

Genesis 12:1–9; Psalm 33:1–12; Hosea 5:15–6:6; Psalm 50:7–15;  
Romans 4:13–25; Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

**Faith Follows the Promise. Mercy Reveals the Heart.**

## Opener:

Friends, please open your Bibles to **Matthew 9:9–13 and 18–26**. If you do not have one, there should be a pew Bible near you.

Today we hear the Gospel of God from Matthew's account of Jesus calling Matthew, eating with sinners, healing a suffering woman, and raising a little girl.

**Read Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26**

These are the words of God for the people of God. "*Praise be to God.*"

Some things look dead before they look alive.

## Introduction

If you have ever ordered a bare-root tree, a rose bush, or some kind of plant through the mail or picked it from your local nursery, it is bare, it does not arrive looking beautiful. The plant usually comes in a box, wrapped in damp paper or sawdust. No leaves. No flowers. No fruit. Just roots, sticks, and a tag telling you what it is supposed to become.

And if you did not know better, you might think, "They sent me something dead."

But the grower knows what the eye cannot yet see. The promise is not in appearance. The promise is in life hidden within it. So, you plant it. You water it. You wait. And for a while, it may still look like nothing is happening.

Then one day, a little green shoot appears...

That is where our Scriptures meet us today. God calls life out of places that do not yet look alive, speaks promise into places that look uncertain, shows mercy to people others have already judged, and God brings life where everyone else has started using the language of finality.

This is what I mean: Abram looks too old to become the beginning of a great nation... Matthew looks too compromised to become a disciple... The woman looks too unclean to be welcomed... The girl looks too far gone to be helped...

But mercy sees what promise can raise. So here is the truth I want us to carry today:

**Faith follows the promise. Mercy reveals the heart.**

That is the sermon in one sentence: **Faith follows the promise. Mercy reveals the heart.**

## Genesis 12:1, Faith Follows the Promise

Our story begins before we ever get to Matthew's table. It begins with an old man named Abram standing at the edge of everything familiar.

The Lord says to Abram, "*Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you*" (Genesis 12:1, NIV).

That is not a small word. That is not a gentle suggestion. That is not God saying, “**Abram, I have prepared a five-year strategic plan, a map, a full list of contingencies, and a projected outcome report.**”

God says, “Go.” And Abram goes.

**Faith begins there.** Not with full certainty. Not with visible proof. Not with everything explained ahead of time. **Faith begins when** the promise of God becomes more trustworthy than the security of what we can already see.

God says, “*I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you*” (Genesis 12:2, NIV). God says, “*All peoples on earth will be blessed through you*” (Genesis 12:3, NIV).

Now, let’s slow down and feel that... Abram is not young. Sarai is not pregnant. They do not have a child. They do not have the land. They do not have the visible evidence. They have a promise.

And you know what? Faith follows the promise... This is not shallow optimism. This is not positive thinking. This is not pretending the hard things are not hard. This is not saying, “Everything looks good,” when everything does not look good.

Faith is deeper than that: faith says, “God has spoken, and God is faithful.”

### Psalm 33, The foundation

Psalm 33 gives us the foundation underneath Abram’s obedience: “*For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does*” (Psalm 33:4, NIV). That is why Abram can move. Because faith is not built on Abram’s strength. Faith is built on God’s faithfulness.

And Psalm 33 continues, “*The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love*” (Psalm 33:5, NIV).

That matters because the promise to Abram is never just private blessing. God is not calling Abram so Abram can become spiritually impressive, nor collect religious status. God is calling Abram so that blessing can move through him into the world.

### Holiness

#### That is holiness.

Holiness is not God giving us a religious trophy. Holiness is God forming a people through whom his faithful love can become visible.

And Friends, this is where we need to be careful: the psalm says, “*Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance*” (Psalm 33:12, NIV).

That is a beautiful line, but it can be misused if we are careless. Psalm 33 is not giving any nation permission to use God as a mascot. **It is not saying, “Put God’s name on your banner and then do whatever you want.”**

This psalm is describing the blessedness of a people whose trust, justice, hope, worship, and common life are ordered under the Lord.

A people are blessed when God is Lord, not just a decoration you were around your neck... A people are blessed when their life together bears witness to the righteousness, justice, and unfailing love of God.

So Abram hears, “Go.” And Abram goes. Faith follows the promise. But the Scripture does not let us stop there.

Because faith can become distorted. Religion can become performance. Sacrifice can continue after mercy has disappeared. Worship can remain active while the heart has wandered.

And that brings us to Hosea.

## Hosea 6, Mercy Reveals the Heart

### Mercy Reveals the Heart

Hosea is speaking to a people who still know religious language. They still know how to bring offerings. They still know how to perform the rituals. They still know how to sound like they are returning to God.

But God is not fooled by religious motion and religiosity does not please Him... God says, *“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings”* (Hosea 6:6, NIV).

That verse is not God saying sacrifice never mattered. It is God saying **SACRIFICE WITHOUT MERCY IS HOLLOW.**

- A church can have sound doctrine and still lose mercy.
- A person can know the words of faith and still avoid the way of faith.
- A congregation can protect religious respectability while missing the very people Jesus is calling.

Hosea exposes that danger.

Psalm 50 says the same thing from another angle. God tells his people that he does not need their animals, as if the Lord were hungry. God says, *“Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High”* (Psalm 50:14, NIV). Then God says, *“Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me”* (Psalm 50:15, NIV).

That is not empty ritual. That is relationship. That is trust. That is a people who know that God is not managed by religious performance. God is met in surrendered faith.

## Mercy Reveals the Heart

This is where we need to take notice: because most of us know how to look religious enough.

We know how to show up. We know how to sing the words. We know how to carry the Bible. We know how to say, “I’m fine.” We know how to keep the surface tidy.

But mercy reveals the heart.

- Mercy reveals whether our faith is alive or whether our religion has become a dry branch with no green shoot.
- Mercy reveals whether holiness is forming us into the likeness of Jesus or whether we are only guarding our own sense of respectability.

Friends have long believed that Christ is present to teach, gather, correct, and lead his people. Early Friends were not trying to preserve a religious brand. They were seeking the living reality of primitive Christianity revived — Christ present, Christ obeyed, Christ forming a holy people from the inside out.<sup>1</sup>

That means holiness cannot be reduced to religious appearance through a list of do and don’t...

- Holiness is not anxiety dressed up in church clothes.
- Holiness is not fear of contamination.
- Holiness is not standing far enough away from sinners so we can feel clean.

Holiness is life in Christ, by the Spirit, forming a people who live in faithful obedience, inward surrender, outward witness, and holy love.

And that brings us to Jesus (Ya’know because that is why we are here, right?).

In Matthew 9, Jesus shows us what Hosea means.

## Jesus Embodies Mercy

**Jesus Embodies Mercy:** Matthew tells us, “*As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth*” (Matthew 9:9, He is actually my favorite).

That is easy to read quickly. But Matthew is not sitting in a neutral place: he is sitting at a tax booth.

There are many people around him because the booth is sitting in area where crowds gather..., and that booth represented compromise. It represented collaboration with Rome. It represented greed, betrayal, uncleanness, and shame. And Matthew was not the obvious candidate for discipleship.

If we were building a religious movement, Matthew might not make the first list. But Jesus sees him. That is the mercy of God. Jesus sees more than the booth. Jesus sees more than the label. Jesus sees more than the past. Jesus sees what promise can raise. And Jesus says, “**Follow me**” (Matthew 9:9, NIV).

Matthew gets up. That is faith. Faith follows the promise.

Abram left his homeland. Matthew leaves his tax booth.

Abram did not have the full map. Matthew did not have a cleaned-up résumé.

But both hear the call. Both move toward the promise.

Matthew does not get a long probationary period before Jesus is willing to be seen with him. Matthew does not have to go hide for six months until respectable people forget his past.

Jesus calls him. Matthew follows. And the next thing we know, Jesus is at the table. Matthew tells us, “*While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples*” (Matthew 9:10, NIV).

That table is the scandal. Not because Jesus does not know who is there. Jesus knows. The Pharisees ask, “*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*” (Matthew 9:11, NIV).

You see out of their mouth, their heart is revealed: They see contamination, but Jesus sees someone needing mercy.

The Pharisees see a table that threatens holiness, but Jesus sees a table where holiness is doing its healing work.

Jesus answers, “*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick*” (Matthew 9:12, NIV). Then Jesus says, “*But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’*” (Matthew 9:13, NIV). And then he says, “*For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners*” (Matthew 9:13, NIV). Wow! I mean, WOW!

### **That is the Gospel of God.**

- Jesus does not come for people who are good at pretending they are whole.
- Jesus comes for sinners.
- Jesus comes for the sick.
- Jesus comes for the ashamed.
- Jesus comes for the ones whose lives look like bare roots and dry sticks.
- Jesus comes for those who are not yet what the tag says they are supposed to become.

### **This is why mercy reveals the heart.**

The Pharisees are not upset because Jesus is being careless. They are upset because Jesus is revealing that their idea of holiness is too small. They think holiness is protected by distance. Jesus shows that holiness is powerful enough to draw near.

They think mercy threatens holiness. Jesus shows that mercy is what holiness looks like when God comes near.

Holiness is not so fragile that mercy threatens it. In Jesus, holiness is so whole that mercy flows from it.

Paul Anderson writes about the healing and saving power of God's presence, reminding us that in Jesus the presence of God becomes accessible in ways the world had not known before.<sup>2</sup> That is what we are seeing in Matthew 9. Jesus is not merely teaching a concept. Jesus is the presence of God at the table.

- God with us.
- Mercy with us.
- Holiness with us.
- Life with us.

And then, while Jesus is still speaking, another story begins.

## Matthew 9, Faith Moves Toward Mercy

**Faith Moves Toward Mercy:** A synagogue leader comes and kneels before Jesus.

That matters... This man has standing. He has a place in the community. He has religious respectability. But grief has brought him to his knees. He says, "*My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live*" (Matthew 9:18, NIV).

**That is a remarkable sentence:** "*My daughter has just died.*" You see that is reality... "But come." Now, that is faith. He does not deny death. He brings death to Jesus.

Sometimes faith does not sound like confidence. Sometimes faith sounds like grief with enough hope left to kneel.

Jesus gets up and goes with him. But on the way, there is another interruption.

Matthew tells us that a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind Jesus and touched the edge of his cloak. She says to herself, "*If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed*" (Matthew 9:21, NIV).

- Twelve years.
- Twelve years of suffering.
- Twelve years of being weakened.
- Twelve years of social and religious isolation.
- Twelve years of being treated as unclean.
- Twelve years of learning how to live on the edge of the crowd.

She does not make a speech. She does not ask for attention. She just reaches.

- Sometimes pain makes words hard to find.
- Sometimes shame teaches people to stay quiet.
- Sometimes suffering has lasted so long that the only prayer left is a trembling reach toward Jesus.

And Jesus turns... He does not let her remain hidden. But he also does not shame her. He says, "*Take heart, daughter*" (Matthew 9:22, NIV). He says, "*Your faith has healed you*" (Matthew 9:22, NIV).

Daughter... That word matters.

- The woman who had been pushed to the edge is called daughter.
- The woman who reached from behind is brought face to face.
- The woman whose body had made her isolated is restored by mercy.

**Faith follows the promise. Mercy reveals the heart.**

So hear this:

- Abram hears, "Go." **Faith Leaves Home.**

- Matthew hears, “Follow me.” Faith Gets Up From The Tax Booth.
- The woman says, “If I only touch his cloak.” Faith Reaches Through Shame.
- The father says, “Come and put your hand on her, and she will live.” Faith Kneels In Grief.

Faith does not look the same in every life. Sometimes faith walks into the unknown. Sometimes faith rises from a compromised past. Sometimes faith reaches from the edge of the crowd because pain has made words hard to find. Sometimes faith falls at Jesus’ feet because grief has taken everything else away.

But in every case, faith moves toward the mercy of God. And wherever faith moves toward Jesus, mercy is already moving toward us. That is why mercy reveals the heart. Not only our heart, but God’s heart.

## Romans 4, The God Who Gives Life to the Dead

**The God Who Gives Life to the Dead:** Romans 4 helps us understand what is happening underneath all these stories. Paul looks back to Abraham and says the promise did not come through the law, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. Abraham trusted God before he could see the outcome.

Paul says Abraham believed in “*the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not*” (Romans 4:17, NIV).

- That is the God Abram trusted.
- That is the God Matthew met in Jesus.
- That is the God the woman reached for.
- That is the God the father knelt before.
- The God who gives life to the dead.
- The God who calls into being things that were not.
- The God who looks at bare roots and sees a tree.
- The God who looks at Abram and sees blessing for the nations.
- The God who looks at Matthew and sees a disciple.
- The God who looks at the woman and says, “Daughter.”
- The God who looks at the dead girl and takes her by the hand.

Paul says, “*Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed*” (Romans 4:18, NIV). That does not mean Abraham never struggled. It means his faith was anchored in the character of God.

- Faith is not confidence in our ability to make things work.
- Faith is confidence in the God who keeps his promise.

N. T. Wright often reminds the church that resurrection hope is not escape from the world, but God’s new creation breaking into the present.<sup>3</sup> Matthew 9 is a sign of that hope. Jesus is not offering vague religious comfort. Jesus is bringing the life of God into real bodies, real homes, real shame, real grief, real tables, and real death.

This is the Gospel. God does not wait for dead places to make themselves alive.

God calls.

God comes near.

God shows mercy.

God raises.

## What Anxious Religion Cannot See

Now we need to bring this closer to home. Because the Pharisees are easy to criticize from a distance. But anxious religion still lives:

- Anxious religion is always asking, “Who might contaminate us?”
- Mercy asks, “Who is Jesus calling to the table?”
- Anxious religion asks, “How do we protect our image?”
- Mercy asks, “How do we reveal the heart of God?”
- Anxious religion asks, “What will people think if we get too close?”
- Mercy asks, “Where is faith reaching for Jesus?”

This is where we need helpful lens. Because anxiety makes people reactive. It narrows vision. It pushes communities toward blame, distance, and control. Edwin Friedman described anxious systems as places where people often seek quick fixes and adapt to anxiety rather than mature presence.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus does not let the Pharisees define his mission. He does not let the crowd define the woman. He does not let the mourners define the girl. He does not let Matthew’s tax booth define Matthew.

- That is holy presence.
- That is mercy with a backbone.
- That is love without panic.
- That is Jesus.

And Friends, this matters for the church.

Because holiness without mercy becomes brittle.

Mercy without holiness becomes sentimentality.

But in Jesus, mercy and holiness are not enemies.

In Jesus, mercy is holy.

In Jesus, holiness is merciful.

This is the life Christ forms in us by the Spirit.

Not a church that excuses sin.

Not a church that performs religion.

Not a church that protects anxiety.

But a people who know how to follow the promise and practice mercy because Christ is present among us.

## Where Are We in the Story?

So, Friends, where do you find yourself in this story?

### **Maybe you are Abram.**

Maybe faith is calling you to step into an unknown future. You do not have the full map. You do not know how everything will work out. You just know God is calling, and the next faithful step is in front of you.

Faith follows the promise.

### **Maybe you are Matthew.**

Maybe there is an old seat you have been sitting in too long. An old identity. An old compromise. An old habit. An old shame. And Jesus is not standing far away from you with disgust. Jesus is saying, "Follow me" (Matthew 9:9, NIV).

Faith gets up.

**Maybe you are the woman.**

Maybe you have carried pain so long that you barely know how to speak about it anymore. Maybe you feel pushed to the edge. Maybe shame has taught you to keep quiet. But somewhere deep down, faith is still reaching.

Mercy sees you.

Jesus turns.

Jesus calls you daughter.

**Maybe you are the father.**

Maybe grief has brought you to your knees. Maybe the thing you are carrying feels beyond repair. Maybe all you can say is, "Lord, come. Put your hand here."

Faith kneels in grief.

And Jesus goes.

**Or maybe, if we are honest, sometimes we are the Pharisees.**

**Maybe we know how to protect religious appearance better than we know how to recognize mercy.**

**Maybe we are quicker to notice who is at the table than what Jesus is doing there.**

**Maybe we are tempted to confuse holiness with distance, when Jesus shows us holiness as healing presence.**

If that is us, then the word of Jesus is mercy too. "*Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'*" (Matthew 9:13, NIV).

That is not Jesus humiliating them. That is Jesus inviting them. **Go learn.**

There is still time to learn the heart of God. There is still time for mercy to reveal our hearts and remake them.

## The Holy Response

So what do we do with this?

- We follow the promise.
- We receive mercy.
- We practice mercy.

**First**, follow the promise.

What is the next faithful step God is calling you to take?

Not the whole map. Not the full plan. Not the final outcome. Just the next act of obedience.

Abram did not need to know everything. Matthew did not need to understand everything. The woman did not need a speech. The father did not need a solution.

They moved toward God.

**Faith follows the promise.**

**Second**, receive mercy.

Some of us are still trying to earn what Jesus came to give. We are still trying to prove we are worthy of being called. We are still trying to dress up the dry branches and pretend we are already blooming.

But Jesus does not call the healthy who think they need nothing. Jesus calls sinners. Jesus heals the sick. Jesus receives the ashamed. Jesus raises the dead.

Receive mercy.

**Let Jesus meet you where you actually are.**

**Third**, practice mercy.

Not vague kindness. Not shallow niceness. Not avoidance of truth.

Practice the mercy of Jesus.

Mercy that sees people.

Mercy that moves toward pain.

Mercy that refuses to reduce people to their worst seat, their longest illness, their deepest grief, or their public label.

Mercy that tells the truth but does not weaponize the truth.

Mercy that makes holiness visible.

This is part of our witness as Friends.

The holy life is not merely private morality. It is public mercy. It is inward surrender becoming outward love. It is Christ present in us, forming a people who know how to sit at the table, walk toward the grieving, notice the hurting, and trust the God who gives life to the dead.

Thomas Kelly once wrote about a life gathered into the divine Center, a life ordered around the living presence of God.<sup>5</sup> That is what mercy does. Mercy gathers us back to the Center. Mercy brings us back to Christ.

And when Christ is the Center, we do not have to be ruled by fear.

- We do not have to be ruled by religious appearance.
- We do not have to be ruled by shame.
- We do not have to be ruled by death.

Because mercy has called us to life.

## Conclusion

Some things look dead before they look alive. A bare-root tree does not arrive with fruit hanging from its branches. It arrives looking like a bundle of sticks and roots. But the grower knows what the eye cannot yet see.

God knows what the eye cannot yet see.

- Abram looked too old.
- Matthew looked too compromised.
- The woman looked too unclean.
- The girl looked too far gone.

But mercy sees what promise can raise. So do not despise the place where all you have is a promise.

Do not assume the tax booth gets the final word. Do not believe shame when it tells you to stay hidden. Do not let grief convince you Jesus is too late.

**Faith follows the promise.**

**Mercy reveals the heart.**

And wherever faith moves toward Jesus, mercy is already moving toward us.

So, Friends, hear the call of Christ.

Follow the promise.

Receive mercy.

Practice mercy.

Because when mercy calls the dead to life, the holy people of God begin to rise.

Amen.

### Footnotes

1. Paul N. Anderson argues that early Friends understood their calling not as founding a sect, but as recovering “Primitive Christianity Revived,” a living apostolic faith centered in knowing and obeying Christ. Paul N. Anderson, “Primitive Christianity Revived—The Original Quaker Vision,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 131 (2018): 5–8. See also Anderson’s discussion of early Quaker holiness and transformation.
2. Paul N. Anderson, “A Theology of Presence,” *Evangelical Friend* 26, no. 6 (July/August 1993): 4. Anderson emphasizes that God’s healing and saving presence comes to fullness in Jesus and becomes available through him.
3. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), esp. 189–230.
4. Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, rev. ed. (New York: Seabury Books, 2007). For a concise summary of Friedman’s framework on chronic anxiety, reactivity, and the need for non-anxious presence, see Alastair J. Roberts, *Self and Leadership: A Summary of and Engagement with Edwin Friedman’s A Failure of Nerve* (2016), 4–15.
5. Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), especially Kelly’s language of the divine Center and the gathered life.
6. Carole Dale Spencer’s treatment of Quaker holiness is helpful behind this manuscript’s claim that holiness is inward transformation becoming outward witness. See Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism: An Historical Analysis of the Theology of Holiness in the Quaker Tradition* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007).
7. John MacArthur’s exposition of Matthew 9 rightly stresses the scandal of Jesus’ mercy toward sinners, though this manuscript frames that mercy through a Friends-Holiness lens. See John MacArthur, *Matthew 8–15*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987).
8. D. Elton Trueblood’s concern for “basic Christianity,” Leonard Sweet’s emphasis on table-shaped gospel witness, and Brené Brown’s work on shame and connection sit in the background of the pastoral applications. See D. Elton Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014); Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012).