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September 21st: Hebrews 10:19-39 & Matthew 9:9-13

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Do not throw away your confidence! The calling of Matthew.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Hebrews 10, verses 19-39. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near. For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, Vengeance is mine, I will repay. And again, the Lord will judge his people.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But recall the former days

when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession, an abiding one.

Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised. For, yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay.

But my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. In the last few chapters, the author of Hebrews has been concerned with the high priesthood and the greater sacrifice of Christ, presenting the heroes of the book with a sermon that now reaches its applicatory punch in the second half of chapter 10.

A new way into God's presence has been opened up to us by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. The effectiveness by which this route has been opened up means that we can now enter with an appropriate confidence. This way did not formerly exist.

It is now a reality for those who believe. The holy places of which the author is speaking are not just the copy and the shadow that existed in the most holy place in the tabernacle, but the heavenly realities to which they testified. Our access is by the blood of Jesus, by his self-offering, and by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain.

The curtain of the old sanctuary was a veil dividing the first section of the sanctuary from the second, which could only be entered once a year by the high priest on the day of atonement, and then only with blood. As the author has already written, this anticipates the movement from the old age to the new age that we have entered in Christ. The former situation in the tabernacle testified to the fact that the way had not yet truly been opened.

Many have seen an association between the curtain and Jesus' flesh here. I think it's more likely that verse 20 should be read in closer parallel with verse 19. So entering the holy places corresponds with the way through the curtain, and the instrumentality of the blood of Christ in verse 19 corresponds with Christ's flesh in verse 20, as in his body and flesh Christ offered himself for our access to God's presence.

The way that we have into God's presence is a new and living one. It was inaugurated and consecrated by Christ's sacrifice. It is also always new in some sense.

It is never going to age, become defunct, or deteriorate. Hebrews has already spoken of

the importance of the eternal life of our Melchizedekian high priest, and the same point is significant here. Our access into God's presence is not just through some physical building, but through the eternally enduring person and work of Jesus Christ.

Such a living way, a living way established by the eternally living Jesus and the eternal spirit, is best suited to bring us to the living God. Jesus is a great high priest over the house of God. He is not merely a servant within the house, as Moses was, but the reigning son, the one who is placed over the entire house as its lord.

The access and authority enjoyed by such a person greatly exceeds anything that a mere steward of the house could enjoy. Knowing these things about the way that we have access into God's presence, the appropriate response is to draw near. We must do this with a true heart and in full assurance of faith.

The true heart contrasts, among other things, with the hardened hearts of the Israelites who failed to enter into God's rest. The full assurance of faith is the sure confidence in the certainty of the promise of God that will cause us to grasp hold of what he has set before us. The heart's sprinkle clean from the evil conscience probably refers to the consciousness of sin that afflicts those under the old covenant, where sins still had not been decisively addressed, also to the uncleanness of their hearts that had not yet been purified.

Behind this we might hear the new covenant promise of places such as Ezekiel 36, 25-27. The sprinkling of clean water recalls various old covenant rituals, but it is now fulfilled in the gift of the Holy Spirit. By the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the underlying heart problem of the people of God as a whole is addressed as the Spirit communicates Christ's life, the life of the one faithful one, the one who offered himself as a true and perfect sacrifice of human obedience, that life is communicated to us.

The body is the means of access, and our bodies are washed with pure water. There is likely some reference to baptism here. The priest had his body washed in order to enter the service of the sanctuary, as described in Exodus 40, 12-15.

Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall wash them with water, and put on Aaron the holy garments. And you shall anoint him and consecrate him, that he may serve me as priest. You shall bring his sons also and put coats on them, and anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may serve me as priest.

And their anointing shall admit them to a perpetual priesthood throughout their generations. We have our bodies washed with pure water as a seal of our access to God's presence. The body is the foundation of the self.

Before we ever developed a sense of self, interiority, subjectivity and agency, or a clear

will, we are and were bodies. Our washed bodies assure us that we have true access to God's presence, that we are welcomed as persons into God's house. Our faithful confidence to enter God's presence draws confidence from the faithfulness of the God who called us.

God has not only promised, but he backed up his promise with an oath, so that there might be no doubt. The author of Hebrews follows his exhortation to hold fast and unwavering the confession of their hope with a second exhortation. The heroes of the book should also stir each other up to love and good works.

They must take an active concern in the spiritual well-being and growth of their brothers and sisters, desiring that they will be encouraged in love and good works, which are the appropriate fruit of a true faith. A particular concern here is that they are committed to their meeting together. The danger they faced was that of abandoning their duties to each other, and abandoning the ministry that other Christians perform towards them.

They would fail to stir other people up to love and good works, and they would neglect the other people who would stir them up to love and good works. The value of meeting together is not just some message from the front, as it were. It's the constant mutual encouragement that occurs in our fellowships.

The neglect of such assemblies seems to have been a real issue among the people to whom the author of Hebrews writes. However, he wants them to feel the urgency of faithfulness at that time. The day was drawing near.

I suspect by this he is referring not to the final day of judgment, but to a more imminent day of judgment that is nearer in time, the day of judgment that would occur in A.D. 70, as judgment would come upon the Temple and upon the Jews who had rejected Christ in that generation. His tone at this point shifts. It goes from encouragement to a stern warning.

There are those who purposefully turn away from God, who reject all the good gifts that have been given to them, and end up bringing greater judgment upon themselves. He has already presented similar warnings earlier in the Epistle. The contrast between the salvation received by the Israelites under Moses, and that received through Christ, is an important spur to this.

It allows him to make an argument from the lesser to the greater. If rejection of the salvation given through Moses was so significant, how much more so that which is received through Christ? Intentional, willful, persistent sin after receiving the truth faces serious consequences. We know the reality of the salvation given in Christ, and if we turn our backs upon it, then there remains no hope for us.

There is no salvation left in the Judaism to which such people could return. Judgment is

going to fall upon Jerusalem and its Temple. All its efficacy looked forward to the efficacy of a sacrifice that would be offered in Christ.

There is no hope to go back now. All that awaits is literally the fury of fire that will destroy that whole system in a few years' time. Reject the sacrifice of Christ, and there's no other sacrifice towards which you can turn.

There's no other way to get access to God. All that awaits is eternal loss. If there was a death sentence for those who formally apostatized and rejected Moses' law, how much more for those who reject Christ? They face that eternal loss.

There is no hope for them. There's a three-fold description that he gives of what rejecting Christ means. They have trampled underfoot the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of Grace.

Such a person who willfully rejects Christ, even knowing what that salvation means, is someone who tramples Christ underfoot. They profane the blood of the covenant, by which that new and living way into God's presence was made open for us, treating that blood of Christ, his sacrifice, as a mean or a common thing, something of no value, even though it is the most holy and precious thing of all. There is a contrast here between sanctification, that which renders us holy, and profanation, that which despises or holds something up to contempt.

Such a devaluation or denigration of the sacrifice of Christ is a deeply serious matter. Such an apostate is also insulting or outraging the Spirit of Grace, disdaining the one who communicates the grace of God and the life of Christ to us. This is what the rejection of Christ and his sacrifice will lead to, and the consequences for such a person are of the utmost severity.

The author of Hebrews does not want to give any ground for presumption. While he seeks to spur Christians to a proper confidence in God's promise and the surety of his word, he does not allow them to take confidence just in a once-saved-always-saved position, for instance. True salvation requires perseverance in the faith, holding on to God's grace and not letting go.

Those who once received God's blessings and abandoned them and rejected them and despised them face the devastating prospect of eternal loss. While some might be tempted to look back to their first start in the faith as a source of presumption, that once they had received the grace of Christ there was never any risk of their losing it, the author of Hebrews wants them to look back in a different way, to look at the start that they made in the faith, to seek to keep up that same spirit that enabled them to face the challenges of persecution and opposition, to recognize how much they valued the hope and the promise that they had been given at that point, and not to let go. They had looked forward to a greater reward which enabled them to hold their earthly possessions

with an open hand, to be prepared to sacrifice or lose much on account of the much greater gain and reward that they awaited.

They once had that confidence and they should not throw it away, it is invaluable, don't give up what you began, recognize those earlier sacrifices and commitments that you made, follow them through, abandon those sacrifices at this point and all that you once suffered will have been in vain. There is a value of looking back here, not to take presumption but to redouble your commitment. The salvation of God will surely come, even though it might appear to tarry.

Here he quotes Habakkuk 2, verses 2-4 And the Lord answered me, Write the vision, make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time, it hastens to the end, it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not delay.

Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. That passage speaks of God's judgment upon the Chaldeans that would occur, even if it appeared to take time. Paul also quotes this in Romans chapter 1. The author of Hebrews here quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which he is using, and he tweets it in order to strengthen the contrast between living by faith and drawing back.

The wilderness generation were those who drew back, but the people of Christ should be those of faith. Righteousness, proper standing in good relationship with God, is confident faith in the certainty of God's promise. The author gets his hearers to look back, to look at the start that they made, to look forward to the hope that they await, and to redouble their energies and their commitment, striving to enter into the promise that God has set before them.

The confidence with which they began is of inestimable value. To abandon it at this point would be a tragedy indeed. He is like the coach encouraging the runner on the last leg of the race.

Don't give up now. Think of all the sacrifices that you have made. Think of all the things that you are looking forward to as a reward for this victory.

Do not let go. Do not give up. Continue and persevere.

Grasp hold of what you are awaiting. It is all so close. There's only a little further to go.

At the beginning of chapter 12, he will turn to this language of a race, a race that must be run with endurance, and talks about the witnesses that help us in pursuing this, the great gallery of faith to which he will introduce us in the following chapter. A question to consider. Can you identify some of the sources of confidence and commitment that the author of Hebrews directs our attention to in this chapter? Matthew chapter 9, verses 9

to 13.

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, Follow me. And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came, and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? But when he heard it, he said, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. In Matthew chapter 9, we have an account that we also find in the book of Mark chapter 2 and Luke chapter 5. Matthew the tax collector is called by Jesus to follow him. In the other gospels account, the calling of the tax collector is the calling of Levi.

In the other gospels, as here in the gospel of Matthew, Matthew is listed as one of the twelve apostles. But only in this gospel is he identified with the tax collector who is called. We see this identification in chapter 10 verse 3. We aren't told of any prior acquaintance between Jesus and Matthew.

However, it would not be surprising if there were one. Several of Jesus' disciples seem to have had some prior acquaintance with him, whether as relatives or people he knew within a wider circle. Some, for instance, as former disciples of John the Baptist.

The fact that Matthew follows Jesus so readily perhaps suggests that there had been some prior interaction. The instruction that Jesus gives to Matthew to follow him should recall such events as Elijah's call of Elisha at the end of 1 Kings chapter 19. Jesus is another great prophet who calls people to follow him, to leave their daily vocation and to join his mission.

After Jesus has called Matthew, the next scene is that of a shared meal. It seems to have a festive character to it. While people would more generally sit up while they were at the table, to recline at table was associated with an extraordinary or festive meal, not just a regular meal.

The meal is celebrated in the house. If we were reading this purely in the context of Matthew's gospel, we might have presumed that the house was Peter's. But reading this in the light of Luke chapter 5 verse 29, we know it is the house of Matthew.

Along with Matthew, there are a lot of tax collectors and sinners. In addition to being complicit with the Romans and the governing authorities, the tax collectors were also seen as unjust. As those who oppressed the poor and were seen to betray their nation, they would scandalise both religious along with more typical nationalistic sentiment.

The sinners who were also present at this meal would have been those who have abandoned the law and live more like those outside of the covenant. Both groups would be associated with Gentiles, with the outcasts of the people. And they weren't just the good outcasts, the people who were oppressed.

Many of these people would have been the oppressors of the poor insiders. Jesus, in the episode that immediately preceded this, had forgiven someone's sins. While forgiving someone's private wrongdoings might seem okay, to forgive someone who is involved in that sort of oppression is a bit more scandalous.

And as elsewhere in the gospels, particularly in the gospel of Luke, eating a meal had significance. It was a sign of the renewal of the kingdom around Jesus. The table fellowship was a sign of who was in, as well as who was out.

It was an anticipation of the wedding feast on the last day. And so, in the context of such a prophetic symbol, including tax collectors and sinners would be quite scandalous. You might wonder why it was so scandalous, what was so offensive about what Jesus was doing.

If he is getting tax collectors and sinners to repent, and in the case of characters like Zacchaeus, to give back any wrongful gains that they had, shouldn't he be a folk hero? Perhaps the answer to this is found in some reflection upon human psychology and its twists and devious turns. For many people, righteousness is about belonging to a privileged moral class. It is about a religion of respectability and status.

It allows you to look down upon others and, in judging them, to feel better about yourself. To include the dregs of society, and what's more, to centre them within the life of the people of God, is deeply offensive to people with such a vision. A true religious teacher should centre the people who are respectable religious folk, while the tax collectors and sinners, if they repent, should be treated like beggars at the doorway.

They can have some of the scraps, perhaps, that are left over, but they will never attain to or enjoy the status of those who are religious and upstanding within such a system. They will always be somehow on the outside. Jesus' practice is offensive precisely because he does not follow such a model.

His statement about the physician is similar to various other proverbial sayings of the time. The point is not that there are some people who are well who have no need for a physician. Rather, it's the fact that if we are to see ourselves as people of God, we have to belong to the class of those who are thought of as sick.

Unless we can see ourselves among the tax collectors and the sinners, we don't truly belong as people of Christ. This is the first time that the Pharisees really come into the frame of the Gospel. And throughout the Gospel, it seems that it is the Pharisees in

particular who exemplify this mode of religion, an exclusionary mode of religion that builds itself up in its self-righteousness by freezing other people out or judging them as sinners.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees by highlighting Hosea chapter 6 verse 6, a statement that he also refers to in chapter 12 verse 7 when he's challenged concerning his disciples eating the grain on the Sabbath. This reference to I desire mercy and not sacrifice is not found at this point in the other Gospels though. The way that Jesus makes this appeal to the Word of God is very important.

The Pharisees should have known all of these things already. This is not something new that Jesus is bringing. Rather, the Pharisees, for all of their pride in their knowledge, did not know the Scriptures.

They had missed its key point. And the point of this particular text is that cultic observance, rituals and sacrifices aren't what God is really looking for. What he wants more than anything else is justice, mercy and faith.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we see some of this. The righteousness of the true people of God should exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees and it will achieve this as a proactive, restorative righteousness. Not just a righteousness of avoidance of pollution and sin and anyone who might be an outsider.

This true righteousness is committed to mercy, to healing what is broken, to restoring those who are outside and to extending the salvation of God. Jesus teaches a similar thing when he teaches concerning the greatest commandment. The greatest commandment is not just about avoidance of sin.

It's about the positive duty of love. Love for God and also love for neighbour. A similar point he makes in chapter 23.

The weightier matters of the law. Justice, mercy and faith. People who are preoccupied with the smallest details of the law concerning the tithing of spices yet forget these things, the real things that matter.

They're straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. True keeping of the law of God is about covenant loyalty. It's about the restorative grace and mercy received and given to others.

That's its real point. A fixation on external observance without true integrity and a desire to communicate the gracious salvation of God in Christ is against and contrary to everything that the law of God is really looking for. God desires mercy, not just this ritual observance.

And the Pharisees with their preoccupation on scrupulous religious observance minus the

inner heart of the law, the spirit of the law that should always animate it are in fact obstructing the salvation of God. Not only do they hold themselves out of the kingdom of God, they also prevent others from entering in. Matthew the tax collector, the story of whose call occasions all of this discussion, is a worked example of what it means to be included in the people of God apart from any worth, apart from any reason that he should be called over others.

He has shown remarkable grace and made part of the people of God, included at the table of grace. According to tradition, he is the one who bears witness to Christ within this gospel of Matthew. He is the one who has recorded these things.

He is implicated within his own story. This is a feature of all of the New Testament. The people who bear witness to these things are implicated within their own story.

No one stands as a passive and uninvolved bystander who is just a spectator. No one who has not been transformed by the encounter with him can be a true witness to Christ. Just as in Peter we see that someone who has denied Christ can become the foremost witness to him, or in Paul how the greatest persecutor of the church can become the greatest servant of it, in the character of Matthew we see that one who is an outsider to the moral community of the people of God, one who is considered in so many ways to be without worth, can become one of the great heralds of God's forgiveness, one who declares with personal experience what the forgiveness of Christ really means, what it means to be a recipient of this, and what it means to be part of a kingdom that is defined around such forgiveness, where one standing in the kingdom is not on the basis of one's moral worth, but is purely on the basis of Christ's unmerited grace and favour.

A question to consider, how does Jesus' use of the Old Testament teaching in Hosea 6, verse 6, that God desires mercy and not sacrifice, connect with themes in the epistles of Paul and in such places as the book of Hebrews?