

Monday, March 1

Today's Reading: Matthew Chapter 8

Today's Devotional Message is by Pastor Jeff Thackston

"As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him." Matthew 9:5-6

Have you ever felt unwanted? Have you ever felt unloved? Have you ever felt like your life does not count? I think that for the vast majority of us, we would have to be honest and say, "yes". At some point in your life, you have probably felt all those things. I pray that you don't feel them now, but if you do ... I have some encouragement for you.

There were a couple of classes of people in Jesus' world that were pretty much outcasts ... lepers and tax collectors. Lepers were outcasts because of a highly contagious, devastating disease, that the ancient world (and to a huge extent the modern world) did not know how to deal with.

Tax collectors on the other hand were totally reprehensible. Can you imagine going to a party, reaching out to the guy beside you, ask him what he does for a living and his reply is, "Oh, not much, I launder money for Al'Qaeda." Oh ... really ... you make sure that our biggest enemy is well financed? That's what you do for a living ... and you can sleep with that. That is what a tax collector was. He was hated. He represented everything that was bad about being in an occupied country. You were not even subservient to Rome, but you had to pay them money for the privilege of being occupied. And to top it all off, it was like a loan shark whose "Big Boss" did not care how much was taken as long as he got his fixed amount. So most of the tax collectors were both rich and crooks. I have this idea in my head, where people today might use the phrase, "well I am not perfect, but at least I am not a murderer or anything". I think that back then they would have said something similar, "Well, at least I am not a tax collector".

OK, that's the background. So chapter 8, what does Christ do ... he heals a leper. Look at chapter 8, verse 3. "He stretched out his hand and touched him". Not only did Christ heal a leper, but he did something that would have gotten him kicked out of church. He touched this diseased person. Jesus was now what the Jewish faith would call "ceremonially impure," or in short, Christ should have been banned from worship. But Jesus did not care. He healed this person and went on to the next. A centurion. Can you imagine again. This is a invading, conquering, occupying force. A centurion was the guy who probably led the force to conquer this part of the world. You don't get rewarded with a command and a house, if you have not done something to earn it. So it could have been this was one of the soldiers who helped keep Judea occupied. Not a popular guy. Yet Jesus went into the house and helped his little girl.

Jesus, also healed Peter's mother-in-law in this text. So as not to take any cheap shots about mother-in-laws, I will not put them in this list of "outcasts" that are healed or called in these passages. I do find it interesting that Matthew chose to include it in this passage. Next we come to a demon possessed man, another outcast, and then on to Matthew, the ultimate traitor. The money man for Caesar. Think about the show Seinfeld and say the name "Matthew" with the same intensity and disdain as Jerry would say the name, "Newman".

Then look at Jesus ... he took this outcast of outcasts and made him one of his own. Wow ... what love, what mercy, what forgiveness! Now fast forward 2000 years. Think about what you have done, think about the person you are, think about what people want to think about you, and look yourself right in the mirror and say, "Jesus says it doesn't matter." "Jesus says, I am worthy." "Jesus says, I am loved." "Jesus says, I am forgiven."

That is the message of this passage that I want to share. It does not matter where you have been, what you have done, how you have messed you your life up to this point ... it just doesn't matter. Jesus will love you and forgive you and will ask you to simply, "follow Him". Will you do that today?