

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS VERSUS REPENTANCE

The religious leaders in Israel were shocked to see Jesus dining with tax collectors and sinners. They did not understand Jesus or His mission. In an accusatory tone, they asked the disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” At that point Jesus intervened to answer the question.

Matthew 9:12 (NKJV)

12 When Jesus heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

Those who are sick need a doctor – in this case a spiritual doctor who can heal them spiritually. Jesus is the great physician. Yes, Jesus healed physically, but we saw previously in the example of the paralytic that Jesus put the emphasis on “forgiveness” (spiritual healing) first and foremost. This is the greatest concern.

Jesus is here speaking ironically because He definitely did not see the Pharisees as spiritually healthy.

Jesus is clear that this external/legalistic/hypocritical righteousness exhibited by the Pharisees will not get you into the kingdom (cf. Matt. 5:20).

Jesus didn’t come to heal the self-righteous “healthy” but rather the humbled sick who admit they need help. Because tax collectors and sinners were more ready to acknowledge their need for a Savior Jesus could heal them (cf. Lk. 18:10-14).

The Pharisees thought themselves to be spiritually “**well**” because of their strict conformity to ceremonial cleansing. Therefore they did not see their own sinfulness (cf. Mt. 5:3).

Matthew 9:13 (NKJV)

13 But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

This phrase, “**go and learn what this means**” serves as a rebuke to those who considered themselves experts in the OT Scriptures. This serves as a rebuke for not knowing what they should have known.

Jesus here quotes from Hosea 6:6 in the OT.

Hosea 6:6 (NKJV)

6 For I desire mercy [Heb. “hesed”] and **not sacrifice**, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

The word “**mercy**” in Hosea 6:6 is the rich Hebrew word “**hesed**” which is often translated as “**loyal love**”, “**steadfast love**” or “**covenant keeping faithfulness**”. And then the verse says, “**the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.**” The key thing in context is that God really wanted them to know Him and thereby to reflect His heart.

In Hosea the Jews were facing serious disciplinary judgment because of their sin. So they thought we can just get right with God by brining lots of sacrifices and all will be well. But what they didn’t understand is that God was more interested in their loyal love than He was in their religious sacrifices. God wanted their hearts – not merely religious rituals.

Jesus summarized the entire law as loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself (cf. Mt. 22:36-40). To really live out “hesed” (loyal love) looks like this – loving God and loving others. God wanted their loyal love that not only properly honors God, but also faithfully cares about others.

For the religious legalist, it’s all about rituals and just jumping through hoops, but what God is really looking for is those who know His heart and therefore care about people. The Pharisees cared all about their legalism and ceremonies instead of people. Thus, they completely missed the point of Hosea 6:6.

Jesus here shows that the priority is the spirit of God’s moral law over and above the ceremonial law. God wants people to know Him and His hesed (loyal) love, and when they do that is reflected in love for others.

Micah 6:8 (NKJV)

8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy [Heb. “hesed”], And to walk humbly with your God?

Jeremiah 9:23–24 (NKJV)

23 Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches;

24 But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, [Heb. “hesed”] judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,” says the Lord.

What I hear Jesus saying is that God doesn't care how religious you are, how many rituals you perform, how many regulations you follow – if you don't care about people, you are completely missing what it means to truly know God. For God it's all about people – lost people who need saving.

God's unfailing love (Hesed) cares about the spiritual needs of people. That is why Jesus went on to say, ***“For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”*** This is what real spiritual faithfulness looks like. It is faithfully concerned about what concerns the heart of God.

There is irony in what Jesus is saying because there are ***“none righteous, no, not one”*** as seen in Romans 3:10. Jesus, in an ironic sense, is saying, *“You Pharisees who claim to be righteous cannot be helped because I came to call sinners to repentance.”*

You see the Pharisees were not really righteous, as noted in Matthew 5:20; but they were **self-righteous**. They thought they were righteous on their own merits and therefore did not need a Savior. Such people don't need help. Oh, they do, but they don't recognize it. Jesus can't help those people!

The only people Jesus can help are sinners! If one is to be saved, it starts by recognizing I am a sinner and I need to be saved – I need to be forgiven. Christ came to save sinners (cf. 1 Tim. 1:15).

If a person won't admit that they are a sinner, then Christ can save them. The first requirement to be saved is to acknowledge you are a sinner.

Christ came to save sinners. Christ came to call sinners to repentance. Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8). Christ didn't die for saints – He died for sinners.

The Bible talks about imputed righteousness, which means the righteousness of Christ is put to our account on the basis of faith alone (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:8-9).

Note something very important in the text here. Christ didn't hang out with sinners to partake of their sin but to reach out to them and offer them healing – not to condone their sin but to call them to repentance. That is a whole different thing than carousing with them in their sin (cf. 1 Pet. 4:3-5).

And we should note the context here was on Matthew's turf (Matthew's house) – not the sinners' turf. This was not a carousing context but a home context where the focus could truly be on Jesus.

As a footnote, observe that the older manuscripts here in Matt. 9:13 don't have the words "**to repentance**". However, this is a moot point because the parallel passage in Luke 5:32 does have it.

Luke 5:32 (NKJV)

32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

The "call" of Jesus is really the invitation of Jesus. He invites people to come to Him in repentance. This is what "mercy" looks like. It invites people to repentance out of love and concern for their souls.

The Pharisees insist that sinners become righteous to gain acceptance; Jesus insists that they be accepted as sinners – albeit repentant sinners.

We often say, "To get them saved you first have to get them lost". To appreciate the good news, people first have to know the bad news. In order to have a Savior, you first have to realize you are a sinner in need of a Savior.

Romans is the most systematic presentation of the gospel that we have in the NT. The first theme that Paul develops at length is that all people are sinners as seen in Romans 1-3. He shows that pagans are sinners, moralists are sinners, and religionists are sinners. And it builds to this

Romans 3:23 (NKJV)

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

The standard is God's very glory and we all come far short. We are all spiritually sick in need of healing; we are all sinners in need of repentance. Jesus came to call sinners to repentance. The self-proclaimed self-righteous don't need Jesus – or so they think.

Jesus is the great physician who heals the spiritually sick. But the medicine He uses (so to speak) is repentance. The way the sick get healed is through repentance.

The word repentance (Gk. metanoia) means "to change your mind". It is a change of mind about sin and about Jesus. In repentance one admits they are a sinner—a sin-sick sinner who can't heal themselves and therefore they need Jesus (the great physician) to heal them. In repentance, we

change our mind about Jesus as Savior and we change our mind about Jesus as Lord. We change our mind from rebellion to submission, recognizing Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Repentance is a complete change of mind that results in a changed life. Repentance is an essential element of true saving faith. It is only a change-of-mind kind of faith that will get you into the kingdom.

In one of the Napoleonic wars, Lord Nelson defeated the French navy. The defeated admiral brought his flagship alongside Nelson's vessel and went aboard to make his surrender. He approached Nelson smilingly, with his sword swinging at his side. **He held out his hand to the victor.**

Nelson made no response to this gesture but said quietly, **"Your sword first, sir."** Laying down the sword was a visible token of surrender. (This is the spirit of true repentance)

*"Make me a captive, Lord, And then I shall be free,
Force me to render up my sword And I shall conqueror be."
(George Matheson)*