

The Reason for Ritual

Good morning everybody. If you have a bible, head with me over to **Matthew 9**. If you're new around here, what we like to do on Sundays is just **open up the bible** to a passage or two, unpack what it means, and then talk about what it looks like to apply it into our lives today. And right now, we're in a series where we're just doing that straight through the book of Matthew, line-by-line. And specifically right now, in chapters 8-10, we're exploring some of the *people* that Jesus interacts with *in* the story. Jesus comes across a wide variety of people, and in each interaction, we get a glimpse of who Jesus is and what his heart is for people in general.

Now in today's story, Jesus is going to have some of his first **run-ins with people** that represent **"the Law."** Now when I say that, I don't mean "the Law" as in "the cops,"—I mean people who were steeped in the traditions and commandments in the law of *Moses*—the law that you and I find primarily in the first five books of the Old Testament. **At the time Jesus arrives on the scene, there was a certain understanding, from that part of the bible, of how God related to people, and how people related to God.**

And today, Jesus interacts with three specific groups of **people who saw themselves as experts** in all that: the *Pharisees*, the *scribes* (or *teachers* of the Law), and the *disciples of John*. And in Jesus' interaction with each of them, **he engages with that understanding of how to relate to God, he deconstructs it, and then completely reorients it. And my take on it is that through these stories, he might just want to deconstruct and reorient how some of us relate to God too.** So let's dig in and see what we can learn together.

Now just as a heads up, I'm actually going to take these three passages a little **out of order** today. I'm going to cover the story in the *middle* of our passage, and then the stories on either side of that one. The reason for that is because I think **the middle story contains a major insight—sort of an "interpretive key"—that helps us understand the other two stories better.** So we're going to start there in the middle, and use what we learn for the other two. Make sense? Cool. Pick it up with me in chapter 9, verse 9:

[9] As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth (meaning Matthew was a tax collector), and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. [10] And as Jesus reclined at table in the house (Matthew's house), behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. [11] And when the Pharisees saw this,

they said to his disciples, “Why does **your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?**” [12] But when ~~he~~ Jesus heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. [13] Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came **not** to call the righteous, but sinners.”

So in our first story, Jesus calls a guy named Matthew to follow him. **Matthew is**, in all likelihood, the Matthew who wrote the book we’re reading right now—the *gospel* of Matthew. But back when Jesus called Matthew to follow him, Matthew was a **tax collector**. And that’s precisely what prompts the tension and controversy in this particular story. For those unfamiliar, tax collectors were not a wildly *popular* bunch among Jewish people at this time. They were likely seen as equal parts *traitors* and *con-men*.

For reference, imagine with me that a foreign government takes over the U.S. in a **Man in the High Castle**-type situation, and one of your best friends hops on the payroll of that foreign government, starts forcing you to pay 40%, 50% or more of your income *to* that government, this friend gets rich off of all of that, and they use the foreign government’s military to threaten you if you don’t pay. My guess is that you’re not gonna be a huge fan of that friend of yours anymore. That’s essentially who tax collectors were. Needless to say, **if you’re Matthew, you don’t have a lot of Jewish people dying to grab dinner with you. You’ve probably got more people than not who hate you and see you as the worst kind of bad person there is.**

But in the story, Jesus walks up to Matthew and calls *Matthew* to be his disciple. Shortly after, he heads over to **Matthew’s house for dinner**. And to make matters worse, a host of other tax collectors show up to the dinner party, as well as a group of people referred to only as “sinners.” Now there’s some debate as to who these people were exactly. It could’ve been anyone with an obviously sinful lifestyle like a prostitute or a thief, all the way down to just any common people who *didn’t* live in strict obedience to Old Testament law. But whoever it was, the Pharisees are not happy about Jesus having dinner with them at Matthew’s house, so they ask his disciples about it.

You’ve got to remember that in this day and age, **who you ate with was a big deal**, socially speaking. **To eat with someone was in essence to associate yourself with them.** And often, it was to approve of their behavior and lifestyle. And in part, that *is* what is happening with *this* dinner party. At this dinner, there *is* an association and approval of *someone’s* actions taking place. But **it’s not Jesus approving of sinners. It’s the sinners approving of Jesus.** Several commentators on the book of Matthew actually note that this dinner is actually a *reception*. It’s a *banquet*, sponsored by Matthew. It’s Matthew associating himself with *Jesus* and *Jesus’* movement—*Jesus’ way*

of life. Matthew has undergone a transformation: from traitor and con-man to disciple and follower of Jesus of Nazareth. And he invites all his shady friends to this dinner with Jesus because he wants *them* to follow Jesus too.

Jesus actually alludes to all of this in his answer to the Pharisees' question. First, he says that "sick people" are the ones that need a doctor. In other words, when a doctor hangs around sick people, it's not because he approves of *sickness*—it's because he wants to do something *about* the sickness. In the same way, Jesus hanging out with sinners isn't because he approves of sin, it's because he wants to do something *about* that sin. But he also says *this*—and this is the "interpretive key" I mentioned earlier, so I want us to spend some time on it:

Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'

Now first off, this statement would've been wildly offensive to the Pharisees Jesus says it to. Keep in mind, they are *experts* (and very much saw *themselves* as experts) in the Old Testament. Jesus here *quotes* the Old Testament—specifically the book of Hosea—and prefaces it with "go and learn what this means." This would be like me rolling into a fourth year philosophy class at UT and going, "you guys should really read some Aristotle—you might learn something." Jesus is implying that they are unfamiliar with—or at least *confused by*—the thing they've devoted their *life* to studying in detail.

So lest we find ourselves in the same place as the Pharisees—not knowing what that verse means—let's actually look at that verse from Hosea in full. We'll put it up on the screen—this is Hosea 6:6—the verse Jesus quotes from:

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice (that's the part Jesus quoted), *and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*

So God "desires mercy, not sacrifice." But the second half of that verse just revealed that this passage isn't just talking about sacrifice *in a general sense*, as in "being a sacrificial person." It wouldn't make any sense for Jesus to discourage that—he actually *encourages* that on a regular basis. Rather, it's talking about a *specific* type of sacrifice: the *sacrificial system* in the Old Testament. We know that because the *second* half of the verse uses the official term "burnt offering," which is a specific *type* of sacrifice within that system.

So I need to give you a thirty-second crash course in the sacrificial system. Are you guys ready for such a thing? I know that is exactly what you showed up here this morning hoping you would become experts in. But it's important that we get it, so that we can

understand what Jesus is saying. *Essentially*, the thinking behind the sacrificial system was this: sin is a big deal, it separates us from God, and something has to be done about that. If you're a follower of Jesus, you should be tracking with *all of that* so far. But in **those days**, what had to be done about it was that you had to offer a *sacrifice* for your sin. One specific type of sacrifice was called a "burnt offering." Essentially, it was a way of acknowledging your sin nature before God, and expressing a desire for a renewed relationship *with* him. *You would go to the temple altar (or maybe a priest would, on your behalf), and you would offer a sacrifice to God. It was a ritual—but it was a ritual with a distinct purpose behind it.*

Now **keep in mind, the Pharisees were experts** in rituals like these, so they were very familiar with the system. In fact, they saw *themselves*, basically, as the *gatekeepers* of it. They had sort of set themselves up as the authorities on whether or not people were properly *offering* these sacrifices. But here was their problem, and this is so important to get: **the Pharisees emphasized the ritual, but they had forgotten the purpose. Somewhere along the line, the ritual had become more important to them than the reason for the ritual.**

So **what was the reason**? Well we saw it right there in Hosea 6. The purpose was *mercy* and an *acknowledgment of God*. In fact, this passage says that God *prefers those* things, not the sacrifices. Apparently, the point of sacrifice wasn't the sacrifice *itself*. It was meant as a pointer to, a reminder of, what God *really* wants. **The purpose was to reunite God with his people, despite their sin. The entire point of the sacrificial system was reuniting God with sinners by dealing with their sin.**

So here's **why I say the Pharisees had forgotten** the reason: because here Jesus is in the story offering mercy and relationship with God to sinners, sinners are *receiving* it—and all the Pharisees can think about is how it's not supposed to *work* like that. **But listen: that's exactly how it's supposed to work—that was precisely the point of the sacrificial system.** It's just that Jesus is going about it in a new way that just doesn't fit in the existing framework. And *that's* their problem with it. Now, I know we just covered a lot in a little amount of time, but does all of that make sense, at least in theory?

Okay, now I want to look a little more quickly at **the other two stories** in our passage with everything we just talked about in mind. Because I think a lot of what we see in the scribes and the disciples of John is actually a *similar* misunderstanding of the Old Testament law. We'll look at the scribes first. Jump up with me to v. 1 of chapter 9:

[1] And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. [2] And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus

saw **their faith**, he said to the **paralytic**, “Take heart, my son; your **sins are forgiven.**” [3] And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” [4] But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think **evil** in your hearts? [5] For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? [6] But **that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins**”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” [7] And he rose and went home. [8] When the **crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.**

So in this story, a **paralyzed man is brought to Jesus** on a mat. When Jesus sees the man, and the *faith* of the people who brought the man to him, he tells him that his sins are forgiven. The *scribes*, who are watching all of this go down, don’t *like* that Jesus said this. **Because remember, from their perspective, that’s not how this works. From their perspective, for there to be forgiveness of sins, there has to be an offering made, an acknowledgement of sin—there’s a process and a ritual that has to be followed. But here is Jesus just walking around telling people their sins are forgiven, without any of that happening.** So they accuse him of *blasphemy* (of claiming to do what only God, through the sacrificial system, can do).

Jesus, knowing what they’re thinking, asks “**which is easier** to do? To say ‘your sins are forgiven’? Or to say ‘get up and walk’?” So I’ll just ask y’all—which is easier to say? Well it’s easier to say “your sins are forgiven.” Because there’s no way to verify whether or not that’s *true*. Right? **I could walk around telling people their sins are forgiven all day long. I could do it Oprah style: “you get forgiveness! And you get forgiveness!” I could claim to do that all day long, because there’s no way for anybody to know whether it has really happened.** But Jesus says “**so that you will know I have the authority to do the unverifiable thing, I’ll do the verifiable thing.**” And he tells the man to get up and walk, and the man does.

And **plenty of people see it** happen, it says. So now the scribes have a bit of a P.R. problem on their hands. They’ve been emphasizing to people, non-stop, the necessity of the sacrificial system for forgiveness to happen. And Jesus has just seemingly bypassed the whole sacrificial system and then been *validated* in doing so. **He has sidestepped the ritual, but has accomplished the reason for the ritual: restoring people to God, via the forgiveness of their sins.** Once again, Jesus cares about the *reason* for the ritual.

Okay, let’s look at **the last story**, and then we’ll see how this all might apply to us today. Pick it up with me down in v. 14:

[14] Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but **your disciples do not fast?**” [15] And Jesus said to them, “Can the **wedding guests mourn** as long as the bridegroom is **with them?** The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and **then they will fast.** [16] No one puts a piece of **unshrunk cloth** on an **old garment**, for the patch **tears away** from the garment, and a **worse tear** is made. [17] Neither is **new wine** put into **old** wineskins. If it is, the skins **burst** and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But **new wine** is put into **fresh** wineskins, and so **both** are preserved.”

So this time it's the “disciples of John (the Baptist)” who approach Jesus. Now, this was a slightly *different* group than the Pharisees and the scribes. But they were *similar* in that they *also* took adherence to the law very seriously. **While the Pharisees were sometimes more focused on the ritual of the sacrificial system, John's disciples were a little more focused on rituals like fasting.** To them, fasting was an important ritual that God regularly commanded from his people, but they didn't see the disciples regularly participating in. They probably see or hear about Jesus' disciples having a feast with tax collectors and sinners, and that seems off to them. They want to know why they and the Pharisees fast, but Jesus' disciples don't seem like they do.

Jesus answers by saying three different things to them, that are really **three ways of saying the same thing.** He offers two word pictures: one about patching old clothing, and one about storing wine in old wineskins. Without going into unnecessary detail, the basic point is that you *can't do* either of those two things—it won't *work*. If you patch an old garment with new material it will *tear*, and if you pour new wine into old wineskins, the wineskins will *burst*.

But **before all of that,** he says this, which I think is probably the most vivid for us: “**can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?**” Weddings back then, like many today, were *massive* celebrations. Jewish weddings actually lasted an entire *week*. **Dads with daughters in the room: you think you're stressed out now about having to pay for a wedding one day? Try multiplying that by seven days in a week. I've got a daughter and I'm getting anxious just thinking about that.** But weddings were *huge* feasts, *huge* celebrations. So Jesus says “you don't *fast* at a wedding—that's the exact opposite of what a wedding *is*.”

Imagine **one of your best friends** in the world is **getting married,** and they go *all out* for the wedding. There's good food, good drink, everybody's dancing. And you go to talk to them at the reception, they're all smiles, and they say, “how are you liking the wedding?” And you say, “well actually, I felt like this was a good weekend to start Keto. So I'm not

partaking in the food or the drink, and I'm a little too tired to dance." Can you imagine how *confused* your friend would be? Maybe even how *offended* they might be? They're probably going to think "hey, Keto is great—do your thing—but don't you think you could've started that *tomorrow*? We're *celebrating* right now." It's a fundamental misunderstanding of your surroundings and the mode of the moment.

I think Jesus is **saying something similar to John's disciples** in our story. He says, essentially, "we're in *wedding* mode right now, and you're trying to have a *funeral*. I'm on the scene. People are being brought back from the dead. People are being healed. People are coming to discover who God is and responding with repentance. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is time to *celebrate*, and *that's why* my disciples aren't fasting." Fasting is great—it's a way to turn your attention and focus towards God. But Jesus is saying to John's disciples, "God is right here in front of you, and you're still trying to find him in fasting. You've got the *ritual* down, but you're missing the *reason* for the ritual."

You see again, the Pharisees and John's disciples were **trying to fit Jesus into** their existing ritual practices. But Jesus makes it clear that he is new wine, he's the new patch on the garment. He is doing a new thing, in a new way. And somewhat ironically, that "new" thing is really just a different expression of what God has been up to all along, what God has *cared* about all along. And that's sinners coming to find God's mercy. Sinners acknowledging and responding to the grace of God. Jesus is trying to help them look past the ritual so that they can see the incredible thing God is doing right in their midst and be a part of it. They want *ritual*; but Jesus wants the *purpose* for the ritual. Is that making sense?

Okay. So with all that unpacked, where do these passages need to **intersect our lives today**? My guess is that many of you here in this room aren't fixated on the Old Testament sacrificial system and need to be shaken out of it. So how might this impact you and I? Well once again, remember the problem with the Pharisees from the first story we looked at. **They were so fixated on the ritual, that they had forgotten the reason for the ritual.**

And I think it's **worth noting** that our faith as followers of Jesus, is in many ways **also a ritualistic faith**. Right? Maybe we wouldn't use that word to describe it, because "ritual" sounds like witchcraft to us. But really, a *ritual* is simply something you do, usually on a *repeated basis*, to help achieve a certain *purpose*. **So this—the Gathering on Sundays—is a ritual.** The things we do *during* the Gathering are *rituals*. Singing songs to Jesus, learning from the Scriptures, the awkward two minutes where I very rudely make you talk to people you don't know—all of those things are *rituals*. Showing up to LifeGroup is a

ritual. Many of your LifeGroups have “rhythms,” where you go somewhere in the city and hang out, hopefully inviting people that don’t follow Jesus to come too—that’s a *ritual*. Reading the Scriptures each day. Prayer. A day of *rest* once a week. *Confession and repentance*. We could go on—but all of these things are *rituals* that we participate in as God’s people.

And *all* of these rituals have *purpose* behind them. Each one of them have unique purposes of their own, but *all* of them have the *common* purpose of helping us and others discover and walk in intimacy with God through the Spirit. But **the temptation for us—just like the temptation of these three groups of people in the passage—is to continue the *ritual*, but forget the *reason* for it.** The temptation, for instance, is to attend *Sunday Gatherings* because it’s a tradition or because we grew up doing it. The temptation is to *sing* because that’s what we do. The temptation is to *listen to the teaching* because it Christians do—listen to sermons. The temptation is to show up to LifeGroup because we feel obligated to show up. The temptation is to *read the bible* in the morning just because that’s what we were told to do, or because we feel guilty if we *don’t*.

But *none* of those motivations embody the *heart*—the *reason*—for those rituals. The purpose of ritual is a *knowledge of* and *relationship with* God himself. The purpose is to grow more in love *for* and intimacy *with* him. The goal is to see our sin as a problem and Jesus as the solution. The point is to align our heart and our desires more and more with the God who made us, in such a way that mercy flows from God, to us, and then *through* us, towards others. The reason for those rituals are not the rituals *themselves*. The reason for those rituals is a vibrant relationship with God.

And *when forget that*, we can really quickly start to resemble the Pharisees, and the scribes, and the disciples of John. **We can become *experts* in ritual, but strangers to God.** We can become “good church people”: people who participate in all the right things and go through all the right motions, but whose hearts are far from walking with God himself. *And here’s the thing: when that’s the case, all it will take is the right hobby or the right girlfriend or boyfriend or the right combination of life circumstances to come along, and all of a sudden even the *rituals* fall by the wayside...because that’s all they were: empty rituals. I see this happen a dozen times a year as a pastor. **When our relationship with God goes no *deeper* than ritual, it’s only a matter of time until something else becomes more important.***

So *how do we avoid* ending up there? Well first I’ll tell you one thing we *don’t* do: we don’t abandon those good rituals altogether. Sometimes that’s the response I’ve seen people have. “Well, I’ve been reading my bible, but I don’t see the purpose in it—my

heart's not in it—so I might as well stop.” “Well I’ve been going to church, but I don’t really think I’m getting much out of it or don’t understand why I need to, so I’m just going to stop.” So often, the temptation when we lose the heart behind ritual, is to abandon the ritual altogether. But can I just try and show you why that solution is not a solution?

Let’s change the details a little. Something you and I should do regularly is **change the oil** in our car. Maybe you do that, maybe you don’t do it, but all of us *should* do it regularly. But let’s say one day you realize, before you take your car to the shop, “you know what? I don’t see the *reason* for this. I just take my car to the shop all the time for oil changes, and I haven’t seen it *tangibly* benefit me one bit yet.” So I’m just going to stop doing it, because I don’t see the *reason* for it. Do you see how that’s not really a *solution* to the problem? You’ve recognized a problem, and then you’ve created a bigger, more serious problem to try and solve it.

Okay, **in a similar way**, realizing that you’ve lost the *heart* behind ritual in your life, and responding by stopping the ritual altogether, is not a solution. It’s the creation of a bigger problem. I’ve heard another pastor put it this way “you don’t *gravitate* towards holiness.” If you just take out all habits and spiritual rhythms in your life, you’re not just gonna wake up in thirty years and be more like Jesus. *Grace* is free, but *discipleship* takes work. It takes intentionality. It *takes* rhythms. It *takes* ritual. So **instead of nixing ritual altogether in our lives, what if we continued in helpful rituals, and asked God through the Holy Spirit to breathe purpose and life back into them?**

What if if **on our drive here each Sunday** morning, we asked Jesus to speak and move through our time here, and then watched and listened for him to do just that? What if we came *expectant* for God to do something in our midst each Sunday? What if **before we began singing**, we took a second and asked God to use that singing to set our minds and hearts on him? What if **before we showed up to LifeGroup** each week, we took a moment or two to ask the Holy Spirit what he might have us say or do or even just *hear* and *process* as a result of being there? What if **as we opened the bible** each day, we read it, expecting not just to *learn* something, but expecting it to help us encounter a *person* and be transformed by him? And we could go on. But I think we’d all be so much better if we looked for ways to remember the *reason* for ritual, as we participate *in* those rituals.

Now lastly, I want to just address one more thing. Because you might be hearing me say all this and be thinking, “but wait—**didn’t Jesus just sort of bail** on the rituals of *his* day? Like didn’t he kind of sidestep them altogether?” Not exactly. I want you to look on the screen with me at **Hebrews 10**:

The law (.that included the *rituals*, the sacrificial system—all of that) *is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

So **the Old Testament law**—the law that included the sacrificial system, and fasting, and that whole framework for relating to God—was never meant to be an end in itself. It never actually had the *ability* to take away sins on its own. That's why they had to *keep* offering sacrifices at the altar, time and time again, year in and year out. It was never *complete*. It was never *effective* in and of itself. So **what is?** What *does* have the ability to do that? We get that down in v. 12-14:

*But when **Christ** had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins* (in other words, on the cross), *he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a **single offering** he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

So **the only sacrifice that was effective**, once and for all, was the sacrifice of Jesus. Through offering up *himself* on the cross, he has *perfected* for all time those who are *being sanctified*. The entire sacrificial system—all of the Old Testament ritual—was always pointing us to *Jesus*. It foreshadowed the day that he would offer up his own body as a sacrifice, to *perfect* all those who *are being* sanctified.

So for all of us who follow Jesus, **though we may participate in our own modern versions of “rituals,”—we don't participate in any of them in order to be accepted by him.** That's already been settled at the cross. We participate in them to *become* more like him. For followers of Jesus, our **altar is now a cross**. We approach the cross of Jesus, remembering the perfect and complete work he has done to bring us near, and respond by implementing any rituals that help us live *into* that reality more and more. That's the reason for ritual.

Let's pray together.