

Matthew 9:9-17
Sermon Follow-up
Rich Lusk

A word or two about sources, followed by some random thoughts—

I have heard numerous sermons on this text (and its parallels in the other gospels) over the years, and they have been helpful. In particular, sermons by Robert Rayburn, Tim Keller and Tuck Bartholomew proved useful. The best single short resource is a sermon by John Stott, which I found in transcript form on the web, though I have lost the link and cannot find it now. In terms of commentary, Tom Wright's *Matthew for Everyone* has an excellent summary of these verses. In fact, Wright's understanding of Jesus' miracles and meals has been very influential on my own understanding of these themes in the gospels (see especially Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* and *The Challenge of Jesus*).

On a biblical theology of eating, the opening pages of Alexander Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World* is unsurpassable:

http://books.google.com/books?id=47ncMCfOj58C&pg=PA14&lpg=PA14&dq=schmemmann+%22man+is+what+he+eats%22&source=web&ots=KqzCEOrCt7&sig=18YDD-e0-UP5yiDHOXYQMif3RY0&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=8&ct=result#PPA11,M1

The "good infection" idea I made use of comes in part from C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, Part 4, chapter 4.

While a broader case can be made for weekly communion, surely it is obvious that churches which practice infrequent communion are not following the model of Jesus. If joy-filled feasts were central and regular features of his ministry, they must be so in the church's ministry as well. How can we meet the Messiah who was known as a "drunkard and a glutton" without eating and drinking?!!

When Jesus calls us to repentance, he's not placing a "legal" burden on us. He's saying: "Give me your whole life, so I can heal it. Offer yourself to me, so I can make you whole." Jesus takes the initiative in calling us to himself; we respond in repentance, by giving ourselves to him. The call to repentance is analogous to a doctor saying to a sick person, "Come into my office where I can treat your illness." Repentance is just taking the medicine God offers. We don't often think of repentance that way, but that's what it is.

One thing weekly communion does is give God's people a regular, enacted reminder that we are forgiven. We accomplish this with weekly confession/absolution as well, but communion is a way of tangibly experiencing forgiveness. There is balance between remembering our sins, so we can confess them, and forgetting them because we know those sins are forgiven. C. S. Lewis captures this dynamic well. On the one hand, he writes in *Letters to Malcolm*:

[A. Whyte] brought me violently face to face with a characteristic of Puritanism which I had almost forgotten. For him, one essential symptom of the regenerate life is a permanent and permanently horrified perception of one's natural and (it seems) unalterable corruption. The true Christian's nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool.

I won't listen to those who describe that vision as merely pathological. I have seen the 'slimy things that crawled with legs' in my own dungeon.

On the other hand, this doesn't mean we dwell on our sin so much that we are more preoccupied with our failings than with God's grace. Again, Lewis, this time from his *Latin Letters*, in correspondence with an Italian priest:

As for myself, during the past year a great joy has befallen me. Difficult though it is, I shall try to explain this in words. It is astonishing that sometimes we believe that we believe what, really, in our heart, we do not believe.

For a long time I believed that I believed in the forgiveness of sins. But suddenly (on St. Mark's Day) this truth appeared in my mind in so clear a light that I perceived I never before (and that after many confessions and absolutions) had believed it with my whole heart...

This emboldens me to say something to you that a layman scarcely ought to say to a priest...It is this: you write much about your own sins. Beware (permit me, my dearest Father, to say beware) lest humility should pass over into anxiety or sadness. It is bidden to us "to rejoice and always rejoice." Jesus has cancelled the handwriting that was against us. "Lift up your hearts!"

The Lord's Supper is a reminder that "the gospel is for Christians too." We have no problem offering forgiveness to outsiders when we do evangelism. But we

need to remember that forgiveness is for us as well! Even as believers, we keep sinning, and thus continually stand in need of forgiving grace. The Supper is a regular reminder that that grace is ours. God knows what you've done this week, and yet, come Sunday, he still saves you a place at the table, he still wants to eat with you.

Jesus' reversal of OT uncleanness laws and his proclamation of forgiveness apart from OT sacrifices are ways in which we see Jesus upstaging the ministry of the temple. In the old covenant system, if you wanted to eat with God, you went to temple and celebrated a peace offering. But now Jesus is making peace offering-type meals available wherever he goes.

I did not address the patch and wineskin metaphors at the end of our passage, but this is part of what's going on in those mini-parables. The old structures of Judaism, good as they were for a time, cannot contain the "new wine" of the kingdom. Jesus is bringing in a new world and the Pharisee and the followers of John need to get onboard. They cannot fit the new into the old; the old is going to rip apart as the new comes. Of course, all this was finally made clear in 70 AD when the temple was destroyed by the Romans and the old covenant concluded (cf. Mt. 24).