

Along the main highway, Matthew sat in his tax booth all alone. It was just him, the Roman guard at his side, and stacks and stacks of dirty money. Those columns of coins almost looked like the bars of a prison cell confining Matthew. Take that, along with the guard, and Matthew's solitude, and he might as well have been a prisoner.

After all, as a tax collector by occupation, he was despised by his own people, the Jews. To them, he worked for the enemy, Gentile Rome. And they could see the greed in his eyes, as he would openly steal from them. Here's what he would do—he'd inflate the amount of taxes that they owed and would then skim off the top and pocket it for himself. He was crooked, a cheat, a traitor, a *sinner*. So, they rejected him, shunned him, turned their backs on him. In a word, they *judged* him.

Imagine poor Matthew though, judged so. Even if he did repent, come to see the error of his ways, want to make a change—would they ever let him? Was this really who he was—was this his destiny—was there any hope for him? Couldn't he, somehow, some way, live this down and move on? It sure didn't seem like it. In the world where Matthew lived, there were winners and losers, the blessed and the cursed, the righteous and sinners. It was a world in black and white—and it was clear to everyone where he belonged. He was judged.

Now, I know he's never mentioned in the Gospel text, but it was for people like Matthew that Jesus speaks these words today. Jesus says, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven." In a world full of such cruelty, where everyone is so quick to judge and condemn and so slow to forgive, Jesus reminds His audience—both then and now—that we're not so different from folks like Matthew.

"Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye," Jesus says, "but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye."

If anyone saw a speck of sawdust in Matthew's eye, that was nothing compared to the giant log sticking out of their own eye socket. For we might see a person's single sin outwardly, but what about the countless sins each of us have hidden away within our hearts? Yes, we're a lot like Matthew—maybe even worse.

D'ya see what Jesus is doing here? He's leveling the playing field, showing that nobody can justify themselves before God. No one is righteous, no not one, but all have sinned—no exceptions—and fallen short of the glory of God. It's not that there are some who are good and others who are bad, but all are equally guilty in the eyes of God's Law. Jesus is here saving the first-century Jews from what we might call their legalism.

But legalism today . . . well, I'm not so sure legalism is really the problem anymore. I mean, sure, it raises its ugly head now and again, but we don't find too many self-righteous mounting their high horses and acting holier-than-thou—not like what Jesus brushed up against. After all, people nowadays have no trouble admitting their flaws. In fact they're quick to use them as an excuse, "Well, I'm only human," "Nobody's perfect." No, for us twenty-first century Americans, it's not so much legalism anymore, as it is antinomianism—"anti" meaning *against*, and "nomian" from the Greek word "nomos" means *law*. Antinomianism is a kind of lawlessness—the polar opposite of legalism.

And the way it works out today is like this. Because we're all in the same boat as flawed individuals, nobody has the right to hold anyone accountable for their actions anymore. You often hear, "Who are you to judge?" when somebody wants to use a get-out-of-jail-free card. They play it in order to deflect their guilt, and to strangely justify themselves. The reasoning goes, well if we're all just as guilty—no one's better than another—then neither does anyone have the right to judge someone else's behavior. You'll even hear Jesus' words today thrown back at Christians when they call somebody out for some sin. Legalism might still be alive and kicking today, but it's nothing compared to antinomianism.

But here's the trouble with antinomianism—it doesn't hold up in the New Testament. No, even with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and all, the Bible still says that the Law of God applies—after all, Jesus came to fulfill the Law, not abolish it.

Galatians 5 has this to say: "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

1 Corinthians 6 also tells us, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor those who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

And after getting a glimpse into heaven, John concludes his Book of Revelation this way: "Outside [the gates of God's city] are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."

[Gulp!] So, make no mistake—while Jesus speaks out against legalism in this morning's Gospel, God's Word also speaks out against antinomianism.

So, with legalism on the one hand, and antinomianism on the other, where's a person to turn? Well, the only place left to turn—Christ. Remember, He says today, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." Your Father is *indeed* merciful. He has shown you mercy by sending His Son.

If legalism's caught you, if instead of righteousness all you see is your sin, well, Jesus has done something about that. While the Law had its finger pointed at you, He climbed His cross to stand in its way. The Law then pointing at Him, it was Jesus who was caught in the crosshairs. "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree," and so God's Son mercifully took on your curse. Like a human shield, it was He who was judged for your sins—He was condemned for your sake. It was with Him that the Law exacted its pound of flesh—or should I say, 180 lbs. or so of flesh. And so divine justice has been served. Your sins have been judged with Christ, the verdict's already been handed down—you are NOT GUILTY! There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. In Him, you are justified.

But if you've gotten caught up in antinomianism, well, Jesus has done something about that too. Where you've been lawless, He walked in the way of God's Law for you. Before He ever died for you, He spent all those years beforehand living for you. Every step He took, your Savior walked in the way of God's commands. He kept them completely on your behalf, never breaking them once, but fulfilling them. His life was one of perfection and holiness. Yes, Jesus has taken away your sins, but He's also given you His impeccable record. Your sins are His, and His righteousness is yours. Again, you are justified in Him—no need to ever justify yourself. All that, forgiveness from sin and the gift of righteousness before God, is what Jesus means when He says that your Father is merciful.

So, now you know what it must've been like for Matthew, imprisoned at his tax booth, when such mercy came to call! All Matthew had wanted was a second chance, to be cut loose from his past, and to begin again. On his own, that would've been impossible. But one fateful day when God's mercy incarnate, the Savior Jesus Christ, walked up to his booth, Matthew's life was forever changed. All it took was one little "Follow me!" and Matthew just knew things would never be the same. He sprang up from his table and burst from his cell, and set out as a free man to follow Jesus. Never do we find him looking back, returning to his old life again. Instead, he found a new life in Christ, following in His footsteps on a better way.

And today, you and I might as well be called Matthew. Because right now Matthew's story becomes ours. No matter what sin confines you, no matter what kind of prison you find yourself in this morning, your Savior walks right up to you today and calls, "Follow me!" I mean, here He comes up to this altar—listen—"Follow me!" He says. His body and blood beckon, "Follow me!" . . . "Follow me out of the old into the new!" . . . "Follow me out of slavery into freedom!" . . . "Follow me into forgiveness, into a life of mercy!"

07.14.2019  
Fourth Sunday after Trinity  
Luke 6:36-42

Rev. David V. Miller  
Lutheran Church of the Ascension  
Atlanta, GA

Today He calls us out of legalism, into a better way. We follow in His footsteps, being merciful, as our Father has been merciful to us. Judging not, because we're judged not. Condemning not, because you and I are not condemned. Forgiving, because we are forgiven. And giving, because God has given to us.

But He also calls us out of a life of antinomianism. A life of lawlessness, after all, is a life of sin. It is a life of rejecting the mercy that has been shown to us in Christ Jesus. It is a life that prefers the imprisonment of iniquity to the freedom of forgiveness. A life that despises God, because it despises His Law. Rather, having come to know such a merciful God, how could we not walk in His footsteps and follow His commands? How could we not love His Law—trusting that His ways are better than our ways, believing that it's actually for our good? Matthew didn't turn back, because he knew he had something far more precious than anything sin could offer. Let's not turn back either.

Instead, Matthew would go on to write a Gospel. To warn people of legalism and also antinomianism, but most of all, to point them to the mercy shown to us in Christ our Savior. Like Matthew, Jesus calls to you and I today, "Follow me!" And He sends us out like Matthew to write a Gospel with our own lives, to make the words jump right off the page. To bring these stories to life in our own time by demonstrating the goodness of God's Law and the mercy of Jesus Christ. Just think, through the Gospel spelled out in your life, the voice of Jesus is still calling out. It's an invitation to everyone, "Follow me!"

So c'mon, let's go!