

## **Patching Things Up, Matthew 9:9-17**

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**Jonathan M. Wilson**

### **Introduction**

In the story of Jesus' ministry told in Matthew we find that it was not his Sermon on the Mount that caused people to get angry; it was his actions afterward, in chapters 8 and 9. He touched a leper; he praised a Roman centurion for his faith; he turned away would-be disciples including one who was already a rabbi; before he healed a paralyzed man he forgave his sins; and as the last straw he accepted a tax collector for a disciple. Questions that had been raised by Pharisees and teachers were now expressed as objections, as they demand of the disciples:

“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”

The answers that Jesus makes here, and to the followers of John the Baptist, reveal the heart of the gospel. Yet, recently some parallels have been made to the issues of today which have skewed the gospel. So this morning I preach today with more than Elgin Covenant in view. Since we are surrounded and subsumed by a western culture that is rapidly changing its social and legal definitions, believers are increasingly plagued by arguments over how to read the Bible and apply it faithfully in our time. That is why I hope to share today's message more broadly.

This text speaks to our time, in the context of what proponents of a new kind of gospel want to initiate in terms of church doctrines on human sexuality. This is how the text speaks: First, Jesus confronts those who read the Bible backwards and forwards with a view of justifying themselves. Second, Jesus calls all sinners to repent, to surrender every part of their life. Third, I make this appeal to proponents of their new gospel: In his analogy of the wineskins, Jesus calls the whole Church to discern when a new doctrine or practice needs a new institution in order to

preserve rather than destroy the church as a whole.

**Let us pray:** Father in Heaven, redeem us through Jesus Christ your Son to be a people who by your Spirit testify to your forgiveness and glory. Amen.

### **1. Self-Justifiers**

When Jesus states, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners,” he is NOT paying a compliment to the Pharisees. “*Since you are so righteous on your own account, you are doing fine; you don’t need my help.*” He is not praising them, he is warning them. Their moral lifestyles have only filled them with pride; they look around and tell themselves that if God grades holiness on a curve, then they have earned God’s approval. But that is not God’s point of view. Jesus warns them to come to him just as broken and repentant as the tax collectors and prostitutes who have come to him. The Pharisees saw themselves as a cut above. Jesus, and John the Baptist before him, called people to repent of their sins, but the Pharisees justified themselves by their scrupulous attention to the Bible’s laws. By avoiding sins, they saw no need to repent.

It is common to equate the Pharisees with today’s evangelicals: First, like Pharisees, we make the Bible our guide for life and doctrine. Second, like Pharisees, evangelicals are eager for Christ to come, and enjoy speculating and arguing about Christ’s coming. Third, recall that today’s evangelicals emerged from two major streams of influence: Puritans in the Calvinist Reformed context, and Pietists in the Lutheran context. Both Puritans and Pietists were thought to be prudish, moralistic, judgmental, even hypocritical, just like the Pharisees.

Some of you remember people from the generation of your grandparents who opposed moving picture shows, card games, dancing, drinking, chewing tobacco, and chain-smoking. Two hundred years before the movies appeared, the first German Pietists were opposed to opera, for two reasons similar to the opposition of some of your grandparents to the movies: the first

reason was that tragic opera often told a story of adultery, jealousy and murder, while comic opera featured mistaken identities and attempted adultery; and the second reason was the lifestyles of the opera performers, which were rumored to be dissolute, much like the gossip rags have described about the dominant culture of the Hollywood studios for the last hundred years.

Such prudish moralism is why many evangelists and revivalists over time have risen up to remind the churches that we must not confuse moral living with being justified by God's grace alone, for if we do we make this mistake the Pharisees made we fall into the trap of justifying ourselves. Soon we close our hearts to the unawakened sinner who needs to hear the gospel. I have preached that way too: All through last year, commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, I preached and I taught that we as evangelicals must lead the way in repentance and humility, as witnesses that our sins are forgiven by grace alone, and not by anything we do.

However, there has been a subtle shift by some preachers. Now some are preaching that Jesus called and accepted tax collectors and prostitutes independent of repentance, and that those evangelicals today who still insist that sinners must repent, are like the Pharisees, while *Jesus* welcomes those who excuse themselves from repentance. These preachers quote Jesus that "God desires mercy, not sacrifice." Since the Pharisees object to mercy being shown to the tax collector, the logic is that *the call evangelicals make on sinners to repent is the same thing as Pharisaical bigotry*. That subtle shift skews the gospel.

When Jesus said he did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, that is a warning to all of us to repent, to surrender every part of ourselves to him. When some today look to the Bible in order to find a way of justifying themselves, reading it this way and that, bringing their deconstructive strategies in order to negate their need to surrender what is broken by denying that it is broken, they are doing what the Pharisees did in that they exempt themselves from

God's desire to show mercy on everyone. Repentance, not self-justification, unwraps the gift of grace. The mercy of God is ready to be poured out on every sinner *who repents*, without condition and without qualification.

## **2. Justification: Repenters**

Jesus does not call the righteous, meaning, the self-righteous. Those who do not recognize their need to repent are not invited by Jesus into his community of disciples. Jesus calls and receives sinners. Those who respond are those who recognize their own brokenness in themselves and their need for the redemptive life that only God can provide and empower. The sinner who responds to the call of Jesus to follow him, is the repenting sinner.

Life with God is on God's terms; we do not set the terms for our salvation. In the scriptures God has named sin for us, and in Christ God has shown us the power of righteousness at work by his grace, in his blood and through his Spirit. The Pharisees told themselves that they were favored by God because, by birth, they were children of Abraham. They were deceiving themselves; God can raise faithful children up from stones. You are not justified by the way you are born. There is no discipleship by birth-right, there is no Kingdom inheritance because of your ethnic or genetic or chromosomal make-up. You enter the family and inheritance and Kingdom of God by your new birth which comes when God's grace and call is operating on your heart to convict you of your sin so that you repent, so that you cry out from your convicted, broken heart that you were a sinner while you were still in your mother's womb. This conviction of sin applies universally to every person in every conscious and self-aware condition, every predilection, every challenge, every cross imposed on the flesh, along with every heritage, every background, and every culture, in every time and in every place.

There is no one who does good and does not sin. No one is self-justified, not even one,

for all alike have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. If you are looking for a loop-hole that exempts you from surrendering every part of your life and identity, you are committing the error of the self-justifying Pharisees. You need to heed those warnings in the gospels, for the sharpest and most confrontational words that Jesus has to say are directed at those who justify themselves and think they have the scriptures to back them up.

Jesus offers sinners who repent a cross today and a crown forever. His invitation to this awesome life with God is universal and unconditional. Elgin Covenant Church shall always have our doors open to all people of all kinds and conditions and struggles and crosses, so that all may hear the gospel and its call to surrender, to repent, and to enter into the journey of redemption.

### **3. Doctrine and Practice: New Skins for New Wine**

What I have preached in these first two points is the covenant in Christ's blood, the wine that fills the wine-skins of the Church as it currently exists. I am convinced that there is no other gospel. Any message that falls short of calling the whole person to acknowledge and repent as sin what God has revealed to be sin, is a message that falls short of the promise of salvation; it is a message that does not proceed from the Spirit or Heart of Christ.

There has arisen in our days another gospel which its proponents believe can coincide with the gospel presented here. This other gospel is based on reading scriptures –that I do concede, these are readers of the Bible who are coming up with this– but they read in a pharisaical way, to self-justify and to poke loop-holes in the redemptive call and urgent warnings of our loving, holy, God. So I appeal to those who cherish their new doctrine, that they apply to their efforts the statements made by Jesus about new patches and new wineskins.

The followers of John the Baptist wanted to know why the followers of Jesus did not perform the religious practice of fasting that they and the Pharisees performed. Jesus responds

about the joyful life found with himself. The promise of the Kingdom of God is not of fasting, but as feasting, specifically analogous to a wedding feast.

Then Jesus spoke of his movement as new wine for new wineskins. He said this to the followers of John, so that even John's brief ministry up to that time became as old wineskins in fitting with the analogy. I appeal to you close readers of the Bible who are proposing new doctrines of sexuality, marriage and ordination, that what you are proposing is a new wine. I concede that in fact you appeal to Jesus, so I appeal to you to see the wisdom that he speaks here. The patch that you propose to sew onto the Evangelical Covenant Church has not yet been weathered and treated and seasoned, and it will tear the garment beyond usefulness. Explore your horizons in a new work, a new institution, a new wineskin for your new gospel wine.

Many of you implore us that we should all continue together in unity. But can you not see that Jesus is more realistic? One way or another, there will be current wine that will be preserved in the wineskins that are now used. Names might change, legal ownerships might shift, but such things are outward and human. Know this, that there are current wineskins that will continue to contain the current wine, no matter how things shake out. You will call these current wineskins "old" because of the new things you want to do with marriage and ordination and such. So in your narrative go right ahead and call me and those of my ilk the "old wineskins." Others might resent it, but I have been called worse things, and I expect I shall be.

## **Conclusion**

I know that some of you agree with every word and the spirit in which this was preached. Others probably agree with the general drift but are wishing I had been softer in tone. There may be some who wish I held the other opinion, and preached a different gospel than the one I know.

I do not know what the future holds for Elgin Covenant. I have been saying to the council

that our vision and initiatives for our future always seem to be stymied or slowed down, and we may be discovering the reasons why in God's own wisdom. Perhaps we will need to realign our allegiances in a future that is closer than we want it to be. Or not. No doubt that I even mention the possibility will make some of you feel anxious. I do not feel all that anxious, and if my tone has communicated that I am anxious, I apologize to you. I am not anxious, because I believe that no matter what God has in store, we here will choose to be faithful as we discern the best path to being a church in mission for the gospel. I believe that we will not cease to proclaim the Covenant of peace with God sealed in Christ's blood for the forgiveness *of sins*.

I am gone next week, to be part of pre-Midwinter actions of the Covenant Church for incoming ordinands. What Pastor Greg and myself may have to report after the Midwinter on February 4, and then what the preaching visit from our superintendent Danny Martinez on the 11<sup>th</sup> may entail, might give shape to the actions of our own Annual Meeting on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Or not. More likely we will still be in a season in which we are called to wait on God at least until June, when I am slated to serve the Annual Meeting of the whole denomination as Parliamentarian. It is partly because of that role that I have spoken here and now in this way. My role at the annual meeting will prohibit me from speaking out, and I need you all to know that. I will not be able to speak up even if I end up facilitating, from a legal stand-point, actions from the floor with which I will disagree absolutely and without qualification.

So let us wait on God and discern the Spirit and Body of Christ as people who are repentant, who walk humbly before God and in unconditional love toward our neighbors. Let us testify by our lives, by our preaching and by our witness, that we are forgiven sinners cleansed by the blood of Christ, and that we look forward to our final redemption in glory, for this is our only gospel and our truest, best hope. Amen.