

***September 6, 2020***

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,*

*O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

Whether or not we personally are very good at it, I imagine that most of us understand that one of the messages that Jesus shared with us was that of forgiveness, reconciliation, or what in today's idiom might be called restorative justice.

And in that vein, as this passage begins, I find myself saying, YUP! That sounds... Jesusy! Talk to someone alone to try to reconcile yourself to them, then bring some friends, then bring the whole assembly to try to bring this wayward one back. So far, this resonates with so many things we've heard Jesus say: leave the 99 sheep to follow the one. Rejoice when you've found the one out of ten coins you've lost. Welcome home the son, even the son who has squandered his whole inheritance. Yes. That sounds like the Jesus we know.

“If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This part trips me up! We do not have to do a lot of research to know that Gentiles were not well-loved among 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews, at least in part because so many Gentiles were allied with the Roman forces occupying the land. And tax collectors! Well, I imagine there's good reason that tax collectors rarely come to your door anymore—it's not a great way to make friends. Add in the political situation and you remember that all tax collectors were in the employ of, yes, again, the Roman forces occupying the land. So! Let such a one be to you as... we might say... your worst enemy. And yet, what else does Jesus say about enemies in Matthew 5? ”43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” and after a moment he continues: “46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,[o] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” So, okay, Jesus also identifies Gentiles and tax collectors with “your enemies” but in the same breath as he tells his listeners to love and to pray for their enemies.

“let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” Interesting too that it is the Evangelist Matthew who uses this phrase. Because in Matthew 9, we hear of the call of Matthew: “9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to

him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him." MATTHEW was a tax collector. Usually tax collectors were Roman citizens, but sometimes they were what we might now call *collaborators*. This same passage continues: "10 And as he sat at dinner[a] in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting[b] with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when he heard this, 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, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

And call them he did. In Matthew ALONE, Jesus eats with or talks with or PRAISES tax collectors at least five times. As for Gentiles, Jesus praises the faith of a CENTURION in Matthew 9. Not only a Roman and a Gentile, but an officer in the army responsible for the oppression of Jesus' people. And Jesus heals his servant and commends the centurion for his faith. And in Mark, Jesus cures the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, also a Gentile. Now in Matthew, that same woman is referred to as a Canaanite, but there is much evidence to suggest that this was chosen as an allusion to the Old Testament where the Canaanites were the enemies of the Israelites, and Syrophenician or Canaanite, both tellings of this story make it clear that she is a Gentile, that she begs for Jesus' help, and that he initially refuses, as he had initially refused with the Centurion, in both cases saying that he was only sent to minister to the children of Israel. But it is these Gentiles who, we might say, help Jesus to recognize the breadth of scope of his own mission. It is in these encounters that Jesus appears to realize that he is not only sent to the children of Israel, but he is here to proclaim a universal God, a God not of a specific place, no matter how sacred, not a God who lodges in one place and spurns another, not a God who blesses one place and destroys another, not a God who is "on our side." But God, who works in history, who, in the words of Leonard Cohen counts "time itself" as "the magic length of God."

So, when reconciliation is the hardest, when you have tried the easy ways, talk together, talk with friends, and you are ready to say, this is too much... you are like a tax collector to me. That is not permission to give up. That is exhortation to sit down to dinner, to expand your mission, to realize that it is the tax collectors among us, like the sick in need of a physician, who need love and forgiveness the most.

*Amen.*

***Text for September 6, 2020***

Matthew 18:15-20



This work is licensed by Marta S. Rivera Monclova, PhD,  
under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).