

To Call Sinners to Repentance

Matthew 9:10-13

We are in our Advent series and we're looking at statements Jesus made about why he came to earth. To help us understand the statement we're going to look at today, I want us to think a little bit about Disney World in Florida. Most of us are familiar with Disney World with its resort and theme parks, but not many are familiar with the plan Walt Disney originally had in mind, which was a lot different.

I learned these things in an article by Alex Krieger, a Research Professor at Harvard University. (Picture) Disney had acquired 27,400 acres of land in central Florida, which is 43 square miles, and in 1966 he announced what he intended to do with that property. Rather than just a resort and theme parks, he envisioned the creation of a whole new, futuristic, utopian city that would be home to 20,000 residents. He called the city EPCOT, which stood for "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow." There would be a 1,000-acre office park in the city for developing new technologies, and every household in EPCOT would be the first to receive and test the products before releasing them for the rest of the world.

Disney World would also have an airport so people could fly directly into it, along with a "vacation land" to provide resort accommodations for visitors. There would be a central arrival complex that would include a 30-story hotel and convention center, with the downtown featuring a weather-protected zone of themed shops. Workers would live in a ring of high-rise apartment buildings near the downtown area. Then there would be a park belt and recreational zone outside of that, followed by low-density, cul-de-sac neighborhoods that would house the majority of residents. Everything you needed was right there.

Another feature was that there would be no automobiles in the city. People would travel on a high-speed monorail while there would be a vast system underground that would accommodate trucks and service functions and where cars could arrive and park without being seen.

So Disney envisioned the perfect city of the future where people would essentially live and work in a controlled bubble that was managed by a single authority. EPCOT would have everything they needed to be comfortable and happy and they'd never have to leave.

You may or may not want to live in that kind of bubble, but the reality is that most of us actually do live in bubbles of our own making, and I think we do so without realizing it. We naturally form a community around us and try to live a life that's comfortable, safe and secure. We surround ourselves with people we like and are familiar with – family and friends who do similar things and think and believe like we do. We do things we're comfortable with and enjoy and we avoid things and people we don't like or who are different.

We can live most of our lives in our bubbles, and there are certainly benefits to them. There's safety, security, community, support – all things we need – but we need to see there can be a downside as well, especially for those who choose to follow Christ and want to live lives that are pleasing to God. And this morning as we look at what Jesus said about why he came to earth, we're going to see why we can't just stay in our bubbles if we want to follow him and be part of his kingdom.

Jesus was still early on in his ministry when he made this statement. He had just called a Jewish tax-collector named Levi to follow him and be his disciple, which was shocking because tax collectors were hated, looked down on, and considered to be traitors. And yet, Jesus called him, and he followed. Soon afterward, Levi (who later became Matthew) held a great feast in honor of Jesus, and that's where this story takes place.

Read Matthew 9:10-13.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Luke adds: "to repentance." (Same story in Mark 2:15-17 and Luke 5:29-32)

So the Pharisees had a real problem with what Jesus was doing. They would never recline at table and eat with tax collectors and sinners. To do so indicated personal acceptance and friendliness, and that was the opposite of how they felt. These were people who disregarded the Law of Moses and the Pharisees were against them. They felt that a righteous person should keep their distance from such sinners so they would not become unclean because of their impurities.

The Pharisees were living in a bubble – a religious bubble, and they wanted nothing to do with those outside of it. They wanted to stay safe, secure, comfortable, surrounded by people who thought, lived, and believed like they did. So they kept away from sinners and tax collectors. And they were expecting Jesus to do the same, especially if he was a Rabbi and possibly the Messiah. So when Jesus sat down and ate with Levi and all his sinful friends, they were very surprised and did not approve. Why would he do that?

Jesus gives the answer in verses 12-13. He makes 3 statements. He starts with a metaphor to show them what he was doing: *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”* So he’s drawing a parallel between the sinners he was eating with and the sick who need a doctor. Just like those who are sick need a doctor, those who are sinners need a Savior. He was eating with sinners because they were sick and needed him. They needed healing from their sins. They needed forgiveness. They needed to be restored to God so they could be saved.

But the Pharisees were not concerned about the salvation of “sinners.” They were concerned about their own righteousness, which is why they did the opposite of what Jesus did. They were staying inside their bubble. So he challenged them in verse 13 to go and find the meaning of one of their own Scriptures. Hosea 6:6 says, *“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”* If they had studied that, they would have found that in that prophecy, God was confronting Israel for offering sacrifices according to the law but neglecting to show love and mercy which was far more important. He was making it clear to them what God wanted most was mercy, not sacrifice.

As Israel's religious leaders, Jesus was showing the Pharisees that it's much more important for them to show mercy to sinners who need salvation than to stay inside their comfortable bubbles of perceived righteousness. "It's the sick who need a doctor, and God wants you to show mercy to them."

And the last thing he said was a statement about why he had come: "*For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*" Jesus came to earth to call sinners to repentance. He was in a really great bubble in heaven. He was with the Father and Holy Spirit, in perfect holiness, joy and unity, all the divine glory was his – safe, happy, comfortable, fulfilled in every way. Why on earth would Jesus ever leave that bubble? Jesus said he came to call sinners to repentance – people like Levi and his friends.

There's a similar story in Luke 19 where Jesus reached out to another tax collector named Zaccheus and told him he was going to stay at his house. And the people responded just like the Pharisees in our story. In that situation Jesus said: "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*" (Luke 19:10) He was saying the same thing. He left his home in heaven for a reason: to seek and save the lost; to call sinners to repentance; to show mercy, and because the sick needed a doctor.

Paul writes about what Jesus did in leaving his bubble in Philippians 2:6-8: "*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*"

Aren't you glad Jesus left his bubble? During Christmas we celebrate what these verses are talking about – that the son of God willingly emptied himself and came to earth. Has born in a manger, grew to be a man, ministered among sinners like Levi and all his friends, called them to repentance, and then died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin. If he didn't do that, we would have lived out our days here on earth and been met in the end with the shock and reality of death and condemnation. We were separated from God and headed for eternal judgment, but God had mercy and sent his Son to save us. Because he stepped out of his bubble, those of us who are trusting and following him will be saved.

So we who follow Jesus are recipients of his great mercy, and now, rather than living out our lives in our own Christian bubbles of safety, comfort, and security, that can become a lot like the Pharisees, we have been called to do what he did – to step outside our bubble, show mercy to those who don't yet follow Jesus, and point them to him. It's ok to go back to the bubble to get refreshed and refueled, but it's not ok to stay there and never come out. We need to willingly step outside of our bubbles for the sake of his kingdom.

When I was a senior at Crown College I realized that I was living in a Christian bubble. I was surrounded by Christians and rarely had interactions with unbelievers. God moved in my heart and convinced me to get a job down the street at Taco Bell so I would interact with lost people. I didn't need the job or the money; I just knew God wanted me to get out of my bubble.

So are you living your life like the Pharisees or like Jesus? Are you reaching out to unbelievers and interacting with people who need him? Or are you trying to stay safe and comfortable and keep to yourself and people like you?

Are you acting like the Pharisees toward unbelievers around you? How do you treat your unbelieving neighbors? People who work with you who are different than you? People at school? The LGBTQ+ community? A lot of Christians act like Pharisees toward the people on the other side of the political isle. Are you? How would Jesus treat these people in your life? He'd probably eat with them so he could share the kingdom with them and call them to repentance.

Not only does Jesus want us to celebrate his coming to earth to save us from our sins, he also wants us to do what he did and carry on his mission and ministry. He showed us what to do, and wants us to be like him as we live our lives here on earth and look forward to his coming again.