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“I did not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Matt 9:13).

St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist

Eph 4:1-7, 11-13; Matt 9:9-13

The quote above from today’s Gospel might suggest that Jesus was referring to two distinct groups when he said he had come to call sinners, not the righteous. In fact, there are only sinners, but some know it, and some do not. The scribes and Pharisees, official watchdogs over moral and religious rectitude, did not know they were sinners, while most ordinary people Jesus was appealing to were well aware of their weaknesses.

Matthew the tax collector knew he was a sinner. As a Jew who collaborated with the Romans to extract money from his fellow Jews, Matthew’s entire life was compromised, and his exclusion from society and public revilement reminded him daily when he met with his fellow tax collectors, their cronies, toadies and followers to drink and dine on their ill-gotten extortion.

What seems to have awakened a desire for conversion in Matthew was not the sneering judgment of the righteous priests, scribes and Pharisees but the fact that when Jesus passed by and called his name, Matthew heard love in his voice and in the invitation to accompany him. It was this love that contrasted so deeply with his present state of misery that caused Matthew to walk away from his former way of life.

Pope Francis, who calls himself a sinner, describes his own call to serve God with a quote about the moment Matthew met Jesus: *Miserando ut eligendo*, which became his episcopal motto. It means, “He mercied me in order to choose me.” The future pope, like Matthew, had an experience of profound forgiveness that moved him to respond totally to God.

The scribes and Pharisees who criticized Jesus claimed a righteousness based on keeping the Law, but they knew little of love, an entirely different measure that no one can ever fulfill. Love, in fact, reveals our helpless inability to respond to it in kind. True love is the one gift that exposes our unworthiness while also filling us with joy that someone has chosen us anyway. Matthew could not redeem himself; only love could, and when Jesus passed by and called him, he seized on this call to renew his life as a redeemed sinner. Until they could be moved by mercy in this same way, the scribes and Pharisees would always remain isolated in their righteousness, unable to hear the love in Jesus’ call.

It may seem a strange prayer, but the grace to acknowledge our sinfulness is the beginning of our journey toward holiness. This has nothing to do with immersing ourselves in feelings of shame or guilt. It is to ask for an encounter with God’s love for us. Only love can free us of the illusion that we are complete without God and don’t need forgiveness and the loving care of all the other lovable sinners in this world just like us.

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