

Sermon: God Desires Mercy, Not Sacrifice

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 7, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the pleasure to attend the Equip & Encourage Conference put together by the Presbyterian College. I was there last year as well, around this time of the year. The conference has been growing, which is always a good sign for a seminary. This year, there were around 60 participants, 20 of which were made up of those enrolled in the Certificate in Lay Leadership, a new program designed to support and equip members and elders who play a vital leadership role in the church.

This growing base of conference participants makes an very interesting and enriching environment for conversations, both theological and practical. It also accords the College to invite top notch speakers to the conference as well.

One of the keynote speakers was Austin Carty, pastor of Boulevard Baptist Church in Anderson, South Carolina, and author of a number of award winning books, including his latest: *Some of the Words Are Theirs: The Art of Writing and Living a Sermon*. This has been a book that I've been enjoying reading and re-reading for the past two weeks.

The basic premise is to encourage fellow pastors to take sermon writing as an art form, and to allow their own voice, the person behind the sermon, to surface to the foreground. Taking the view of Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, author and theologian, that 'all theology is autobiographical', Carty masterfully weaves his own life to that of his writing, of books and sermons.

He read to the conference participants a few paragraphs from his book, and they brought me to tears, especially the part about how he and his own father overcame challenges of addiction and reconciled as they sat on a porch of a cottage overlooking a peaceful lake. There is something about how Carty put together words that pull on the heart strings of his readers and hearers. Of course, as Carty readily cautions, one needs to be selective, with the key criteria whether these stories advance the theological point one is making, and move the readers closer to the knowledge of God. Or whether these stories were simply self-aggrandizements, bringing readers no closer to our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

It is with that in mind, I approach our Scripture reading today, in the Gospel of Matthew 9:9, "*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up*

and followed him.” The key point here that we the readers ought not to miss is that Matthew the author was writing about himself—Matthew the tax-collector being called by Jesus, and after receiving such an unexpected call, he simply got up, dropped everything else and followed the Lord.

Ancient writing is very much unlike the modern ones—one does not open up a laptop with a word-processing app and bang out 1,200 words in an hour, in one sitting. The art of writing for the ancients is as meticulous as it could get. Ink, pen, parchment or scrolls were not common materials one could acquire easily or inexpensively. Every sentence, every word matters, and every thought, every paragraph needs to pass through the rigour of ‘does it advance the main plot’, and in the case of the Gospel of Matthew, which really should’ve been read as the Good News of Jesus Christ according to Matthew, Jesus Christ is the main subject, and everything and everyone else revolves around that main plot.

So we see Matthew did not waste ink on describing his inner struggle of that call. He did not note that he was one of the later few amongst the Twelve being called. He did not elaborate on the sacrifice he had to make to drop his lucrative profession. He did not dwell in his internal struggle to follow this rag-tag group of nobody, being led by an equally unqualified, untrained rabbi, who spoke with power and authority few in his time could match. He did expand on a most unlikely meal where Jesus (and his disciples) ate with not just Matthew, but many tax collectors and sinners.

A Jewish friend of mine once told me that the act of breaking bread in Judaism is a sacred act. It’s more than sharing a meal; it marks the start of fellowship, of unity, and the gratitude of divine providence. I don’t know how true it is, but according to that friend of mine, once you break bread with someone, you can no longer testify against that person in a court of law. Therefore, it stands to reason that breaking bread with family, kins, and like-minded individuals is considered an approved and acceptable act. How about breaking bread with tax collectors and sinners?

In the 1st century Israel / Palestine, tax collectors were Jewish men hired by the Roman Empire to collect tolls and taxes. On the account of working for an occupying power, and the fact they often extorted a whole lot of extra for themselves, tax collectors were widely despised and considered the lowest of the low, often grouped together with ‘sinners’, not to be associated, and certainly not to share meal or break bread with. Not sure who those sinners were, but given the strict adherence to the Law preached by Pharisees at the time, there must’ve been quite a few fallen through through the cracks.

But here was Jesus, doing precisely that, and this is not a one-off. Jesus would go on to dine with Zacchaeus and other tax collectors elsewhere in the other Gospel accounts. So it stands to reason that Pharisees would object, and

should object, “*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*” (v.11), as this vile act is not only an affront to good decorum, but an affront to the tradition, and even to the Law (and if they couldn’t find a particular ordinance against such an act, I am sure the Pharisees wouldn’t mind writing one themselves—Thou shall not eat with tax-collectors and sinners.)

To their objection, and this is where Matthew, with his propensity to connect the teachings and the symbolic acts of Jesus to that of the Hebrew Scripture, and particularly to that of prophets of old, and this is where the author wants us to pay attention, as Jesus replied, “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.*” (v.12-13)

Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’. This is a direct quote from Hosea 6:6 (in the NRSV version), “*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*”

Prophet Hosea prophesied in the 8th-century BC, during the reign of Jeroboam II, one of the more corrupt kings of Israel. The context of chapter 6 is a passionate plea for Israel return to God. The chapter opens with the prophet Hosea urging the people to repent, to acknowledge that God is the one who has disciplined them and struck them down. Yet the prophet also asserts that God will bind them up and heal them.

Then from verse 4 onwards, God speaks with a lament, lamenting the shallow, fleeting nature of Israel’s devotion. God likens their love to the ‘morning mist’ or the ‘early dew’ that quickly evaporates when the sun comes out. Then in verse 6, our focus today, God declares that He desires ‘steadfast love not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.’

The Hebrew word for steadfast love is ‘*hesed*’, which is also translated as kindness, loyalty, covenantal faithfulness and mercy. What God desires from the people is not superficial acts of devotions, but *hesed*—an attitude, an orientation, a commitment to be kind to others, to be faithful to God, and to be merciful other travellers in faith, when occasion calls for it.

God also desires for the people to have knowledge of God. The Hebrew word of ‘to know’ is ‘*yada*’. It is more than just an intellectual curiosity, it describes a relational knowledge—that is the difference between knowing about someone and actually ‘knowing’ someone. God desires an almost intimate kind of relational knowing, where people experience the love of God, and in return would love God back—just like in-between a husband and a wife.

One of the most compelling sub-plots of Hosea, as recounted in the first three chapters of the book, is his broken marriage to a woman named Gomer. It is not at all clear as to whether Gomer committed adultery before or after their

marriage, but Hosea was commanded by God to marry her, to forgive her, and to redeem her. Combined with Hosea's continuing faithfulness towards Gomer, these all became symbolic of God's relationship with Israel. The high costs of God's desire for mercy, for love, and for covenantal faithfulness were bore personally by the prophet. Through Hosea, we come to see the extent of God's love, the extent by which God is willing to go to have that reconciled relationship with the people of God.

If all theology is autobiographical, as stated by Buechner, then through Matthew and through Hosea, we come to see the two sides of mercy, the two sides of the same coin—with the tax-collector turned disciple receiving mercy, and the prophet turned husband extending mercy.

Here is the theological truth, the main takeaway: mercy is not predicated on repentance. Repentance comes later, sometimes much later if at all; but mercy, mercy always comes first, with no pre-conditions.

That is the lesson that Jesus wants us to learn, as the community of faith that professes Christ as the head of the church. It is not an easy lesson, given our human inclination to judge, to be judgemental. To be clear, judgement belongs to the Lord. God does and will judge all humanity when that fateful day comes, the Day of the Lord. But in the mean time, we are called to be merciful, to not be the one throwing the first stone, or the second, or the third or the last, even when we believe the Law permits it, even calls for it.

I'll always remember fondly of the ministry of my former pastor, Rev. John Wu (no relation to me). He was the one who put Daisy and I to work, to lead a group of pre-teens, as their big brother and big sister. This despite my reputation of being fast and loose with life and with handling the Scripture (I won't go into details of my former life but those reputations were well-justified). Daisy and I were just married back then, and we had only returned to the church, after years of being absent. John saw something in us, and extended mercy to us, even when others leaders of the church objected. We started serving the church, serving God since, and have not yet stopped.

I don't think there was ever a time that I repented verbally, as certainly some had called for it. But slowly, little by little, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit working inside of me, my life was turned towards Jesus. Thanks be to God, that's mercy at work, a lesson that I learned not painfully but joyfully, and hopes to share with you any chance I got. For blessed are the merciful for they will indeed be shown mercy.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**