

In the popular movie Avengers: Infinity War, the villain tells the heroes his evil plan. He wants to acquire the power to eliminate half of all life in the universe, to bring balance and make sure that those who remain wouldn't be overcrowded or needy. Would it work? Probably so. But he goes on to call his plan "mercy." And of course, the heroes and the audience have the same reaction - that's crazy! You can't kill untold numbers of innocents, even painlessly, and call it mercy!

On such a broad scale, it's easy for us to spot what is and isn't really merciful. When everything is drawn in black and white so clearly, the decision is easy - how hard is it to choose not to let half of the universe die? But even though making the choice to be merciful is easy in that situation, it's not a choice we stumble into in our day-to-day lives, unless some of you dress in capes and masks and have some superpowers you've been hiding!

When we're given the choice to show mercy in more ordinary circumstances, do we always make the right choice? Can we even define what mercy truly is? When we compare ourselves to the Pharisees in today's lesson, who show themselves very clearly to be enemies of Jesus, it might feel like that's a simple question to answer. But if we can be honest with ourselves, and clearly see the sinfulness at work in us, we might come to realize just how much we have in common with the Pharisees. Yet even as our standards and our version of mercy falls short, we see in Jesus the power of mercy personified - the Savior we never deserved who showed a sinful world the true meaning of mercy.

Our account for today picks up just after Jesus performed a miracle - he had healed a paralyzed man in front of a whole crowd of people. His fame was growing, and his teaching was becoming more popular in the region. One of the clearest pieces of evidence we have for this is the calling of Matthew, which is where our account begins.

Why does Matthew, a tax collector, drop everything he has to follow Jesus? It wasn't uncommon for tax collectors at the time to become quite wealthy, although the position came with some pretty hefty drawbacks: tax collectors were seen as dishonest and predatory, often over-collecting the required taxes to line their own pockets. They were forbidden to enter the synagogues or to even interact with "respectable" Jews! What reason would Matthew have to leave behind his wealth and follow a Jewish teacher?

Matthew must have had the chance to see Jesus teach before the day of his calling. He must have heard the way Jesus taught with authority unlike anything the people had ever seen. He must have seen the miracles that Jesus performed by God's authority. Why else would Jesus be able to speak just two words to a person like Matthew, "follow me," and actually convince Matthew to follow him?

And look at how Matthew responds to Jesus' call! Not only does he get up immediately to become Jesus' disciple, but he also hosts a dinner to celebrate the occasion, at his own expense. He invites his friends and acquaintances to his own house, and has Jesus there as an honored guest. Matthew can't help but express his joy and excitement at the opportunity he has been given!

But this happy occasion doesn't last. At some point, the Pharisees arrive, and begin to critique Jesus' behavior. They prove that they are unwilling to face Jesus directly by going instead to his disciples and asking why Jesus was eating with people like tax collectors and sinners - an accusation as much as a question. They looked in on a group of people celebrating together, and instead of fellowship and friendship they saw only vice and sin.

The Pharisees were proud of their ability to keep the Law of Moses, so proud in fact that they had invented new laws to follow that proved their ability to go above and beyond in the pursuit of piety. According to their laws it was sinful to even come into contact with people like the tax collectors, prostitutes, and others who were gathered at Matthew's house. By avoiding such people, and condemning others who failed to do the same, the Pharisees felt that they were building themselves up

in God's eyes. At the very least, they were comfortable with knowing that it was making them look good to other people.

They were missing something, and Jesus was able to show them just what they were doing wrong. In such a subtle display of his power, he shows that he knows exactly what they were thinking and saying by confronting them directly. He quotes the prophet Hosea, and tells them what God truly desires is mercy, and not sacrifice. The Pharisees weren't involved in any sacrifices at the time, so what does Jesus mean?

While nobody was sacrificing any animals or burning offerings to God, they were still fixated on the same Law in which God commanded those sacrifices in the first place. The Pharisees were convinced that their outward actions were sufficient to place them in God's good graces, regardless of where their hearts were at. But in doing so, they were misusing the Law - not only condemning others unjustly, but making hypocrites of themselves by not using the Law the way it was intended to be used and exposing their own sinfulness. The fact that they saw others as more sinful than themselves made them just as sinful as the tax collectors and "sinners" they were condemning, even if they didn't see it that way.

Where else do you see that sinful, selfish, Pharisaical pride? Perhaps it's not as far away as we want to admit. Can we only see it when church leaders or politicians claim to be following the Bible, but act as though they love the world? Or can we still perceive it when we look with joy at those who worship with us in the sanctuary, but down our noses at those who don't? Can we catch a whiff of its scent when we're asked what we spent our Sunday doing, and a smug smile crosses our lips when our coworkers or friends answer anything but "I was in church!"?

Jesus told the Pharisees that what God truly wants is mercy, and not sacrifice. But our sinful natures can't understand mercy - they want to convince us that the only thing that matters is sacrifice, to live a good enough life, or at least a better one than others. But that's not what God wants from us, even though it's the only thing our sinful natures know to do. In order for us to truly understand mercy, we need to see it outside of ourselves - we need a Savior to show us how our mercy falls short, but God's mercy shows the way.

If we want to truly understand the meaning of mercy, we need to learn from the God who perfected mercy. If we want to know why God wants us to show mercy, we only need to look to God's own Son, Jesus. Paul writes in Romans; "but God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Even though we were once lost sinners, full of hate for God and His ways, He still loved us. He loved us enough to send His only Son to live, die, and rise again to take away our sins and make us new and holy in His sight. He didn't do this because we did anything for Him, or because He would gain anything for Himself. *That* is mercy - to show love and compassion to those who truly need it, not only those we think deserve it.

That's why Jesus speaks to the Pharisees about the sick and the healthy - you don't call an ambulance for a healthy person, you call one for the person who is injured, sick, or dying. In the same way, Jesus didn't come to save people who were already perfect - as if such a person even existed! No, Jesus came to save sinners like you and me. He came to call each of us by name out of the darkness that surrounded us, and into His wonderful light.

When we understand what we were - lost, miserable sinners - we can begin to appreciate what Jesus has made us to be - His children, one family, one spiritual body of believers. And when we see the mercy that God showed to us by making us His own, we come to recognize the true meaning of the word. Matthew had it right from the very beginning; he had no choice to recognize his sinfulness, he was reminded of it every day in the way he was turned away and rejected by those who should have taught him the truth. So when Jesus called him, he could clearly see the mercy that was being shown to him for what it really was.

More than that, he immediately went and expressed his joy at being shown mercy to others. He gave other sinners, other people who were sick with their sin, the chance to receive the same mercy that had just set him free. Matthew brings the people who needed God's mercy the most to Jesus, who had just shown him the full measure of God's mercy. Where the Pharisees saw a lost cause, Matthew's eyes had been opened to see a ripe field for harvest.

Where have you seen the sick, slowly dying from their sin? What ripe fields do you know of that are waiting for you to harvest? Aren't they so often just outside our front door? Neighbors, coworkers, family, friends, all those who desperately need the cure that only Jesus can give. And you can bring it to them! No medical training required, no farming experience necessary. Just you, God's mighty Word in your mouth, and mercy in your heart.

On our own, dear friends, we would never be able to discover the true meaning of mercy. Our sinful natures would have us play an endless game of comparisons, pointing the finger at every worse sinner just to make ourselves look better. But thanks be to God, who sent His Son Jesus to show us the true meaning of mercy! He came to us while we were still sinners, and saved those who never earned or deserved it. And now He gives it to you, to show that same mercy to a world full of sin-sick people by bringing them the cure of His mighty Word. We know what mercy truly looks like, because our Savior Jesus has shown us the way. Amen.