

Matthew 9:9-13

Americans spend billions of dollars each year on health care. Preventing disease, treating disease...vitamins, medicine, surgeries—everyone wants to be healthy. It may be a little surprising, therefore, to learn from our text for today that it's actually better for us to be sick. In fact, as we look at these words of our Lord, we shall see that it is essential for our salvation that we be, not healthy, but sick.

Our text begins with Jesus calling Matthew to discipleship. That may not surprise us, but it should. At least it surprised and shocked the people who witnessed it. Jesus had said the words "Follow Me," before—that wasn't surprising. But He had never said them in a tax office to a man whose job it was to collect taxes. It's not that the Jews had it in for tax collectors because they were tax collectors. A man who became a tax collector was a traitor to his own people. To get the job in the first place, you had to pay a hefty sum of money to the Romans. Then the Romans expected you to pay them a certain amount of money each year. But you could charge more, much more than that, from the people in your region. You, as a tax collector, got rich at the people's expense...and worse, you were in league with the hateful Roman invaders. You were on the side of the enemy against your own people. What would you think of an American citizen who told Osama Bin Laden secrets about our government—about our people, and was paid millions for it? That's what the Jews thought of Matthew.

And Jesus walks up to his tax office and says to him, "Follow Me." Doesn't Jesus know what kind of man Matthew was? Later, at a banquet, Jesus sat down to eat with Matthew and other tax collectors, and also with notorious sinners such as filthy prostitutes. Doesn't Jesus know what kind of people these were? We can understand why the Pharisees were upset. They murmured to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with the tax collectors and sinners?"

We've all heard the phrase, "you are what you eat." But what about this one: "you are with whom you eat"? To dine with someone brought you to his level. The Pharisees were very careful, therefore, about with whom they ate and associated. When Jesus chose, knowingly, to eat with tax collectors and sinners, He was lowering Himself to their level in society. Why did Jesus do this?

Because that's what God is all about—not one who rises above, but who lowers Himself. He came to serve, not to be served. He came to save—to call sinners to repentance and faith. Jesus wasn't eating with these people to approve of their sinful way of life. He ate with them to call them away from their way of life to the Christian life.

That's why He eats with you. Later in the service you will come up at Jesus' invitation to dine with Him in His Holy Supper. By eating with you He lowers Himself to your level. He knowingly, willingly, lovingly chooses to recline at table with you, and even to be the Food that you eat. As He ate with Matthew and his group of outcasts, so the Lord desires to break bread with you.

In this meal He calls you to the Christian life. He forgives your past and gives you the strength to live for Him. Because it is true—you are what you eat! As you eat His body

and blood for you, you are God's holy child—righteous, as Christ is righteous; beloved of God, as is Christ of His Father. It is Christ who now lives in you as you feed upon Him.

We could say it in this way, because Jesus does—you come to His Table because you are sick. If you weren't sick, you wouldn't come. You wouldn't even be here at all. "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician," Jesus says, "but those who are sick." A person who is healthy has no need for a doctor, no need for medicine, no need for a hospital. A sick person needs all these things.

Are you healthy, or sick? Jesus is not speaking about physical health. He is referring to your spiritual essence; to who you really are inside; to how you stand with God. The Pharisees did not believe they were sick—they believed they were quite healthy. Was Jesus dining with them? No, they had no use for Him. Why did they need a Savior from sin when they did not believe they were spiritually sick with sin? They thought they stood right with God. They were decent people—better than most. Doctors are for sick people, and Saviors are for sinners.

Do you know that many people today see the church, not as a hospital for sinners, but as a health club—a place where they can go to exercise their faith—a place where the "coach"...the group leader...the minister, can encourage them in their walk with God? And many churches today are set up in just this way—not as hospitals, but as health clubs or gyms. There are numerous programs designed to meet the "felt needs" of the members. There is no offensive, negative language such as "poor, miserable sinner" talk—no medicine either—no "I, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you all your sins" speech. Just "coaching" and encouraging—talk like, "you can do it...you can do better...God will help you if you just try."

The music, too, is music to "exercise by." Nothing too theological, just pep rally stuff. Always positive...and its focus is on you—what you can do, how you can live.

But here's the problem...sick people don't need a health club, they need a hospital; they need a doctor; they need real medicine. A Pharisee who doesn't think he's sick enough, will seek out, not the life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ, but a gym where he can work out his own way to God.

But Jesus' words are clear, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." The Pharisees thought they were righteous—not all that sick with sin, as were the tax collectors and prostitutes. That's why they had no use for Jesus. Who needs the Great Physician when your sins aren't all that bad? Who needs His Baptism, His Sacred Meal, when you already stand right with God?

Friend, I hope you know how sick you really are. I pray you meant it when you said with me, "I, a poor, miserable sinner..." If you're here just to "exercise" your faith, then you're in the wrong place. If you're just here for a "pep talk," well, that's not what you're going to get. Because the Great Physician, Jesus Christ is here in His Word and Sacraments. He is not here to "encourage" you. He is here to forgive you—to take away the filth of your sins and give you His innocence. He is here in Word, bread and wine to give you the real medicine your sin-sick soul needs. He is here to take your death and give you life—His life; the life He purchased for all sinners by His death and resurrection

You don't get a pat on the back in the hospital—you get what you need so that you don't die, but live. The Bible tells us that we are sick unto death with sin. And that's why Jesus is here. Matthew was sick unto death, and so were his friends—other cheats, swindlers, and prostitutes. And that's why Jesus ate with them. He didn't say, "You're too sinful for the likes of Me." Would a hospital turn away a person who was deathly ill? Your Savior will never turn you away. "I desire mercy," He says. He desires, above all else, to show mercy to sinners. That's why He sacrificed Himself on the cross for us. So that in water and Word, bread and wine, He can shower you with His merciful forgiveness.

Everyone is sick with sin unto death. Most don't believe it. But you're here today in church—Jesus' hospital for sinners—and here is the medicine you need: You are forgiven of all your sins. You will not die forever. You will live. Eternal life is yours in Jesus Christ. Amen.