

PP desire | də'zī(ə)r |

noun: a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen
Desire is a word we all understand.

When I began my recovery from my accident the summer I had a desire to walk up steps in a normal fashion. To make that desire a reality I had to do painful exercises day after day, but I desired is enough I was willing to deal with pain. We all have those things we desire, even as I say it this morning there are probably things that come to your mind, perhaps a longing in your gut for your desire to become reality. Do something moment: hold on to that feeling in your gut, that deep desire. As you hold onto that recognize that we have a God who has a deep desire, but feeling of longing in his gut for something to happen, something that will bring about global warming. God is in the house...⁹ *As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.*¹⁰ *And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.*¹¹ *And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*¹² *But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."*¹³ *Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."* Here is God's desire: he desires the people of mercy not a people of sacrifice. Sacrifice, the kind of sacrifice that Jesus refers to here is a specific kind of sacrifice. The Greek word is thusian which refers to a sacrifice that was given in thankfulness to God for something good he had done. What Jesus is saying is that neither he nor his Father want people coming in saying thank you for good and wonderful gifts that come from God but then going off and living however they want. God is more concerned about forming a certain kind of person than having people say empty thank you's. Keep your empty thank you's to yourself Jesus says, what I want you to do instead of saying an empty "thank you" is to be a person of mercy.

PPHere is God's desire: a community of faith filled with people of mercy. What is that going to look like? What is mercy, what does Jesus have in mind when he says that God desires mercy not sacrifice? The words Jesus quotes come for the book of Hosea 6. *PP*What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away... *For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.* Steadfast love is the word that become mercy in the Greek. The Hebrew word is Heseb and it means to show loyalty and lovingkindness. In Hosea what God is looking for is a people who consistently, in word and in deed, reflect to the world God's loyalty and lovingkindness and a people who are completely loyal to God, faithful to him. In other words, mercy is not just being nice or doing good things, biblical mercy flows from the loyalty and lovingkindness of God toward his people.

PPJesus' lifestyle reflects this mercy over and over again—shows it in very specific way—healing. When you look in the gospel of Matthew you find over and over again that the healing that Jesus does is connected with the idea of mercy. From a child possessed by a demon to one with epilepsy, to those who are blind, Jesus' healing of them is connected

with mercy. Mercy is about healing. About all kinds of healing. Healing broken bodies, healing broken minds, healing broken spirits, healing things that destroy both bodies and souls.

A community of mercy is a community of healing. What God desires is this kind of community. When Jesus talks to the Pharisees in Matthew 9 he has one particular focus of healing. He wants to bring healing to sinners. A sinner is a person who does not give himself completely over to God and who is motivated by something other than living for God. Jesus wants to bring healing to sinners because a person whose life is not completely given to God, who is not living for God is missing something. In fact, that is one of the basic meanings of the word sinner in Greek—it is someone who is missing something in the sphere of either the mental or spiritual life. Jesus is concerned about people who are missing something and whose lives, therefore, need healing.

What are these people missing? The clue to what they're missing comes in the words of Jesus where he tells us that he came not to call the righteous but sinners. Call, for those who been Christians for a long time we might anticipate Jesus saying, "I did not come to save the righteous but sinners". But instead of talking about saving Jesus talks about calling which brings our mind back to what he has just done with Matthew. He has called him to be his disciple, to follow a new path in life, to have a new life, a life where Jesus is at the center and following him trumps all else. Healing happens when a person abandons their way of life and hears and responds to the call of Jesus to come and follow him.

Jesus wants a people, a community that is filled with people mercy, a people who sees that those who do not have Christ at the center of their lives are missing something and they long to extend the call of Christ to come and follow him.

PPBy the way, Jesus is so committed to healing sinners they tells the Pharisees that he did not come to call the righteous but sinners. We want to be a little bit careful here because we might assume that Jesus is somehow speaking of righteous people in a negative light. He is not. In fact Jesus's dad was known as a righteous person. Go back with me to Matthew chapter 1. ¹⁸ *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.* ¹⁹ *Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.* Jesus' dad is a righteous man so he is not going to expose Mary, the woman he was supposed to marry, to public disgrace. A little cultural understanding for us this morning: In Joseph's day you have a choice when it comes to divorce, you can divorce loudly or quietly. When you divorce loudly you take your spouse to court, you point out their sin which you can prove, the sin that has broken your marriage. When the divorce is granted you walk away Scott free, you walk away looking good while your spouse is punished. Not only that but because only the man can initiate divorce at this time, when you prove that your wife was at fault for the divorce you don't have to pay her the marriage inheritance that was promised as part of the engagement agreement. So she is punished and she is poor. But there is another kind of divorce, a quiet divorce. This is a kind of "no contest". You simply wrote out a divorce certificate and handed it to your wife—done deal. Except that your wife would receive the marriage inheritance promised at the time of engagement. Joseph knows the truth, he knows that he's not the dad of the child Mary is carrying, he could

have proven it in court, gotten out of paying the marriage inheritance. But he doesn't. He decides to heal as much as he can in a difficult situation—after all, the marriage inheritance could be enough for a person to live on—he decides to extend, dare we say it, mercy even though he knows the truth, he plans to divorce Mary quietly. One commentator brings connects Joseph to Jesus' words in Matthew 9. **In the opening chapter of the First Gospel, Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man. For Matthew, however, the focus is not on Joseph's blameless observance of the Lord's commandments. Instead, Joseph's righteousness is offered as an explanation for what readers learn in the next verse: he is unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace—or worse—and determines instead "to dismiss her quietly" (Matt 1:19). Joseph is a righteous man, and so he resolves to practice mercy.**

PPJesus says that he has not come to call people like his dad, people who were filled already with the heart of mercy. He has not come to call such people because they are ready gathered around his mission, they already are part of this community, committed to his father. Instead he has come to call sinners, instead, he is come together around himself people who are on a different road, on a road filled with potholes, blown out bridges, and cracked pavement. He wants to gather these people around him and show them God's road.

This is a troubling thing to us: Jesus' focus is on sinners. Sinners—people who are different than us. The problem the Pharisees have with the people Jesus hanging out with is not that they are a garden-variety sinner, someone the Pharisees could put up with. The Pharisees were not naïve, they did not believe they were perfect, but they didn't believe that they were if you will of the better class of sinners. Jesus doesn't just hang out with sinners he hangs out the wrong sinners. He hangs out with tax collectors, those who were traitors to their own people. He hangs out with people who don't keep rules of the Pharisees considered important. It's not just the Jews hangs out with sinners if it hangs out the wrong sinners.

We understand. There are the right kind of sinners and the wrong kind of sinners. There are acceptable sins that allow a person to be in good standing in our eyes. There are unacceptable sins that cause us to shun people. As long as the focus is on acceptable sinners we are fine with Jesus coming to call sinners. But let him sit down with tax collectors and suddenly he has stepped over the line. Think about it in terms of some words from the book **PPAlmost Christian... The problem does not seem to be the churches are teaching our people badly, but they're doing it exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people, focused primarily on "folks like us"—which of course begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.**

PPThe church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people, nice sinners, people who sin like us, focused primarily on people who send like us—which begs the question of whether such a community is really the church at all. Really the church at all because a true community of Christ is a place which fills the desire of God, the desire for a community of mercy; a desire for a community that joyfully sits down with tax collectors.

PPSomething else, something unsettling: the fact that the Pharisees have to go and learn what it means that God says desires mercy and not sacrifice tells us that the Pharisees are not people of righteousness, they are not on the road that Joseph was on or for

that matter other people in the Bible we are told are righteous, such as, the parents of John the Baptist. The Pharisees believe they are righteous, they believe they are on the right road; they are not.

Which begs the question whether a community of faith that refuses to sit down with tax collectors, that does not have the heart of Christ to call sinners, that says easy thank you's but does not practice mercy, whether that community is really the Church or if it is a reflection of a group of Pharisees who come to Jesus' disciples complaining that he's eating with tax collectors and sinners.

PPWhich makes us ask what kind of church are we trying to build? Is a church filled with people of mercy, filled with people of righteousness or are we simply trying to build a nice place to be. The movement in our culture is to build a church that is a nice place to be, filled with nice people, filled with nice programs, and filled with a nice God. C.S.Lewis, a British philosopher and thinker, once said, **A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world and might even be more difficult to save.** While we might like to build a church which focuses on nice the biblical reality is God is not about nice, he is about mercy, righteousness, sitting down with tax collectors. Professor and pastor Kenda Dean writes, **...the God of the Bible traffics in life and death, not niceness, and calls for sacrificial love, not benign whatever-ism. If the God of Jesus Christ is a missionary God who crosses every boundary—life and death and space and time—to win us, then following Jesus bound is bound to be anything but convenient. Jesus Christ doesn't tinker; he tears down walls, draws up new plans, makes demands: “have no other gods before me; Love one another as I have loved you. Leave your net, and followed me.” Imitating this Christ makes people lay down their wallets, their reputations, their lives for the sake of others, which is why parents rightly fear it for their children. The cult of nice is so much safer; God is friendly and predictable, offering little and asking less. [The Church of nice] does not ask people to lay down their lives for anyone, because niceness does not go that far. Love goes that far—and true love is neither nice nor safe.**

One of the things this passage in Matthew 9 calls us to, those who are often concerned about making sure we have a nice place, is to ask if the words of Jesus to “learn what it means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’”, if those words are addressed to us. If they are we are actually the sinners that Jesus needs to sit down with for we are on the wrong path, our lives are missing something for they are not completely given over to God. One of the questions parents have to ask is, “Am I more concerned with making sure my children have a nice place, filled with a nice God or do I want my children to be a place filled with people of mercy?” And as a parent what am I teaching my children about God, am I teaching them a God was nice or a God who is a God of mercy, a missionary God, who crosses every boundary to win us, who inconveniences himself to death on cross, a God who doesn't tinker; he tears down walls, draws up new plans, and makes demands. As parents we have to come to realize something unsettling: that while good youth programs are great, good people in the church who provide an example of mercy are wonderful, every study on religious faith being passed on shows that parents are the vital connection of bringing a real, vibrant, merciful faith into the lives of their children.

If we wonder if we are the ones who Jesus needs to call, if we wonder if our chil-

dren are the ones Jesus needs to call all we really need to do is to look at our lives and ask, “is there a continual movement of mercy in my life that brings the healing of God, both body and soul, to others?”

PPOne last thing. Jesus has not come to call the righteous but sinners this we know, that what some miss is Jesus’ goal. What Jesus is shooting for is to take sinners and turn them into righteous people. Jesus is not satisfied with sitting down for a meal with sinners, he wants to transform sinners. At times people miss this, they believe that Jesus is unconcerned with their transformation, that all he wants is to eat with them, have a nice meal, but Jesus desires much more. Remember sinners are people whose lives are missing something, what they are missing is a life of righteous living. A life of righteous living that begins by belonging to Jesus Christ. As the 16th century confession of faith the Heidelberg catechism says, **PP**

Lord's Day 1

Q & A 1

**Q. What is your only comfort
in life and in death?**

**A. That I am not my own,
but belong—
body and soul,
in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.**

**He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.**

**Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.**

PPJesus wants to take sinners and turn them into righteous people, turn them into people of mercy. Back to the book of Matthew and the words of Jesus, two places—Matthew 5. ¹⁹ *Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* ²⁰ *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* Matthew 25—a picture from the day Christ returns, ³⁷ *Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?’* ³⁸ *And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?’* ³⁹ *And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’* ⁴⁰ *And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’*

PPJesus desires to take sinners in turn them into righteous people, turn them into people of mercy. As he heads in the direction he looks at you, he looks at me and says, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”.