

Everyone Belongs at Jesus' Table

Matthew 9:9-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

September 21, 2025/Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

As you likely know by now, we are spending most of our fall sermons reflecting on themes from a book that I read on my sabbatical called *The Big Relief* by David Zahl.

We are pondering “the urgency of grace for a worn-out world” and exploring the ways in which the gospel offers the relief that we most need.

Today's theme comes from chapter two of the book which is called “Favour: The Relief from Rejection.”

I have to confess at the outset that I struggled with this sermon. When I was planning the fall series and saw this chapter heading, I thought, “Oh, that will be a relatively easy one to preach on!”

But all week I struggled to know how to approach this sermon. Rejection is such a painful topic. It touches us in some very personal, very vulnerable places.

I think we have all had experiences with rejection in our lives, whether it's in the world of relationships or being passed over for a job or a scholarship or not being recognized for what we contribute or feeling like nobody really sees or understands us fully or just feeling plain old unwanted or unliked or ignored.

Some of us perhaps even feel rejected by God.

Rejection is extremely painful. In the first sermon in this series, I said that we are always chasing a sense of “being enough.” When we are rejected—or even when we *feel* rejected—it is easy to believe that we aren't enough, aren't worthy, don't have value.

So, what to say about rejection? How does the gospel address what can often be an open wound in our lives?

I decided to start where I often start when I'm thinking of how the gospel meets us in our most painful places. The jail.

I don't just do this because I'm looking for an interesting story to hold your attention. I think the jail is just the human condition in its starkest form.

And what I see in the jail is people who have struggled with feeling rejected their whole lives.

I saw this once again last week. I went in for an hour on Wednesday to cover for Ch. Anna who had an appointment. So, I was leading a chapel for a unit that I don't usually see.

Thankfully, they were doing the same thing that I do with the remand guys on Mondays. Watching and discussing *The Chosen*.

I've referred to this show before. I know some of you have watched it. Others aren't fans. I get it. The show isn't perfect. It creates storylines that aren't in Scripture. It can feel, for lack of a better word, a little too "American" at times.

But at the jail, it's a great tool. I've tried other formats and other resources, but the guys always want to come back to this show.

Many of them struggle to read or can't read at all. Their attention spans are short. *The Chosen* is a good way into the story of Jesus for them.

At any rate, on the day I went in to cover for Anna, the guys were watching an episode where Matthew plays a prominent role.

The opening scene flashes back to a scene before Jesus calls Matthew when he is still a tax collector. Matthew accompanies a Roman official to his father's house to collect on an outstanding debt.

His parents are shocked and not at all happy to see him. His choice of occupation is bad enough—a Jewish collaborator with Roman imperial authorities would have been a social

outcast among his own people. But he has the nerve to show up at his own parents' house?!

A difficult scene ensues, one that ends with Matthew's father disowning him, saying "I have no son."

Fast forward to the end of the episode. Both Matthew and his father have encountered Jesus in their own way (and unbeknownst to each other).

Matthew comes home desperate for somewhere to stay, and his father opens the door.

Matthew greets his father formally, by his first name. He expects his father to still be hostile to him, but maybe he's hoping he can at least have a bed. There's a bit of a pause and then his dad looks at him and says, simply, "Son."

This is a scene that often affects the guys in a powerful way. Often there are tears. Many of them know all too well what it means to be rejected by a father or a parent.

For some, the rejection goes back right to the beginning of their lives. Some never knew their parents. Some have been neglected and discarded by all the adults in their lives that should have cared for them. All of them have made choices in their lives have led to broken relationships and the severing of connections.

And they all know what it means to feel rejected by society.

This scene of a rejected son being welcomed back is one that I think many of them long for, even if they don't always say it out loud.

This scene isn't in the actual gospel of Matthew, obviously. But it's not hard to imagine it could be.

Matthew would have been well-acquainted with rejection, if not from his parents, then certainly from the rest of his Jewish community.

Tax-collectors were hated for obvious reasons. They would have been social outcasts, viewed with a combination of suspicion and contempt. At least nine times in the gospels (including in today's passage) they are lumped together with "sinners."

This is who Jesus calls to be his disciple, a member of his closest inner circle.

And no sooner does Jesus call Matthew to follow him than he's hanging out with Matthew's friends, breaking bread with the social and moral outcasts of the day.

People who would also have been well-acquainted with rejection.

The Pharisees are not fans of this. Not at all.

They have been steeped in a religious system that has taught them that sin is like a contaminant.

The entire Jewish sacrificial system operated on the assumption that ritual purity mattered deeply. Contact with the wrong things and the wrong people could leave you defiled, according to many at the time.

Sin was like a disease. It could be "caught," in some ways. It needed to be avoided at all costs.

Lines needed to be kept very clear and clearly defined. There were "sinners" and "righteous" and the blurring of boundaries was not welcome.

This was the social and religious world in which Jesus sat down at a table with tax collectors and sinners.

And in so doing, says something profound about each person at the table. *I do not reject you. You have value no matter what the world says. The labels you've picked up from others don't matter to me. You are loved despite your failures. You belong.*

The word David Zahl uses in his book to contrast with rejection is "favour."

And it is profoundly good news that God's favour bears very little resemblance to ours. We tend to favour the strong, the wealthy, the competent, the beautiful, the influential, the righteous. The ones who are winning at life, or so we think.

God's favour is far more generous and expansive. It sees what we easily ignore. And It rests on all of us.

It is anchored and secure in the truth that God loves and pursues the lost, the rejected, the sick in need of a physician.

And it's important to say that Jesus doesn't say, "don't worry about changing anything or pursuing something better and truer in your life."

A physician that didn't bother to treat the sickness wouldn't be much of a physician! Jesus doesn't intend to leave our sin untouched! Transformation and healing are always Jesus' goals.

But it starts with mercy, with welcome, with unearned favour.

This is what the Pharisees could not (or would not) grasp. And to them, quoting the prophet Hosea (i.e., making sure he's speaking their language), Jesus says, "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

What does he mean?

"Mercy," we understand, even if we aren't always very good at extending it. But what about "sacrifice?"

Well, I think Jesus is referring to Israel's sacrificial system. Historically, an animal had to be sacrificed for sin, whether a goat, a dove, a ram, whatever. It varied according to the nature of the sins committed.

But the idea was, we'll put all our sin, our guilt, our shame, our contamination, our impurity... all of it on *this thing*, and that's where we'll park the blame. That's where the judgment will go.

This is the logic of the system.

The scapegoat is the most obvious example of this. In Leviticus 16, we read that a goat would be sent into the wilderness after the Jewish chief priest had symbolically laid the sins of the people upon it. The sin would be removed from the camp.

And, again, while the specific practices might sound strange to our ears, we do the same today. The scapegoating instinct is alive and well in our time.

There's always a "those people" where we want to park the blame.

To us, just like to the religious leaders of Jesus' time, Jesus says... *Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice.*

For Jesus, mercy often involved a table and a bunch of sinners.

Jesus seeks out those familiar with rejection and he sits down at their table.

What about us? Who should our table include because of our allegiance to Jesus?

A fairly common question I get from some of the guys that I get to know a little bit in the jail is, "So, I'm getting out soon... Would I be allowed to come to your church?"

I always say the same thing. "Of course, you'd always be welcome at my church."

You'd always be welcome at my church. Do I believe this? Do I have a right to say this? Would you fine folks appreciate me throwing open the proverbial doors to a bunch of sinners?

Sinners plagued by addiction, sometimes with histories of violence. Sinners who can be highly unstable, emotionally volatile, unpredictable.

Sinners who have political and religious views that would probably fit a bit awkwardly with the general ethos of the community.

I've had enough of these conversations to know that "I'll look you up when I get out" rarely, if ever results in anyone actually showing up at church. But what if it did?

Many churches — perhaps especially more, for lack of a better term, "progressive" churches — are quite fond of using the language of "welcome and inclusion."

My sense is that usually this welcome and inclusion implicitly has a very specific range and scope. We're talking about the categories of race, gender, and sexual identity. We're talking about doubters and skeptics. We're talking about those exploring different paths on their spiritual journeys. We *might* be talking about socioeconomic standing (maybe).

But are we talking about conspiracy theorists and people obsessed with spiritual warfare? Are we talking about those who aren't themselves very inclusive? Are we talking about people who can't sit still for more than five minutes and are prone to outbursts? Are we talking about the angry and the addicted and offensive?

I think very often we say things like "all are welcome" because we think it's the kind of thing Jesus would say and the kind of thing that Jesus would want us to say. We can't imagine Jesus turning anyone away.

But if we're honest, we don't really mean "all." We mostly mean, "We welcome all people that we believe it would reflect well on us for welcoming."

Truly extending a welcome to *everyone* could well be impossible. Or dangerous. Or irresponsible. Or... *something*.

At the very least, it's a lot more complicated than throwing a slogan or a sticker on a door or a website.

And yet. Jesus ate with sinners. Like, *actual* sinners. People that it clearly did not reflect well on him for including. People who perhaps had only known rejection their whole lives. Possibly people whose rejection was well-earned.

These were the people that Jesus sought out and said, "Come, follow me."

And of course, Jesus didn't simply come to remind us to rearrange our categories and to encourage us to be a bit more welcoming of sinners.

Jesus would ultimately be rejected by the ones he came to save.

On the cross, Jesus would become the scapegoat, the place where we parked the blame. He would bear our iniquities. And three days later, he would rise victorious, speaking words not of condemnation but of peace.

This morning, I want to leave us with two simple truths. They are probably truths some of us have heard our whole lives, but we always need to hear again.

First, you are favoured by God. God likes you. No matter what you've done, no matter how or by whom you have been rejected, you are not rejected by God. Never.

God always stands at the door saying, "Son," "daughter," "welcome home."

Second, we who have experienced the favour of God in Jesus have a duty to extend this welcome to the people Jesus did. Our table must have room for tax collectors and sinners.

How could it not, if it has room for us?

It's a simple message. We who have experienced the love and welcome of Jesus are to love and welcome like Jesus did.

As the saying goes, "The church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners."

Jesus has come to show the favour of God to all of us. To the rejects and those who reject them. To saintly sinners and struggling saints. To sons and daughters trying to make their way home.

The church must never tire of proclaiming and embodying this simple twofold message.

May we be seek to be faithful to this high and holy calling.

Amen

