Arabian Desert not far to the east would unload priceless cargoes of spices and essential oils for sale on the far side of your location, over toward the Western Sea. Lucrative commerce with north-south horses out of Anatolia traded for textiles and linens from the shadows of the pyramids in Egypt. You can sit there at your tax booth and count your coin. Track your ledgers. Call out the soldiers if anyone resists your tactics.

Are you starting to sense why Matthew's Jewish father might be ashamed? Occupation to support occupying armies of hated invaders taxing your conquered people? Their Empire stretched from far away Rome, north to Britain, south to Egypt, east beyond Arabia. An iron fist crushed any resistance. Rome's tax collectors were considered scum because of their tax farming techniques. As long as Rome got what it wanted, tax collectors, a.k.a. publicans, could charge whatever they felt was fair for their vital service and personal profit. Argue? Talk to my squad. Whine if you want, but I'll just move my tax table up the road and hit your caravan again...just around the bend. Tax collectors were such dreadful sinners in the eyes of the rabbis that synagogues rejected them. What father would want a tax collector for a son? And what comfort can come from your coins if your heart is sick from family losses?

The most famous rabbi of the day had just healed a paralyzed man on a mat and soothed his soul with the kindest comment: "**Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven.**" (9:2 NKJV) **As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting in the tax collector's booth.** What's on your mind, Matthew? Just doing your job, expecting a scowl? Every other rabbi in the country thinks you're a lost cause; every citizen agrees? Looking up, you see a smile, not condescending, but kind and friendly. From His upraised hand instead of a slap He motions to you and says, "**Follow me.**" Do you question what about all this money? Do you wonder where you'll find another job like this one?

Why would Matthew follow Jesus? That Nazareth carpenter's son was accused of blaspheming God for telling the paralytic, "**Your sins are forgiven.**" For a while Jesus' following will increase all the way to peak of popularity feeding 5,000 men plus women and children with a little boy's lunch. But then

¹ *Christian Worship Supplement 747* – "There Is a Redeemer," Melody Green, 1982, Birdwing Music.

it will plummet, nose-dive, hit bottom in massive defections all the way down to the lowest, most shameful death possible – crucified on a Roman cross with a mob of fellow Jews shouting shameful condemnation. What could possibly make Matthew do it when Jesus said, **“Follow me”**?

This isn't so far off of arguments about COVID-19 medicine these days. No matter what you conclude from media coverage, if you took that medicine, felt better or recovered from the coronavirus, could anyone talk you out of praising that medication? Wouldn't you feel it was the “one thing”?

What's that “one thing” for you? Is it different for everybody? Remember the 1991 comedy *City Slickers*? Billy Crystal's character is confused by the old cowboy played by Jack Palance. There's “one thing” he tells the greenhorn. “What is it? Your finger?” “That's what you have to figure out.” Everyone thinks it's a thing or relationship. “If only I had...” “If only he / she would...” Enter King Solomon who had it all – riches, honor, fame, knowledge and wisdom, all the pleasures of a man's heart. “One thing”? Solomon had everything! And his conclusion? *Meaningless empty vapor.* (Ecclesiastes) In the Proverbs of Solomon he explains what that “one thing” really is. You don't have to guess. Ready? **“What a man desires is unfailling love.”** (Proverbs 19:22 NIV84) *Loving kindness, loyalty, mercy* – we try to capture one of the Holy Spirit's favorite words: *Chesed*. But we heard our problem in the Old Testament lesson: **“your faithfulness (Chesed) is like the morning mist, like early dew that disappears.”** (Hosea 6:4 EHV)

When earthly friends forsake me quite, And I have neither skill nor might, He's sure my Helper to appear – His loving kindness, oh, how near! (TLH 340:6) The “one thing” you thought you needed, God takes away. Healthy family? Happy marriage? Good fortune? Portfolio? Why? Lost in thought on life's emptiness...here stands Jesus: **“Follow me.” Matthew got up and followed him. Medicine for the sick.**

† mercy for sinners (v.13)

Matthew was looking into the kindest eyes anyone will ever see, deep pools of longing for your heart and mine. The purest, most unselfish love that loved you all the way to the cross. Now Jesus wants to fill your heart. The fact that Jesus found Matthew and called him to follow – all this is proof of God's **mercy for sinners**, unselfish love and loyalty which alone can fill the God-shaped vessel of your soul.

Now what you do if you're Matthew-Levi? Oh, it's party time. Yes, it is! Evangelism party for all your friends, the kinds of folks nobody wants, and every self-righteous neighbor loves to hate. See them sneering when they notice all the **“tax collectors and sinners”** coming to your table? Do you suppose the Rabbi from Nazareth will ditch your party? Maybe He thinks it's not worth the bad “PR” to show up with such a shameful crowd. Imagine your absolute joy when Jesus walks through your door and sits (reclines) at your table! Can you believe your eyes and ears? He's right at home with all your homies! And when the critics carp, **“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”** Jesus gives an awesome answer: **“The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’** [Hosea 6:6] **In fact, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** Every “lost cause” was just found. They're the ones Jesus wants!

How do **sinners** respond to such **mercy**? Another tax-collector, too short for crowds at Jericho, climbs a sycamore fig tree to see. Matthew knew how he felt when Jesus stops under that tree and invites Himself over for dinner! **“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”** How healthy are you on God's **mercy for sinners**? Watch Zacchaeus without a command, purely from a heart tasting **God's Friendship** and loving to give love for love: **Zacchaeus stood up and said, “Look, Lord, I am going to give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone out of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”** (Luke 19:5,8–10 EHV) Ah, the sweet, sweet **Taste of Friendship with God**, the “one thing” your heart really needs. *Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed are they who take refuge in him.* Far from the tempest and storm, close to the heart of God, **Taste God's Friendship** in Christ alone...and live! Amen.