

*"As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' So he arose and followed Him. Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard that, He said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.'"—Matt. 9:9-13. (NKJV)*

**THE GOOD PHYSICIAN**  
**A Sermon by Theodor Zahn**

ONE of the best known scenes in the Gospel story is here placed before our eyes, and the same picture, in all essentials, meets us more than once in the Gospels. On the one side stands Jesus, the Friend of publicans and sinners, and who sat at meat with them; and on the other side the Pharisees, who murmur and find fault with the Lord for so doing. On another day Jesus replied to the murmuring of the Pharisees by the three parables of the lost piece of silver, the lost sheep, and the lost son. The same opposition was manifested when Jesus sat at meat as the guest of Simon the Pharisee, and, to the astonishment of those who were eating with Him, allowed an abandoned woman to wash His feet with her tears, and to wipe them with her hair.

To all sorts of people Jesus cried, "Follow Me." There were the honest fishermen by the Lake of Gennesaret. There was the faithful son who wanted first to go and bury his father, who had just died. And today it is a publican who is sitting at the receipt of custom at Capernaum. He is named Matthew, and he is the Apostle whose name stands at the head of the Gospel from which our text is taken. The publican must not be missing from the inner circle of His disciples, from those whom Jesus invited to give up their former calling and become His fellow workers. He was not only tolerated but even drawn by Jesus to Himself, and brought forward by Him that all might know why Jesus came into the world.

If we ask in amazement how it was that a publican could immediately respond to such a call and give up the whole course of his life, a satisfactory answer will occur to each of us. The publican Matthew, like many more of his order, must have heard Jesus preaching more than once, and possibly he may have even listened secretly to the preaching of John the Baptist. This powerful preaching had opened a new world to him, the very opposite of the world in which he had hitherto lived--a world of righteousness, of grace, and of peace. Hence sprang his implicit trust in the Man who offered Himself to him as a guide to a new life and a new life work. He celebrates with a feast the hour in which Jesus made him a sharer in His own work. On the same day he invites many of his own class to a meal in his house. And as they feel drawn to Jesus, so Jesus also seems to feel at ease in their company. But what a company that was!

Even those who know but little of the conditions of the Holy Land at that time (of the fearful pressure of taxation under which the Jewish people had long groaned, of the habitual embezzlements and extortions of those who farmed out the taxes and of the officials under them) can understand that publicans and sinners were almost interchangeable words. Jesus Himself did not speak of them in any other way. In fact, a want [lack] of all love for the Fatherland and a heartless love of gain must characterize an Israelite like Matthew or Zaccheus before he could become such a parasite, and thus suck the blood from the body of his own people. We cannot

wonder that the Pharisees sneered and shook their heads, when they asked the disciples of Jesus, "Why does your Master eat with publicans and sinners? He should not do so, if He intends to be a preacher of righteousness. He ought to avoid it, if He would be regarded as religious Himself." At a later time they went still further. They had not as yet said, "By the society that He chooses it is evident that He Himself is a sinner." But all their moral principles and inherited prejudices were roused by this sight, and an opposition to Jesus was now raised, which was not set at rest till Jesus hung upon the Cross as a transgressor of the law and a misleader of the people; and even then this opposition was not silenced.

But what has this to do with us, who are gathered together in the Name of the Reviled and Crucified One? When we look at this double picture, on the one side Jesus surrounded by publicans and sinners and on the other the Pharisees who murmured, we have no doubt on which side we ought to place ourselves. Our hearts, or at all events our Christian education, urges us at once to the side of the loving Master, who parts with none of His majesty and purity by sitting at meat with degraded and erring people. And yet more than this, we place ourselves not only by the side of the publicans who are gathered round Jesus, we actually take their places. Today, as on every Sunday in the service at the Altar, we have said with the publican in the Gospel, "God be merciful to me a sinner," and we turn away with horror from the Pharisee who stands opposite to him in his self-righteous pride and with his blasphemous prayer.

But we may well doubt whether this means very much. It should make us pause to remember, that many who are quite unused to allow the sigh of the publican to pass their lips are yet very ready to join in the judgment of condemnation on all Pharisaical doings, all spiritual pride, and all hypocritical piety. Again, is Jesus, as He verily lives before us in the Gospels, really what we need? Does the society, in which we once more see Him today, suit us? We generally choose other company for ourselves. And, lastly, can we all of us give a satisfactory answer to the question of the Pharisees, "*Why does your Master eat with publicans and sinners?*"

It seems as though the disciples of those times were embarrassed by this question. Jesus Himself was obliged to give the answer in their stead. I imagine it would not be very different now, therefore I think it will do us all no harm if during this hour we consider seriously the answer which was given by our Lord Jesus Christ. He first replied with the proverb, "*They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.*" This is indisputably true. But in the proverb, which is disputed by none, the answer is to be found which is by no means so plain to all. Jesus says by it, "*I am a Physician; therefore the sick seek Me, and I visit the sick. But because I am a Physician, the whole have no part in Me.*"

1. The whole need not a physician. Are there any men, then, who are whole? Jesus did not directly deny it. The publicans and sinners were sick people—sick in soul, sick in honour, sick in conscience. The Pharisees were whole in comparison with them. They had remained true to their nationality; they lived correctly according to the law of their fathers; they were held in honour by their nation as the guardians and teachers of the law. If they were of different minds among themselves on religious and moral questions, still they had and knew the law, and were well versed in expounding it. They had had great teachers, whose decisions were accounted by them as a Gospel. They would also gladly have recognized a new Master, who in their own way, only more clearly and more intelligently than their former masters, would comment on the Word of God and teach the true wisdom of life. But they had no need of a physician who said, I am a Physician; because they did not feel ill.

Are there any among us who are not ill? Why, in the great company of those who have been baptized in the name of Christ we find many people like the Pharisees, who are unable to accept Jesus and to desire a closer relationship to Him, just because Jesus is a Physician and they feel well. The Gospel is a medicine; to one it tastes bitter, to another nauseously sweet. Who cares to take medicine when he feels perfectly well? A draught of fresh water from a natural or an artificial well, or a glass of wine at a joyful feast, tastes better and does more good to a man who is whole.

It may seem unnecessary to speak of such healthy people in church; they do not hear, for they do not come to church. Certainly every one of us is ready to assent to the words of the Apostle, "What have I to do to judge those also that are without?" We may not judge those who turn away from our Physician and His medicine. We may, indeed, judge no man, for then we should be Pharisees. Neither ought we to be indifferent to them. They are our brethren, our fellow citizens, our fellow workers. They are, perhaps, our personal friends and nearest relatives. There are people among them, too, who really give us the impression of perfect health. They accomplish great things, and in many ways their work is beneficial. They are held in honour, and not without cause. Some among them are the darlings of their nation, and we have been accustomed to admire them from our youth up. How can we remain unmoved when such eminent persons, after living in our midst, end their days among us without drawing near to the Lord, who is our Physician?

In no other respect is there any impassable gulf between us and them. They have been baptized as we have, and we are men like them. Only a movable barrier seems to separate us. How often we see one who has been brought up in Church ways, and who has really possessed religious faith, gradually glide across or even suddenly fall away to the side of those who imagine that they can get on without Jesus the Physician. A religious boy grows into a man of the world. His parents were religious, but before they closed their eyes the last thread was broken which had hitherto linked the son to the community of Christ. Who can deny that the great reputation of those healthy and strong masterminds has much to do with these sorrowful developments? There, many princes in the realm of intellect may be seen; here, not a few publicans and sinners.

I believe that it matters much to us what the healthy people on that side think and say of the Physician and His medicine. One of them once said, "Whoever possesses art and science possesses religion also; let him who has neither have religion." During their life they do not intend to dispense with that superiority to all that is trivial and transitory, which is preserved for other men by their faith. They want to have a kind of religion. But the true religion, the revelation of God in His Son Jesus Christ, does not suit them; for He is a Physician, and they are whole. So they search for and provide some substitute or other for themselves, leaving religion for those who are less gifted and who do not possess or know anything about art or science.

Others go still farther. They join in the well meant words, "Religion must be preserved for the people." And by people they do not understand the nation to which they are proud to belong, but the mass of the uneducated, who earn their bread in the sweat of their brow. They consider that the latter could not get on without religion, for without it they would become rough and rude, discontented and violent. They look upon religion as useful in disciplining the turbulent masses.

Since we have possessed colonies, we have sometimes heard such people speaking, by way of exception, in a friendly manner of missions to the heathen, whereas formerly they would only have mocked at them. The Roman Catholic missionaries are especially praised, because they are

more speedy in attaining their object. Christianity is good for the negro, because it teaches him discipline and order, work and cleanliness. We Germans, however, who have passed through the children's school of Christianity a thousand years ago or more, need not be perpetually passing through it. At all events, the educated members of the nation do not need the Gospel any more, for they are strong enough for the battle of life without it. Some are ready to allow that, in spite of the most highly developed culture, there are some temperaments that absolutely need the consolation of the Gospel, and that to them nothing can replace it. They do not object to their wives being religious and practicing devotion. They themselves stand afar off; they do not feel any need, for they feel they are whole.

Now, how are we to reply to all this? Are we to prove to such people that they are sick, and that our whole nation is sick, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot? Are we to force ourselves upon them and show them that their imaginary health does not exist, and that they are sadly in need of the Physician? That would not be like unto the Master. Jesus did not say to the Pharisees, "Come unto Me," but He said, "Go your way." Neither did He say, "Come and learn to know Me better," but, "Go and learn what is written in your Bible: 'I will have mercy and not sacrifice.'" If ye were compassionate, ye would not look down so contemptuously on degraded and inferior people, and so askance at those who take an interest in them. You would not find the distance so great between them and yourselves, but would acknowledge them as your equals in all the essentials which make up the misery and the dignity of man.

Go and learn better what you yourselves acknowledge as the chief command of your God--the law of love. Then prove yourselves, and thus learn to know yourselves. Perhaps the day will come when you will find yourselves destitute of love, and therefore destitute of all true life; when you will feel sick in the innermost center of your being. Remember then that there is a Physician who heals all diseases.

Jesus still speaks thus to those who are whole, and who turn their backs upon Him; and He can scarcely speak in any other way to many of those who confess Him. The same people that He calls "the whole" in parabolic sayings, He calls "the righteous" when using no figure. But when we ask where righteous people are now to be found, we shall not exactly look for them outside our own circle, but first of all among those who still adhere to the Church, the Word of God, and the Altar. And there also they are really to be found. There are plenty of Pharisees among those who call themselves the disciples of Jesus. We can prove this at once by noticing how seldom a joyful spirit is to be seen in those who are well disposed towards the Church, and who conscientiously fulfill their religious duties.

The company gathered round the table in the house of Matthew was in a joyful, festive mood, and this also was considered a cause of offense. On the same day, the disciples of John, the preacher of repentance, came to Jesus and asked Him, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but Thy disciples fast not?" And Jesus answered, "Can the children of the bride-chamber mourn when the bridegroom is with them?" There is a time for fasting and there is a time for sorrow, but he who sits at meat with Jesus is celebrating a wedding and cannot be sorrowful again immediately. Such a man will go away from the Lord's Table and from the House of God, to his own home, his face beaming with joy. How comes it to pass that we see so little of this joyfulness in so many Christians? They may be righteous, but so were the Pharisees.

If we are righteous, we must also offer sacrifices. We, as Evangelical Christians, acknowledge as such only works of love and the sacrifice of the praise of our lips. Such sacrifices are well

pleasing to God, and we rejoice that they are to be found in our midst. For example, it is meet and right that we should offer our confession of Apostolic faith as a sacrifice of praise to God every Sunday. But we must also allow those words to be said to us, "I have more pleasure in mercy than in sacrifice." Confession of faith may be so made that it sounds as though it were meritorious to be able to believe and to dare to confess. A sacrifice of praise, beginning quite rightly with the words "I thank Thee, O God," may end in words which are an abomination in the sight of God and of man. The prayer of the Pharisee in the Temple was of this nature.

All who confess Christ and all who worship in the House of God must therefore take to heart the words of the Lord: "I have more pleasure in mercy than in sacrifice." In these days those words are emphasized by many Christians, while they even reproach our Church with attending so exclusively to doctrine, confession, and public worship, that she fails in active sympathy with the needs of the community and neglects her social tasks. There may have been times when there was some truth in this complaint. But in our century the revival of Home as well as of Foreign Missions is a real proof that Evangelical Christianity is mindful again of these words.

For a long time past there has been no lack of opportunities for offering to God sacrifices which are also works of compassionate love. But the way in which, in a certain quarter, the Church is invited to attend to her social tasks tends to obscure the Gospel. Jesus did not say that He came to make the world better, to create a better order of things in the State and in society, and to put an end to the ancient strife between mine and thine to the satisfaction of all, but He said He was a Physician. A physician must always treat separately the individuals who need His help in sickness. Those who feel called to take part with the followers of Jesus in His work must strive to be like Him in thought and in their treatment of men, instead of carrying out their own wise or foolish thoughts. They must, first of all, realize that the root of all the evil in the world is to be found in the sickness of the human heart, and that, in all their efforts to heal, they are only bungling if they do not attack the seat of the disease. But they only can realize this, and act in accordance with it, who have studied the universal sickness in themselves, and have found the true seat of the disease in their own lives, and have experienced something at least of the healing power of the great Physician.

2. We have seen that there are many and divers kinds of men who are whole who have no part in Jesus, and who must be left to themselves by Him for the present. But there are plenty of others who are sick and who are being treated by this Physician. They think much of Him and will one day know that they have to thank Him for everything. Are we sick folk like them? Nothing was taught us so early, and nothing has been impressed upon us so often, as the fact that we are sinners, and that all evil proceeds from our sin and that of our fellowmen. But on whom does it still make any impression? To how many has it become insipid food? There are many, at all events, who do not find it any help. They remain as they were--today happy, tomorrow sad; today content with the world and with themselves, tomorrow discontented with everything; today crushed down by despair and tomorrow as haughty as the Pharisees.

Perhaps we have not yet heard the true preacher of repentance. It was not Moses with his Law nor John the Baptist with his words of thunder. But it was Jesus who said, "I am come to call sinners to repentance." He even preaches repentance without speaking. He preaches repentance by His mere presence, by His holy face, His faultless life, His unselfish love for mankind, by the peace of God which is poured out over His whole Being. Even the heathen said, "Behold the man," or, "Certainly this is a righteous man." And down to the present day the enemies of the Gospel have never succeeded in blackening this radiant human form. It still shines in the midst

of history, and in the midst of the present world. And all the greater and lesser lights of humanity pale before it, even before "the breath of death breathes upon them" or the strong wind of this world's judgment extinguishes them.

All the differences between the more or less good disappear in the light of this holy human life. Together with Him may be found the true Israelite without guile like Nathanael; and the prodigal son of the same nation; busy Martha and thoughtful Mary; and the woman who was a great sinner. It is difficult to regard all such differences as insignificant. It is painful to be obliged to confess to ourselves that had our education and position in life been different, we might not have been safe from the deepest abyss into which we have seen others fall. But truth will have it so. The man who with a single and upright heart gazes upon the holy Man Jesus feels pricked to the heart, and is forced at last to confess, "Thou only, O Lord, art true Man, as God would have Him be; we are all only caricatures of men. Thou only art pure; we are all impure. Thou only art whole; we are all sick." There is no question of a little more strength or weakness, of perfection or imperfection; but it is a question of health that longs for eternal life, and of sickness which leads to death.

A man who allows himself to be thus called to repentance by Jesus has already found out to some extent that He who only is whole is also the Physician of all who are sick. He will soon learn more, for all that Jesus says and does bears witness to him that the good pleasure of God which rests on Jesus, and the love of God in which He lives and moves, do not concern him only, but all who allow themselves to be called to repentance by Jesus. The love of God for His Son is already grace for the sinners who cling to Him, and who, taking His hand, appear before the Eternal Father. There is forgiveness of sins. The Son of God came that man might be enabled to believe. Therefore the Pure One did not shun, but sought the society of the impure. Therefore He sat at meat with the publicans who had taken to heart His call to repentance. In communion with Him they have forgiveness of sins. This is balm for the wounds of the broken heart; this is the return of health. Here the joyful sense of recovery from severe sickness makes itself felt; here also is thankful love for the Physician who has given His help.

But what am I speaking of? Of things that happened eighteen or nineteen hundred years ago, or of things that we now experience? It seems as though one of us ought to come forward and bear witness, "It is still so today. I have experienced it." It seems as though one Christian ought to tell another how sick he was, and how he experienced the help of the Physician. But who will do it? Who will dare to venture? These are very delicate matters. It would be neither beneficial nor desirable for all if one were to reveal the depths of the life he led without His God and Saviour, or the secrets of his return to God, in the presence of the community. The latter could not be done truthfully without the former.

But still worse would it be for one of us to be ashamed of that which alone has saved our honour. Yea, it would indeed be disgraceful for one who preaches the Gospel to be ashamed of the Gospel. The man who preaches in sincerity, and the man who hears in unfeigned faith, alike confess: "We belong to the sick who need the Physician; we know only One who is whole, even Jesus Christ, and He is our Physician." We also know by experience that health streams forth from Him in the call to repentance, in the forgiveness of sins, and in the power of sanctification. Do not let us allow ourselves to be led astray by the hateful scars that we perceive on ourselves and our fellow Christians, nor by the slowness of recovery and the constant return of the old sickness. All these things only remind us that we need the Physician as long as we remain in the great infirmary of this world. Therefore let us hold fast to the tried Physician, whose skillful and tender hand,

whose patience and faithfulness, have been tried by us. We will not let Him go, neither will He let us go, till we are quite whole. Amen.