

There are many instances where deserving families are helped out by the generosity of others. Maybe it is the family that has lost everything in a house fire. Maybe it is the young cancer victim who is granted her special wish. Maybe it is a single mom who is working several jobs to take care of her children and her elderly parents. In each of these instances, we are reminded how these people deserve this unexpected help. It really touches our heart to see such generosity given to those who could truly use this help as they are working hard to provide for their families, but are just going through a real tough time. On the flip side, we truly get irritated when we see families playing the system, refusing to work and relying on welfare and anything else they might be able to get for free. Such people we do not have a great deal of sympathy for and do not want to do anything special for them — at least not like we would want to do for a “deserving” family. As we consider ourselves standing before our Lord, we might like to think of ourselves as a person “deserving” of His love and favor. And yet, in the Word of God which is before us, we see that JESUS HELPS THE UNDESERVING. 1) He knows how much they do need His help, and 2) He gives them the healing they truly need.

The setting for this account was early in Jesus’ public ministry. He was still gathering His inner circle of disciples. One day Jesus “**saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.**” (9) As a tax collector, Matthew sat along one of the major roads, and collected a tax on the goods which was being transported along that road. Since he was working for the Roman government, his own people considered him a traitor. And since the normal procedure for tax collectors was to cheat by collecting more than was required, he was really considered the scum of the earth by the “respected” people of Israel.

It was to such a person that Jesus approached and called him to follow Him as one of His closest disciples. Matthew must have known something of Jesus before this because we hear that immediately he left his position and his possessions to become a full time follower of Jesus. Jesus’ message must have had a powerful impact on his life for him to make such a drastic change.

This privilege of following Jesus was so important that Matthew wanted to celebrate. So he threw a party, with Jesus being the guest of honor. Since Matthew was not allowed to associate with the “respected” people, all of his friends were also the outcasts of society. So these were the very ones whom he invited to this party. “**While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and ‘sinners’ came and ate with him and his disciples.**” (10) Jesus was pleased with this, because His Word had so touched Matthew’s heart that he wanted to share what He had found with all of his friends. Jesus did not condone Matthew’s previous sins, nor did He approve of the sins which these others had committed. But still Jesus welcomed them because He knew that they needed help — help which only He could provide for them.

It is not recorded for us what Jesus said to all of these people who came to this party, but no doubt Jesus said the same things which He always said to those who were sinners. First He would call them to repent, or feel sorry for the sins which they had committed, and then would announce to them that all of their sins had been blotted out or forgiven. Then, if one of them allowed that message of forgiveness to touch his heart, then there would follow a natural change of life-style. Only after hearing of the forgiveness which Jesus offers will a person desire to put away all sins of the past and lead a life worthy of the One Who forgave all his sins.

But the Pharisees did not understand this. They felt that Jesus was showing His true colors by associating with all of these sinful people. “**When the Pharisees saw this, they asked the disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’**” (11) They assumed that birds of a feather flock together. Therefore Jesus could not really be the One sent by God to be their Savior. No “good” person would associate with people like this. They considered themselves to be better than Jesus because they refused to associate with such sinners.

It was for this reason that Jesus used the illustration of a doctor. Jesus said, **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** (12-13) A doctor who refuses to see anyone who is sick is not going to help anyone. By definition, a doctor is going to be seeing people who are sick. So it is also with Jesus. If He is going to help anyone, the ones who need the help are those who are sinners, those who have the problem for which He alone has the cure. So it is fitting and proper that Jesus take His message of forgiveness to those who are sinners. That is why the saying is so fitting that a church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners. We keep coming back to the Lord’s house to get patched up from losing our battles with the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. Jesus gives us the balm of healing that comes from the forgiveness of sins so that we can go back out into the world again.

Jesus’ quotation from the Old Testament may not be as easily understood as His illustration of a doctor, but it really teaches the same lesson. The Pharisees were very careful not to do anything that was against the law. In fact, they made many additional laws which went beyond what God gave to Moses, and were religious in keeping each and every one of those laws. That made them feel that they were superior to other people, and therefore deserving of favor in God’s sight. It also led them to look down with disgust on all of those other people who did not quite live up to their standards, that is, those who were undeserving. This was the whole reason that they thought it was terrible for Jesus to be associating with sinners. They felt that if they were going through the outward motions of being God’s holy children, that was all that was required of them. So Jesus reminded them that God desired mercy, not sacrifice. It was easier to bring a sacrifice and go through the motions of worship than it was to make a change in one’s life that truly reflected the attitudes and emotions that were pleasing to God. So through the prophets, the Lord reminded the people that He was not interested just in the outward sacrifices that they brought, but in the attitude of their hearts when they brought those sacrifices. The Lord always looks upon the heart, not just on the outward actions.

Those who feel that they are healthy, those that feel that they have no sins which need forgiveness, will see no reason to go the great physician for the healing which He is offering to them. We need to be on guard for the times when we begin to act like those Pharisees who feel smug and self-confident because of who we think we are and how we act more like Christians than other people. If we begin to feel like we are deserving of God’s love and forgiveness, then we better take a good close look at ourselves, for we would then be acting as though we did not need a Savior.

On the other hand, those who feel ashamed and not worthy to come into the presence of the Lord, those who feel like God would not want them because of their sins, those are the ones who will be willing to accept the healing which comes from the blood which our Savior shed on the cross. Such people are the ones whom Jesus seeks.

May we realize that we are those poor, miserable sinners who do not deserve any of God’s blessings, but who come humbly seeking the healing which only He can offer to us through the forgiveness of sins. Then may we not become conceited and look down on others as though we are better than they are. We are not to condone their sins, but we are to reach out to them with the same message of forgiveness which we received. Jesus has come as the great physician for all who need the healing for their sins.