

## ***The Mercy Rule***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

June 11, 2023

Texts: Hosea 5:8-6:6 and Matthew 9:9-13

This past Thursday, the University of Oklahoma women's softball team won its third straight NCAA Softball World Series. The team is a juggernaut that won 53 games in a row this season and 61 of 62 games overall including 35 by shutting out their opponent; last year they won 62 of 64 games. They are so dominant that over the last two years they have won 70 games by the Mercy Rule which allows the umpire to end the game if one team is ahead by 8 or more runs after 5 or more innings. It is intended to shorten lop-sided games and prevent the losing team from being further embarrassed by having the winning team run up the score. There have been variations on this rule for Little League baseball and children's soccer; unfortunately, there is no such rule in Major League Baseball to ease the pain of Pittsburgh Pirates' fans over these last several years – myself among them!

The mercy rule has biblical roots, of a sort. In responding to the Pharisees who criticized him for eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus tells them to learn what the Lord said through the prophet: *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."* The quote is from that passage in Hosea that we heard this morning; it is a stern reprimand to a people whose love for the Lord was as fleeting as the morning dew that disappears quickly, to quote the prophet. Across its history, Israel's faith and faithfulness – their love for the Lord – appeared and disappeared like that dew. In times of prosperity and peace they tended to forget the Lord – living into that maxim: *"Danger past, God forgotten"* – only to suddenly remember the Lord and cry out for help when the danger returned. At other times they abandoned God in the face of dire threats, buying into the false promises of false gods or foreign kings to deliver them, then crying out to the Lord when deliverance never came.

The immediate threat to which Hosea spoke was that of the Arameans. Israel had divided into northern and southern kingdoms, and the northern kingdom had switched allegiances from the Arameans to the Assyrians, believing that the Assyrian king would protect them. They turned away from the Lord to

embrace a political heavyweight as their salvation, and through Hosea, the Lord called them to account. Anticipating the distress which lay ahead, Hosea predicts their eventual return to the Lord with an expectation that the Lord would save them despite their unfaithfulness. They will say, *“Let us press on to know the LORD; for the Lord will come to us like the showers, like the rains that water the earth.”*

Imagine that! People ignoring God or even blatantly disobeying and then expecting God to jump in and save them when things go bad! People offering sacrifices and going through the motions of worship to placate God, but living day to day as they darn well please! People not bothering to pray, but expecting the Lord to stand by and respond promptly when they finally decide they need God to rescue them! Imagine that! And in your imagination, take a hard look to see if some of those people look like you and me from time to time – people who claim to be followers of Jesus without living as he calls us to live or loving as he calls us to love or forgiving as he calls us to forgive – and then expecting him to rescue us when tragedy strikes or troubles mount or a diagnosis is dire and our anxieties rise! *“What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?”* says the Lord. *“What shall I do with you, O Judah? What shall I do with you – with you?”* It is less a question than an expression of divine exasperation. *What shall I do with you – you whose love is as fleeting as the morning dew?* What then would you have the Lord do with them?

For the Pharisees in Jesus’ day the answer was clear – shun them, condemn them, judge them, reject them, have nothing to do with them. They who regarded themselves as faithful followers of the Law had no time or place in their lives for those who were sinners; chief among the sinners in their view were tax collectors and prostitutes. So, when Jesus sat at dinner with such people, the Pharisees challenged his disciples. *“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? Why does he eat with such awful people?”*

About twenty years ago in our nation there were rumblings about Congress turning over tax collection to private companies – a suggestion that resurfaced recently in some of the debates around funding for the IRS. Those companies would be empowered to collect taxes and retain a portion of the sums collected as their fees. But as the experience with privately-run prisons has proved, not all functions of government can be better handled by private entities! In an article entitled *“Private Tax Collectors: A Roman, Christian, and Jewish Perspective”* in

*The Dickinson Lawyer*<sup>1</sup>, my law school's quarterly magazine, a law professor suggested that we ought to learn from historical experiences of private tax collection before repeating their mistakes. The Romans utilized private tax collectors across their empire to collect taxes with backing from the Roman guard and could charge a fee on top of the tax. Often those surcharges were substantial, making tax collectors rich. Thus, tax collectors were despised by the people as traitors and thieves: traitors because they worked for foreign powers in Rome, and thieves because they profited handsomely from their work at the expense of the people. 1<sup>st</sup> century tax collectors traded their integrity and honor for a dirty, but lucrative job in the Roman ranks. The price they paid was being regarded as moral misfits in Jewish society. Matthew was such a moral misfit when Jesus called him.

Why would Jesus choose, not only to dine with such people, but to call one of them as his disciple? Jesus' explanation in response to the judgmental Pharisees was this:

*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners.*

Jesus was not denying the sinfulness of Matthew or any of the other sinners who were sitting at his table. He knew who they were and was not excusing what they had done. But by his presence there he was affirming God's continuing love for them – God's mercy extended to them – and rather than rejecting them, was welcoming them back into relationship with God. He did not demand that they repent before they joined him, but those who dined with him often did repent, as Zacchaeus did. In Matthew's case, Jesus called him to leave his Roman 1040 tax forms behind to become his disciple even though Matthew had undergone no training program, no confirmation class, and had made no renunciations of his life as a tax collector for Rome. Yet Jesus called him to be his disciple anyway.

Jesus' invitation to Matthew and his response to the Pharisees is God's response to that rhetorical question posed by God through Hosea: *What shall I do with you – you whose love is as fleeting as the morning dew?* I will welcome you back and invite you to follow me. God does not give up on any of us – on tax collectors or prostitutes or sinners. God shows them mercy. Jesus came specifically for those people – not to reward the saints but to save the sinners!

And that is good news for us, for if Jesus could call as a disciple a moral outcast like Matthew, might not God extend to you and to me, moral misfits that we are with faithfulness as fleeting as the morning dew, that same gracious invitation to discipleship? If Jesus could see past the traitorous thievery of the tax collector, might God not see past our transgressions and welcome us in his company? Pharisees and tax collectors alike are in need of God's mercy, so whether you identify with the judgmental Pharisee or the chronic sinners at table with the Messiah, you need God's mercy and grace extended to you. Whether your sins are pharisaic pride, or greed or leisure's lusts or selfish indifference to the suffering of others, you need God's grace and mercy. Jesus welcomed the obvious sinners at his table; he called Matthew to be a disciple; might he not also welcome us and invite us to follow him?

For, the invitation to follow Jesus is not a reward for being faithful. It is an invitation for healing, and we all need that healing. The Church is not a haven for saints; it is a hospital for sinners. It is not a place of rest for souls who have "made it;" it is a community of healing for souls sick with sin. Jesus came into the world to heal sinners, not to reward us or punish us, but to save us from the taint of sin that touches us all. *"Go and learn what this means,"* he says, *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."* What it means is that we who have been shown mercy should ourselves be merciful; we who have been loved should ourselves be loving; we who have been forgiven should ourselves forgive. For, the Lord our God is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And we who are created in the image of God and have been called to be disciples of Jesus are called to follow his example – to be merciful and slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love for God and one another. You might call it the Mercy Rule. Or you might call it what Jesus calls it: faithful! Amen

---

<sup>1</sup> "Private Tax Collectors: A Roman, Christian, and Jewish Perspective" by Maureen B. Cavanaugh, *The Dickinson Lawyer*, Winter 2005