

## Jesus came to Save Sinners.

On the television news I saw a report of a mother who was going from bar to bar, and sleazy motel to flop house looking for her daughter. The daughter, a young woman, had fallen into prostitution, and almost every other habit of street vice so she could obtain crack cocaine. The mother, carrying an identity card made for her daughter, would show the picture to almost anyone who would look at it, asking always, "Have you seen her? She's my daughter." Sometimes the mother would get close to her daughter's location, only to lose her. She blamed her failure on "snitches," people who tell the daughter someone is asking about her.

When the reporter questioned the mother, asking why she continued to pursue so hopeless a task, she said, "If I don't find her she will die."<sup>1</sup>

As it was for the woman's daughter, so it is for sinners of all stripes.<sup>2</sup> If they are not rescued they will die. Moreover, it is ironic that people in such mortal danger would flee from their rescuer, but they do.

The Bible tells us that Jesus came to save sinners. Paul wrote to Timothy in his first letter,

**I Tim. 1:15** It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

Leprosy at the time of Jesus was an incurable disease. Even today it is difficult to cure. It is perhaps the most loathsome of diseases because in its fullness it causes an ugliness that is difficult to approach. Many believe that God chose leprosy as the symbol of sin and its consequences. The Law of Moses certainly carries out this idea. Sin,

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<sup>1</sup> WTVT Channel 13, Tampa, FL, September 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23.

uncleanness. These two ideas lie together. Luke says concerning Jesus that,

Luke 5:12 ...it came about that while He was in one of the cities, behold, there was a man full of leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

Under the Law of Moses lepers are separated from the uninfected. The Hebrews prohibited lepers from mingling with the healthy. Luke tells us that this man was "full of leprosy." He was a leper past all hope of recovery. In this condition he would have been a repulsive sight. The whole appearance of his face would have changed until he looked as a lion. Nodules grow on the skin. They ulcerate. Discharges flow from the wounds. The eyebrows fall out. The eyes stare. The voice becomes hoarse. The victim wheezes. Ultimately the disease spreads inward. It ends in consumption, dropsy, suffocation, and death. This man was not far from that end.

"Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean," he said. So we see that this man did not doubt Jesus' ability to heal him. He believed the only thing that would prevent his release from leprosy was Jesus' willingness.

To many Jews of that far off day ceremonial uncleanness was at least as horrible as the disease. It meant to be an outcast from Israel, to be classed with swine, and dogs. And remember this: to the Jew a man's physical condition told of his spiritual condition. And this man asked to be made clean—he did not ask for good health. So, besides asking to be healed, the leper asked that the Lord would remove his shame. This leper was beyond help so far as man was concerned, but he believed.

Luke says of Jesus that He,

... stretched out His hand and touched him.

He touched him! The man was unclean. Jesus did not shrink from him. He touched him.

And Jesus said, "I am willing; be cleansed."

And immediately the leprosy left him.<sup>3</sup>

This tells us that no matter how loathsome the disease—or the sin, the Lord can cleanse it. By extension, we see that the Lord can touch us just as he touched the leper. He is willing to cleanse—to forgive.

In Matthew we read a comment of the Lord about the difficulty of gaining heaven,

**Matthew 19:23** And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 “Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” 25 When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” 26 And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but **with God all things are possible.**”

God forgives all manner of sin, and no one is beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness and salvation, except the one who puts himself into jeopardy.

In Luke’s gospel we read of an incident in which Jesus taught the scribes and Pharisees a lesson about His concern for the lost,

**Luke 15:1** Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

3 And He told them this parable, saying, 4 “What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? 5 “And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 “And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ 7 “I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 5:13.

in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Jesus does not want to lose even one. The Lord holds out his hand to all sinners, asking them to repent—to the willful, the scoffers, the ignorant and misguided, and to the wretched. He wants to save them all.

Matthew tell us that,

Matt. 9:9 And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He \*said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose, and followed Him.

At the time of Christ the Talmud lists two classes of "publicans" or tax-gatherers. There were the *Gabbai* and the *Mokhsa*. The latter was the *douanier* or custom-house official. Both classes of tax collectors fell under the Rabbinic ban, but the *dounaier*—such as Matthew was—became the object of chief denunciation.<sup>4</sup> The rabbis and the Pharisees with many of their fellow Israelites cursed the tax-collectors and classed them among the worst of sinners.

Matthew was a tax-collector. Jesus called him.

Matthew 9:10 ...it happened that as He was reclining at table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and joined Jesus and His disciples at the table. 11 And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with the tax-gatherers and sinners?" 12 But when He heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are ill." 13 "But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Alfred Edersheim wrote concerning the difference between the teaching of the world's religions and the teaching of Jesus,

In two things chiefly does the fundamental difference appear between Christianity and all other religious systems, notably

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<sup>4</sup> Edersheim, A. (1896, 2003). *The life and times of Jesus the Messiah* (1:515). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Rabbinism. And in these two things, therefore, lies the main characteristic of Christ's work; or, taking a wider view, the fundamental idea of all religions. Subjectively, they concern sin and the sinner; or, to put it objectively, the forgiveness of sin and the welcome to the sinner.

But Rabbinism, and every other system down to modern humanitarianism... can only generally point to God for the forgiveness of sin. What (in them) is merely an abstraction, has become a concrete reality in Christ. (Christ) speaks forgiveness on earth, because He is its embodiment. As regards the second idea, that of the sinner, all other systems know of no welcome to him till, by some means (inward or outward), he have ceased to be a sinner and become a penitent. They would first make him a penitent, and then bid him welcome to God; Christ first welcomes him to God, and so makes him a penitent. The one demands, the other imparts life. And so Christ is the Physician, Whom they that are in health need not, but they that are sick. And so Christ came not to call the righteous but sinners... to Himself, to the Kingdom; and this is the beginning of repentance.<sup>5</sup>

So it was with Matthew whom Jesus called as he sat in the tax-collector's booth engaged in the occupation so loathed and despised in Israel that repentance was accounted especially difficult for tax-gatherers and custom-house officers.<sup>6</sup>

As it was for Matthew so it is for many of us. Our deeds become barriers to forgiveness—not on God's part, but ours.

There is the story of the settler in South Africa who found a native of the Kaffir tribe near his stable. The settler accused the Kaffir of attempting to steal a horse. The Kaffir declared that he was simply taking a short cut home. But the settler had no faith in Kaffirs, and he

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<sup>5</sup> Edersheim, A. (1896, 2003). *The life and times of Jesus the Messiah (1:507)*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Edersheim, A., 1:517. "Levi-Matthew was not only a 'publican,' but of the worst kind: a 'Mokhes' or *douanier*; a 'little Mokhes,' who himself stood at his custom-house; one of the class to whom, as we are told, repentance offered special difficulties."

was a vindictive man. He decided to make the Kaffir afraid of him. So he tied the Kaffir to a tree and cut off his right hand.

Months passed. A day came when the settler traveled far from his cabin. A storm overtook him and he sought shelter. The only shelter available was a Kaffir hut. Nevertheless, the Kaffirs gave him food and a place to sleep. When he awoke he saw a tall Kaffir standing over him. When he raised his eyes to meet those of the Kaffir the native held up his arm, and there was no hand on it.

The settler felt at this point that his time had come, because he had heard that the Kaffirs were cruel and revengeful. He waited for the fatal blow to fall. But the moment passed, and slowly the handless arm dropped to the Kaffir's side. He said, "This is my cabin and you are in my power. You have maimed me for life, and revenge is sweet; but I am a Christian, and I forgive you."<sup>7</sup>

How is this story different from what we have done to the Lord? Yet He forgives. Our deeds may stand in the way of forgiveness, but they are in our way, not His.

People who regard themselves as righteous, as did the Pharisees, tend to look down on others they consider to be sinners. That practice received a rebuke from Jesus in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Yet while there are many willing to condemn the sinner the practice may be equally as prevalent in which the sinner condemns himself, and so places himself outside the pale of forgiveness. There is the story of the man who once cursed "God with all His attributes." He thought that in his anger he had committed the unpardonable sin. There was once a woman who was involved in a love triangle. She was caught. She took an oath on the Bible to her husband that she was innocent. Because she had lied with her hand on the Bible she believed she had committed the unpardonable sin. Others have said, "There are some things which are beyond the reach of God's pardon. There are some things for which one can never be forgiven."

None of these self-condemnations is true in Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Knight, Walter B., *Knight's Treasury of Illustrations*, p.133.

Paul regarded himself as the "foremost" of sinners, but not beyond the pale of forgiveness. And note what he did,

- Paul said he was "foremost" of sinners.
- Acts says that Paul was, "...breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."<sup>8</sup>
- that he was, "...consenting to the death..." of Stephen.<sup>9</sup>
- Paul had persecuted the church. As it says in Acts, "But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."<sup>10</sup>

But when Paul met Jesus on the Road to Damascus he found that Jesus had not come to condemn him, but to save him. Paul wrote to Timothy,

**I Tim. 1:16** And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

As it was in the case of Paul so it is with those who would come to Jesus. His mercy takes the form of longsuffering, of patience. The Lord was patient with the ruin and destruction Paul wrought on the church. Jesus might have cut his career short with swift judgment. Instead, His mercy took the form of a personal rebuke, and then of a deliverance from guilt, sin and death.

The greatest persecutors, or the greatest sinners, should not despair of mercy. The Lord will wait a long time for one sinner to come to repentance. (But will He wait forever?)

The case of Paul, "...the foremost of sinners..." ought to encourage sinners of every class to have hope and trust in the Lord. This should satisfy the misgivings of someone who thinks he has sinned too much to be saved, to receive mercy from the Lord.

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 9:1.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 8:1.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 8:3.

David, that heroic king of Israel of whom we read much that extols his greatness, was also a great sinner. When we first meet David the prophet Samuel has come to the house of Jesse in search of the new King of Israel. Samuel looked upon the sons of Jesse and when he saw Eliab he thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him.” But that was not the case. For God said to him, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”<sup>11</sup>

The Psalmist wrote,

Psalm 78:70 He also chose David His servant

And took him from the sheepfolds;

71 From the care of the ewes with suckling lambs He brought him

To shepherd Jacob His people,

And Israel His inheritance.

72 So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart,

And guided them with his skillful hands.

David, the chosen of the Lord, lived with God’s favor until the day that he sinned. He lusted for Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and committed adultery with her. He compounded his sin by attempting to cover it up, and when he did not succeed he sent a letter by Uriah’s own hand to the commander of Israel’s army. The letter told Joab to place Uriah in the forefront of the fiercest battle and then withdraw from him, so that he might be struck down and die.<sup>12</sup>

David’s sin began with lust that grew into adultery. Next, he used deception to cover his sin, and then he used his position as commander of the army to commit murder.

The prophet Nathan brought the judgment of God against him.

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Samuel 11.



David then saw the gravity of his sin. God's judgment brought him face to face with his sin, and he confessed it. On that day it would have been difficult to imagine a man more wretched than David, the sinner. He wrote in the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm,

Psalm 51:1 Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;

According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity

And cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions,

And my sin is ever before me.

4 Against You, You only, I have sinned

And done what is evil in Your sight,

So that You are justified when You speak

And blameless when You judge.

David's attitude was like that of Jonah when he had been cast into the belly of the sea monster,

**Jonah 2:1** Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. 2 And he said: "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, And He answered me. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, And You heard my voice. 3 For You cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the floods surrounded me; All Your billows and Your waves passed over me. 4 Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' 5 The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head. 6 I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars closed behind me forever; Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God. 7 "When my soul fainted within me, I

remembered the LORD; And my prayer went up to You, Into Your holy temple. 8 "Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy. 9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD." 10 So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

From this we learn that the Lord can deliver from the most hopeless of circumstances. Jesus touched a leper and cleansed him. He called Matthew from the most despised of occupations. He had mercy for Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor. And as David pleaded for mercy the Lord forgave him. Paul wrote,

1 Timothy 1:15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.