

⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

My kids' pediatrician has the special gift of teaching my offspring to do things that he knows will drive me up the wall. He's been engaged in these shenanigans for 14 years; from the moment they were old enough to walk and talk. First, he taught them how to do the Florida Gator Chomp. I took one for the team and let it go. Then, he taught them how to do the Florida State Seminole War Chant. I took another one for the team and let it go. But when he taught them how to do the South Carolina Gamecock Chicken Cluck, I decided not to take one for the team and not to let it go. Just like the illustrious and esteemed gentleman and scholar, Popeye the Sailor Man, I'd had all I could stand, and I couldn't stand no more. So, on that day 14 years ago, right there in the doctor's office, I vowed before the sun, moon, and stars that I was going to go through any means necessary—including bribery—to find out what drives him bananas. Such an endeavor took quite a spell because he plays his cards very close to his vest. But while I was briefly at his home to drop something off, he showed me a card he later regretted. He chastised his youngest for playing with something very loud, telling her that he was going to throw *all* her toys away if she did not silence it. At that moment, I saw the light and there was no more darkness and no more night. As a result, I decided to strike while the iron was hot. I did not pass go. I did not collect 200 dollars. I went straight to Walmart instead in pursuit of the loudest, the vilest, and the most parentally offensive toy possible for her to open in front of him on her fast-approaching birthday. I found a terrible one, too in aisle 36: a megaphone with a built-in voice distorter. That thing was so loud and over the top it could make Alvin and any of his Chipmunk brothers sound like Darth Vader. So, for one easy payment of 44.99, I purchased it. And when that special day finally came and she unwrapped it, I knew I had a winner, winner chicken dinner because she smiled brightly at her present. I did too, most especially when I saw the abhorred scowl on his face. And on that day, I became the vilest of toy givers in the great city of Vero Beach, FL.

If you search the Gospel of Mark, you'll find out rather quickly that God is in the gift giving business. He gave the world the gift of John the Baptist preaching a baptism of repentance in the wilderness in order to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. He gave the world the gift of the incarnation of the Son of God who came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many. He gave the leper and the paralytic the gifts of spiritual and physical healing. And he gave Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John the gift of ushering in the way God would relate to humanity from that point forward when he called them to be his disciples. But in the passage of Scripture before us today, you are going to see one of the greatest gifts God ever gave to the world. This gift had a name: Matthew. As a matter of fact, the name Matthew means "gift of God." But here is where the problem comes in: when we first meet him in the Gospel of Mark, he's anything but a gift of God. He's the worst of the worst. He's the last and unredeemable. He's the exploiter of God's people. He's a living and breathing walking contradiction to everything right, true, noble, becoming, and holy. He's the vilest offender in all the New Testament who truly did not believe. But the moment Matthew bowed low and left the tax collector's booth to follow Jesus is the precise moment God started crafting with his divine chisel a true living and breathing miracle from the sculpture that was Matthew Levi, the son of Alphaeus. As a matter of fact, you are going to see from Matthew's life today what one of God's greatest gifts to all of us, the gift of his grace, is all about. As a result, I want to share with you this morning what the worst of the worst – the vilest offender – would tell us about the grace of God if he were standing before us today. To do that, please turn with me to Mark 2:13-17.

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. ¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

What the Worst of the Worst – the Vilest Offender – Would Tell Us About the Grace of God:

1. It is Favor Unearned, Unmerited, and Undeserved

- **The Trapeze Artist** – (1) In one of my restless nights of insomnia, I turned on the television and stumbled upon a trapeze artist. (2) I was amazed at the dexterity, the movements, and the near misses of the artist on the trapeze high above the ground. (3) But I noticed that in the 20 minutes I spent watching the show, 18 of them were focused on the net below. (4) Here's why: if some fool broke through the security barrier because he bet his buddy sitting next to him that he could do that to, the net would still be there to catch him just as well even though he didn't deserve it in the first place.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Despite his names, Matthew Levi, son of Alphaeus, had done absolutely positively nothing to deserve the high calling of Jesus to follow Him and play an important role in the way God was going to relate to humanity from that point forward with the New Covenant.
- **Textual Emphasis (14a): His Names:** (1) Names might be decided on a whim in our world; but not in the Hebrew world. They denoted the hopes and dreams of parents and the expectation that their lives would turn out exactly as their names. Matthew Levi was no different. (2) His parents constructed Matthew from two Hebrew words: "mattan," (gift) and "yah(weh)." Thus, gift of God. But he was hardly a gift. (3) His

other name way Levi. In the Bible, you don't get the name Levi without being a Levite. They were the priestly tribe of Israel, responsible for the sacrifices of a nation. (4) But Levi was a Levite in name only. Had he heard his Levitical number to report for temple duty at nine a.m. to serve God and His people on the Day of Atonement, Mr. Matthew Levi would have been a no-show. He only had one primary passion in his life: himself.

- **App:** Matthew could not boast in his names, upbringing, or his life's trajectory; for he had betrayed them all. He was the worst. So why does the worst become the first writer of a Gospel in the New Testament: the grace of God. You see, grace isn't about you at all. It's about God. You only need to let yourself receive it.

2. It is Kindness that Leads to Repentance

- **The Southern Smile:** (1) I've been to NY exactly one time. It was the airport. When I smiled and said hello, people looked at me like I was crazy. (2) But when you are in the south, everyone smiles. And not all smiles mean the same thing. (3) I've seen people to come a front desk to be greeted with a smile. And the moment they left; the receptionists smile turned to a scowl. (4) I've had a lady smile and tell me "I'm going to pray and sick the Holy Spirit on you." I said "thank you" but should have said "oh no. She's angry." (5) Human smiles can be deceiving. But not Gods.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Matthew deserved a scowl. He got a smile from Jesus instead. And the kindness of God led to Matthew's repentance. Not God's condemnation.
- **Textual Emphasis (14b): He Deserved No Smile:** (1) Mark tells us in the 2nd part of v14 that Matthew was "sitting in a tax collector's booth." The verb tense is reflexive which denotes something that comes automatically. Sitting in a booth stealing people's money came as natural to Matthew as breathing. He deserved no smile. (2) Tax collectors like Matthew worked for the Romans, even though they were Jewish. The Romans demanded a certain amount from them, and what was left over went straight into their pockets. As a result, publicans became quite skilled in extorting their Jewish "neighbors." And the Jews hated them for it. (3) Matthew deserved no smile. Yet, here is Jesus smiling upon Matthew and calling him to follow the Messiah. Such a call would not have been taken well by Peter and Andrew, James and John. Why? Because Matthew stole from them also.
- **App:** The kindness of God is an attribute of his character that we don't understand because deep down we think God operates based on merit. Some people deserve his kindness more than others. But when you receive kindness even though you know judgment and condemnation is the appropriate consequence, repentance follows. But repentance seldom follows the one who expects God to show him kindness more so than others based on his/her merit and goodness. Why? There's no need to repent of anything in that person's estimation.

3. It requires one thing to experience

- **The Church of the Nativity** — (1) The Oldest Church in the world is in Bethlehem, Palestine. It's existed for nearly 2000 years. (2) Empires and kingdoms have come and gone. World leaders and events have come and gone. But the church of the nativity has continued through the centuries. (3) But the greatest thing about the church of the nativity is this: for 2000 years anyone who has ever entered the church of the nativity has had to come in the exact same way: by bowing low. (4) You see, the oldest church in the world also has the smallest of doors. (5) The church's ancient architects knew something we are prone to forget: experiencing the grace of God requires you to bow low first.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Jesus' call to Matthew was first a call to bow low and then a call to stand tall and walk forward. You can never reverse that process by which the grace of God is experienced.
- **Main Textual Emphasis (14b): Lower Than People's Eyesight:** (1) Mark intentionally juxtaposes "sitting in a booth" with "getting up" to follow Jesus to teach us a spiritual lesson. (2) To sit in a tax collector's booth was to sit in a place that was lower than people's eyesight. The idea is that what Matthew was up to in his life was lower and dastardlier than the shortest person who had to pay him to keep living. (2) And in order to leave the booth, he had to bow low to exit through the door. (3) But then, after bowing low first, he began to rise and stand up straight when he stared into the face of Jesus.
- **App:** Bowing low, rising, and standing up straight in glorious victory is how the Father chooses to communicate with humanity. He did it in the life of Christ when he died, rose, and ascended. He did it with Matthew when he bowed low and then stood tall. And he does the same thing in our lives.

4. It demands a proper perspective

- **Bad Eyesight at the DMV** — (1) I had bad eyesight that I was worried I might fail my eyesight test at the DMV; (2) I hoped the lady would ask me to read the "E" on the top line. But she didn't. I had to read the one close to the bottom. And the only way I passed it was because I listened to the people before me reading the same line. (3) But when I had surgery, future visits to the DMV were no longer a concern. I could now see with the proper perspective.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Grace allowed Matthew to see God's mission in the world correctly. It allows us to see it also.
- **Main Textual Emphasis (15-17): A Party for Tax Collectors and Sinners:** (1) After his conversion, Jesus dines with Matthew. That's a big "no no" because he's a rabbi. (2) People were included or excluded in those days based on religious affiliation and ethical norms. Sadducees ate with Sadducees, and Pharisees ate with Pharisees. Moreover, tax collectors were right up there with lepers in the unclean department, so you didn't even think about eating lamb chops with those individuals, not unless you just wanted your relatives and friends to shun you. (3) When

the religious people get wind of it, they are outraged. Which prompts the greatest mission statement of all time: "it's not the healthy that need a doctor. It's the sick."

- **App:** Grace demands the proper perspective about God's mission in the world and our role in it. It is this: Jesus didn't come into this world to make bad people good. He came to make those who were dead in their trespasses alive in Christ Jesus.