

Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist  
Matthew 9:9-13  
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St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA  
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### **“Open Invitation”**

In any given year, I receive invitations to a variety of events. Business meetings where a company is promoting a particular product; an invitation to a special party like a birthday or anniversary; I've been invited to experience the opening of a new facility; but the most invitations I receive are to dinner, sometimes lunch, and on a rare occasion breakfast. Most times the invitation comes from someone I know. On some occasions, the invitation is given by someone I do not know. Usually the unknown inviter is someone wanting to sell me something; something to improve my life. It seems that whenever an invitation is extended, it usually involves food, nourishment for the body. It might be snacks and beverages or a multi-course dinner complete with a decadent dessert served with the finest wine. Isn't it amazing how if you want to invite someone to be a part of something bigger, food is included? There is a Pennsylvania Dutch saying, “The way to a mans heart is through his stomach!”

Events are a way of showing off something of value for the host or hostess. It may be a special product, or a unique location, or even the food. In this presidential election year, we hear of events at which the political candidates will attend. The cost to attend may be hundreds or even thousands of dollars to attend. So that you can be with the candidate of your choice who when elected claims to make life better. To be in the company of someone who thinks like you, who shares similar life values, someone who makes promises that may or may not come to fruition. Invitations are extended to those who have the resources, primarily financial sometimes time to volunteer, to back the candidate who promises the best change for life in this country. Value is placed on being in the company of someone special, a person who will make living easier; promises of improved benefits all in the name of a better life.

Imagine what Matthew might have thought when Jesus approached him and said, “Follow me”? It is probably safe to say, Matthew heard of Jesus and his ministry. I imagine Matthew thought, ‘who, me? Why do you want me? I'm not like those, who worship God, and do all the ‘right’ things. I am a tax collector, someone despised in the world.’ And what we know about Jesus, Matthew is the exact person Jesus was seeking; someone who was not like all the others, someone who knew the ordinary person on the street, someone who could be shaped to become a disciple of Jesus. Jesus invited Matthew to be one in his inner circle of friends. Jesus saw something in Matthew that made him to want to directly include him.

What do they do to solidify the relationship, they have dinner together; they share a meal. Not only is Matthew present, but many of his friends, other persons who probably have deceived society. The conversation around the table must have been intriguing. There is Matthew, once disliked, now committed to following Jesus; the one who teaches inclusivity, who desires all people to know Him to be with God. Matthew was invited by Jesus, and now he is sharing his newfound relationship with God. While on the outside, there were the Pharisees looking in. Trying to see who was there and determine what was going on inside that they weren't invited too.

The Pharisees were originally not a bad group of people. Their intentions were to serve God following the letter of the law and the commandments. They wanted to be sure that God's truths were understood and obeyed. Their intentions were good. And because they wanted to do everything correctly, their desire to serve God turned into absolute perfectionism. They obeyed all Jewish laws of cleanliness, sacrifice and obedience for God. The life of a Pharisee was a life of sacrifice and servitude. They were the examples of how to serve God. They felt they had become righteous in the sight of God. Here was Jesus, inviting the sinners, having dinner with them. The ones who thought they were doing all the right things for God, were left out.

Jesus tells them, 'Well, you are right with God, you don't need a doctor. But these are people hurting. They will be made well by God through me. Oh, and by the way, figure out what this means 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous, but the sinners.' In other words, Jesus knew the Pharisees felt as though they were right with God and therefore did not need help. Jesus has come to be with the sinners, those who struggle to be accepted in the world.

The invitation to be with God is still there for us today. In all of our brokenness, God desires nothing more than for us to be in relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. It is not an invitation to the righteous, or those who pretend for the moment to be righteous. It is open to all of us. Everyone in the world matters to God. There is no exclusivity among God's people.

I am sure each of us knows of people who do not seem to matter. We are aware that children die of starvation and disease in many places in the world, even perhaps in our own community, but we do not know most of them personally. We see people in our daily walks all the time, but we do not know them. Whatever their stories might be, they do not seem to matter to us. They are unknown, and for the most part will remain that way. Perhaps we write them off as not very important. The reality is that we do not know for sure if other people matter in a world that is so large and complex. What may be just

as clear is that most of us do not know if WE matter. We exist from day to day and wonder whether anyone out there thinks of us as important, or even meaningful; anyone outside of our own loved ones anyway.

On any given day, each of us notices people who struggle to live. There are people in our world who do not have the resources for daily living. There are people in our community who desire a relationship with God. They are seeking a second chance on life; maybe even a third or fourth time. They are waiting for an invitation because maybe the church has turned them away in the past and now they are afraid to join in the community of believers. Maybe their self esteem has been so weakened they wonder if God really loves them. What about those people who are homeless or involved with substance abuse or who suffer with HIV/AIDS or who understand themselves to be gay or lesbian. These persons are children of God too and yet, sometimes I think the church unwelcomes them because they are different or not righteous enough.

Church as we know it today and its ritual are good things, but if it hadn't been for the early church proclaiming forth a message that everyone had a second chance, that sinners are welcome and expected, if they had kept this to themselves without inviting others into a relationship with God, the church would still today be a little group of men and women in Palestine. Think about that. If Matthew and the other eleven disciples had not invited others to know God through Jesus, the church would be very different today.

God desires for each of us fullness of life, but God also desires of you that you "go and do likewise" that you go forth, invite and give others a second chance. People you may be keeping in bondage by not letting them free from something that they have done against you or people who simply do not know the love of God, people the church may have turned aside. These are the people God wants us to invite into a relationship with God; the sinners of the world, those whom we have separated ourselves from.

We who have been touched by Jesus are called to bear witness to invite others to the kingdom of God. It is a witness of "no" to the powers that exclude others in the world. It is a witness of "no" to the powers that drive us to serve ourselves in a broken world. It is a witness of "no" to the searches for life and purpose and meaning apart from God. It is a witness of "yes" to God's way of life through self giving. It is a witness of "yes" to God's invitation to all people to join in the wedding feast. It is a witness of "yes" to the understanding that all of us are linked in one great body, the Body of Christ, and in that body everyone matters. God wants us to be the means whereby the grace and mercy of God would be proclaimed to the whole world. Not just for the righteous.

God invites us to a new life in Jesus Christ. There is always an open invitation no matter how often we stray or how often we falter. God welcomes us at the table of grace in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We enter His presence in this place broken; seeking a right relationship and God in his mercy forgives all our sins and still gathers us around the table of everlasting life. A feast that refreshes and continues to bring forth life.

The walls of the church cannot contain what God will bring to growth here if we let him. No, the walls of this church will simply explode forth, sending you and me into the world, to call sinners, to show forth the mercy and healing power of God, to bring to all what God desires: life in all its abundance, as shown to us in Jesus, our Lord. Let us go from this place, minister to the sick, to the needy, to those who need health, to invite those who seek a renewed life in Jesus and do so in the power of God. Welcome them into the fold as God welcomes you. Discard your prejudices and fears invite someone to join you in your journey of faith and bring them to the feast of everlasting life that you have found.

God desires of you not only for your own lives to be full and joyful. God also desires of you to proclaim to those who are struggling that indeed God extends to them His mercy. I think that what God desires of you is not only that you let God give others a second-chance, but that you be the means whereby it happens. Extend the invitation to others. Bring them to a feast that gives everlasting life.