

Intro: So we're three weeks into our Moment of Truth series, and we're going to be looking at the gospels all summer long. This is the foundation of what we believe at Harbor, in the gospels we see Jesus from the perspectives of four different men who witnessed and saw and knew Jesus personally and shared that in writing that has been meticulously maintained and passed down for centuries. This is our story, too, because as we read, as we learn about Jesus, as we get the chance to witness God made flesh, something incredible, something that changed the course of the world.

And when we read the gospels and when we encounter Jesus, we have our own moments of truth, just like the people in these stories: we find ourselves at the same crossroad as these people did. Is Jesus a good guy, a moral teacher, a heretic, a lunatic with delusions of grandeur, OR is he the Son of God, the Savior of the World, the redeemer sent to give us new life, reconciliation with God and with our fellow humans.

Here's the thing, though: there's more than one possible outcome depending on how a person responds to that moment, what comes out of that moment of truth. A person can come to that moment of truth and choose to reject Jesus, that he wasn't who he said he was or that this is far-fetched and ridiculous, that any person who claims to be the Son of God is about as sane as a person who claims to be a time traveler. A person can come to that moment of truth and be a little passive, saying that Jesus seems like a nice guy who had some nice moral stories to teach us, but is still a human. Or a person can come to that moment of truth and take Jesus' hand and allow Him to become Lord of their life.

So I'd like to start off reading from two of the gospels, so first we'll read part of Luke 19, and then we're going to jump to Matthew, so first, let's look at Luke 19: 1-10: Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. 2 There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. 3 He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. "Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today." 6 Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. 7 But the people were displeased. "He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner," they grumbled. 8 Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!" 9 Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man[a] came to seek and save those who are lost."

Okay. Keep your thumb in your Bibles there, because we'll be going back there in a second, but I also want to read from Matthew 9:9-13

*9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.*

*10 Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. 11 But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?[a]" 12 When Jesus heard this, he said,*

*“Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do.” 13 Then he added, “Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.’ [b] For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.”*

So, going off of what Jesus says here, about only sick people needing a doctor: last summer around this time, give or take a few weeks, kind of like the Pharisees here, there was a certain husband of mine who was a little confused about this concept of what it means to be a sick person or a well person.

I think I was less sexist before I got married, and the longer I am married the more I start to think that there is something to some of those stereotypes. So one Thursday night last summer, Jeff came home from work and said: “My right side has been hurting me.” And I said: “Hmm, well, that’s where your appendix is, but if it just kind of started suddenly, that’s probably not what it is...” And he said: “Oh, actually, it’s been hurting me since Monday.”

When I suggested maybe this was a problem that needed to be checked out by a professional, though, Jeff had lots of good reasons why he shouldn’t have to go to the doctor, mainly that he just didn’t want to. And I said a line that made me realize I’d become kind of sexist: I said: “Stop being a man, and go to the doctor.” And even though he didn’t want to, he did, and lo and behold, I get a sheepish phone call a few hours later from Jeff, saying he’s going in for emergency surgery because he has acute appendicitis.

Yeah. I get to hold that over his head for a long time, I think. I basically saved his life, right? I’ll pat myself on the back for that one. And he can, too, because his surgeon said he was a tough guy, because it was pretty bad. But the real problem was that he was pretty sick, and he didn’t think he was. They told us if he had kept ignoring it, his appendix could have burst, and that’s actually REALLY dangerous.

If we go through life thinking we’re healthy and doing great when in fact we’re really sick, that’s not great. More than not great: it could be pretty deadly. If we know we’re not well, there’s something that can be done: we can get help.

In both of these passages from Scripture, we have people who are sick and know they’re in need of help. And we have people who are sick but think they’re doing just fine, or are even way healthier than the average person, thank you very much, but are just as bad off. And as we’ll see, their response in their moment of truth, when they’re faced with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, they respond very differently, and make very different choices.

Transition: So you might be thinking: well, that’s silly. Or maybe your husband’s also a tough guy. But I’m not actually here to talk about physical illness and appendectomies today (and neither was Jesus in this passage of Scripture) – We’re talking about spiritual sickness, and we’re not talking about gender stereotypes between men and women: we’re talking about Tax Collectors and Pharisees.

So tax collectors in the ancient world were not great people, and they knew they weren’t great people... I think a lot of us kind of feel the same way about the IRS that ancient people felt about tax collectors, only it was more of a Wild West situation back then. Basically, the tax collectors were hired by the governing power (Jewish governors, the Roman occupiers, etc.) to collect tax money from the people,

and these tax collectors would often overcharge in order that they might skim some money off the top for themselves, and since there weren't any docs on file at the town hall, or the internet or whatever, it's not like people could check to make sure they weren't getting ripped off, and at the same time, if they put up a fuss and refused to pay taxes, that didn't work so great, and they'd get arrested.

A modern day equivalent might be debt collecting agencies, taking advantage of the powerless and people strapped for cash for profit. So tax collectors were not good guys.

Pharisees in the ancient world, though, were the good guys. I know that might be hard to believe, because they're kind of the bad guys in the New Testament, but they weren't the bad guys of the ancient world, by any means. They were devout, clean-cut, holy folks. They knew their Torah backwards and forwards and followed it to the letter! They had the thing MEMORIZED. Have you ever memorized an entire book? And Pharisees were seen by their culture as set apart, true believers, well-educated holy people who really knew how to follow God. They gave to charity. They went to the synagogue. They didn't cause a ruckus in society. Therefore, they had a good standing in society.

The modern day equivalent to Pharisees would be something like pastors and priests, elders, deacons, church leaders, seminary graduates. People who would lose their jobs if they were caught leaving a strip club or reading a copy of Fifty Shades of Grey at the office kind of people. Basically: me.

So in these Scriptures, we have two kinds of people, and two kinds of problems:

On one side, we have our Tax Collector: Flagrantly not following God by being corrupt government lackeys.

On the other side, we've got our Pharisees: Flagrantly following God...

If you were going to align yourself with someone, be friends with one of these people, be associated with one group, who would you choose?

Transition: There's a couple ways of looking at this. Let's look at the tax collectors of these Scriptures first, and see how they responded to Jesus...

So first we have Zacchaeus. This story was one of my favorite NT stories as a little kid, and I think some of you felt the same way. Partly because he was short, and kids are short, but those of you who grew up in the church might also know the kid's song that retells the story about Zacchaeus being a "wee little man." I'll spare you a rendition of it now, but my mom had me and my sisters sing it in front of the members of the First Baptist Church of West Townsend, and my younger sister Amelia got the fun line: "Zacchaeus, you come down!" and she said it so sternly, wagging her little finger like this.

Anyhow, in verses 5-6 we see that Zacchaeus is a "notorious sinner," and yet Jesus wants to go to his house. Jesus sees him up in that Sycamore tree, and he singles him out... not to call him out on being a notorious sinner, but to spend time with him, and have dinner with him in his home (which is an honor.) Later on, Jesus calls him a "true son of Abraham" because Zacchaeus wants to change! (verses 8-9).

Zacchaeus is one of the “lost,” but he knew he needed Jesus: he knew he was a sinner, and because of Jesus, he changes his ways!

And in Matthew, we meet Levi the tax collector... who is actually Matthew. I know, it's a little confusing, but they're the same person. And you'd think a guy who wrote one of the books of the NT would be a pretty holy and good person... Nope! Total tax collector. But when Jesus walks by his booth and calls him, he drops everything and follows him. Matthew becomes a disciple, someone in Jesus' close and intimate inner circle, and we still read his account of the gospel thousands of years later. He went from being a flagrant sinner to a follower.

Transition: Now I've been saying “sinner” a bunch, which may be making some of you squirm. Sinner is a word that makes some of us cringe – it either sounds too extreme or old-fashioned, or we have bad associations with it – like shame and guilt that we were made to feel bad about ourselves and who we are. It's a heavy term with lots of baggage. And yet it is a word that comes up a lot in the Bible; it's very important to understanding the gospel. So let's stop here for a minute: what is sin, exactly, and what does it mean to be a sinner?

So in the Old and New Testaments, it can mean several different things, but the root of the word in the Bible more often than not means “Missing the mark,” like in target practice, when you're aiming for the bullseye. The “mark” is God's law, God's good plan for humanity. That's how we measure and determine whether we're a sinner. And a sinner is someone who misses the mark somehow.

And here's the thing: We ALL miss the mark... a lot. Even if you don't like that word: Sin or sinner, you would be remiss if you thought you never missed the mark. That's our biggest problem: that we were made for God and to worship Him, but we messed up and completely missed the mark.

Transition: However, there are people who spend their entire lives fighting against this, making sure they don't miss the mark, and that nobody thinks or sees them missing the mark. You might know people like that, or maybe this describes you. In the New Testament, those people are often Pharisees.

So, let's move on to the Pharisees: They show up in Matthew's story, and ask this question in verse 11 after Jesus goes to have dinner at Matthew the tax collector's house: 11 But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with such scum?” .

We see a dual judgment happening here:

First, the tax collectors are sinners, are “scum.” Low-lives. The stuff bottom feeders eat. Makes me think of Star Wars when Obi-Wan Kenobi describes Mos Eisley as being a “hive of scum and villainy.” Untrustworthy, criminals, etc.

Jesus is a dummy for consorting with them: Why would he want to spend time with people who have no value in society, and in fact, tear down our social fabric and steal from people. It just doesn't make sense.

It would be like today, if Rick Warren was in town, or Bill Hybels, or Steven Furtick, and instead of having a nice dinner with local church pastors, they decided to grab dinner with a vertically-challenged crooked businessman. We'd think these pastors are dummies, or worse, maybe in cahoots with this crooked businessman, right? And that's what these people think of Jesus.

Transition: So the tax collectors are being judged, and Jesus is being judged for consorting with these shady characters. But Jesus' answer to the Pharisees tells us something important.

He says that vs 12 "Healthy people don't need a doctor... sick people do." And adds in verse 13: he came to call those who know they are sinners, not those who think they are righteous. On one hand, it's easy to say: Yeah, no kidding. But let's slow down a little-it can be easy to read through the Bible and think we know what's happening when the reality is that we don't.

When Jesus is talking about healthy people, you might be tempted to think that the correlation is that he also means righteous people. The problem is, though, that even if society thought that the Pharisees were righteous, Jesus didn't. If we can learn anything from Scripture and the lives and stories we find there, we learn that nobody is righteous, nobody is good. People may think they are righteous, but they aren't. They just think they are.

In the same way that Jeff thought he wasn't really sick, when in fact he had appendicitis, the Pharisees think they are healthy/righteous, but they aren't. So after he answers the people's questions about eating in a tax collector's house, Jesus has to remind them of God's truth (that he wants mercy not sacrifice) – these people who supposedly know their Scripture backward and forward – which makes them not as healthy as they think they are...

And here's my question for you all, and for myself, too: Who's in bigger trouble here? The tax collector or the Pharisee? The person struggling to keep their head above the waves, or the person curled up on a sofa with a good book in their luxury room on the Titanic? Both are done for: but one feels the waves crashing over his head, the fatigue in his arms and legs, the cold water as he struggles to stay afloat; the other just has a false sense of security.

So if we're going to continue the drowning analogy: Neither is good... Either way, you're sunk.

So being an obvious sinner isn't good for the soul: you know your life is a mess, you know the things you do hurt you and hurt other people, you know you're missing the mark. When you go through life like this, you can get worn down, whether you feel badly about it or not. There are consequences you'll face, your sense of identity and who you are will be shaped by this identity.

On the other hand, in a lot of ways, being righteous (while actually still being a sinner) can be much worse, because it's sneaky...

You can go through life thinking things are great! You read your Bible. You go to church. You're generally pretty nice to people. You give to charity. You don't swear. You are a productive member of society.

But underneath that righteous exterior, you've got appendicitis – a ticking time bomb. Maybe it's thinking your "goodness" is what makes you a valuable person to God. Maybe it's pride, that you're awesome and others aren't so awesome. Maybe it's a judgmental attitude, where you see others make mistakes or experience a set back or misfortune and assume they did something to deserve it. A lot of times we aren't conscious of it happening, but it does.

The problem with this: you're in danger, but you don't really know it: You're walking across a bridge with frayed ropes holding it together. You're bungee jumping with a helmet on but nothing attached to the bridge. You're riding an upside down roller coaster with a broken seatbelt.

Transition: Some of you might identify with the tax collectors: being a sinner is just your identity now. That's who you are. Or maybe you identify more with the Pharisees – you think you're a good person, you're better than most other people, but the reality is that there's no such thing as a "good" person. I probably fall into that Pharisee camp myself more often than I'd like to think – where I become entitled and judgmental thinking I deserve what I have and don't have much empathy for others. Regardless: either way we're in trouble! So what do we do...?

There's this really great anecdote about the Victorian era novelist GK Chesterton, who was a Christian; the London Times put out a question for people to write in an answer to in their editorials, and they wanted people to write out an answer to the question: what's wrong with the world?

And Chesterton's answer to this question was: "Dear Sir, I am. Sincerely, GK Chesterton."

This answer shows us the key in how we can take steps towards avoiding the Pharisee's plight. Lots of terrible stuff has been happening lately: the Syrian war, racial injustice in our country, gun violence and acts of terror. And I know that a lot of judgment and self-righteousness is being thrown around because I have Facebook.

And I'm tempted to go out there like this (pointing finger outward): look at this person. Look at this politician. Look at this hatred, this brokenness, this nastiness. But this (finger pointing) is antagonistic, this is aggressive, this is defensiveness, this is self-righteousness.

What I really should be doing is this (pointing finger inward). The problem begins with me in my broken humanity. I have hatred in my heart, I am broken. I can be nasty. I am a sinner who has missed the mark.

Jesus calls the sick, the unrighteous, which is ALL OF US. He is the only one who lived a perfect life, who followed God's law, which is what points out how much we fall short.

I know it's kind of a weird concept, but: Jesus was fully God – He was there at Creation, he is eternal, he is God, but he is also fully man, and Hebrews 4:15 tells us he was tempted in every way we are, and yet he did not sin. He was the only person who can claim that, and will always be above the sinful nature that plagues the rest of us.

And even when we've been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, even after we experience forgiveness and can trade our sinner's identity for a new creation, even after we become children adopted by God, we still wrestle with sin and brokenness, don't we?

Transition: You might be sitting there thinking: Ugh. This is depressing. This sounds pretty bad. If you're a pessimistic cynical-type like me, it might reinforce these ideas you have about people. Or maybe you're a nicer person than me and you have a sense that people are basically good and they change, and this is depressing because you want to have hope in people.

The good news: you don't have to lose hope, because our hope isn't in people! It's in Jesus' ability to redeem and change our lives – and we aren't doing these changes. God is. And this is our moment of truth. The Moment of Truth here is: When we encounter Jesus, do we say:

WE NEED YOU DESPERATELY! WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE'RE DOING! WE'RE SELFISH, GREEDY, SELF-CENTERED, CLUELESS, AND IN DESPERATE NEED OF SAVING! JESUS: CHANGE ME.

Or do we say: I'm good. I'm fine. I have my act together. I'm better than most people, actually.

Zacchaeus and Matthew the tax collectors didn't change themselves – an encounter with Jesus Christ changed them! They knew they needed him; they knew they were sick, and they dropped everything to follow Jesus.

The Pharisees thought they were good. They thought they were righteousness by their own power, and so their encounter with Jesus didn't lead to any change at all.

This is your moment of truth:

Are you a tax collector or a Pharisee in your moment of truth? Do you know you're sick/not righteous? Do you think you're well/righteous? Depending on how you answer this question, that'll tell you. Because in one instance, you're moving closer to Jesus because you're admitting how much you need him; in the other, you're turning your back on him because you think goodness is found in you.

I love this parable just a few chapters before the story of Zacchaeus in Luke: In Luke 18:9, we find this parable: 9 Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else:

*10 "Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer[b]: 'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! 12 I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.' 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.' 14 I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

Who are you? A tax collector? Or a Pharisee? And what are you going to do in your Moment of Truth as a result?

Transition: Because we can't just sit here with this diagnosis: we have to do something in response. There's something we have to do once we've had this moment of truth.

And the truth is, for us to truly follow Jesus, we need to be like Zacchaeus and Matthew! If we look at Luke 19:8 – Zacchaeus says he will give half of his wealth to the poor, and repay four times anyone he may have cheated as a tax collector. He replaced his old god (money) with the True God, Jesus Christ: he gave away his money because that was what he lived for, that was what made him "sick."

And Matthew did something similar: he left his old life as a tax collector, dropped everything, and followed Christ. He got rid of the thing he worshipped and put first in his life (his job and livelihood) and replaced it with a life following Jesus.

What did the Pharisees need to hand over to Jesus, to drop (and yet didn't)? Their pride. Their self-righteous identity. Their "rules and regulations." Their lack of compassion. If they handed over these false sources of goodness and self righteousness and traded it for Jesus Christ, their lives would have been transformed the same way Matthew's and Zacchaeus' were.

So the question for us today is, how can WE do this? What is it we need to hand over? What can I hand over to Jesus, drop from my life, drop from my attitude?

Maybe you can answer this question like Zacchaeus and Matthew, and it's easier because it's more obvious: you're a tax collector, and you know you're a sinner in need of God's mercy. You know you need to make a major life change, maybe relationally or vocationally. You know you need to cut a bad behavior out (gambling, dishonest business practices, abuse of drugs, alcohol, etc.)

Or maybe it's a little tougher, because maybe you're more like the Pharisees with unseen, hidden sins. It could be a heart issue, where you don't have compassion toward others, or you're condemning or apathetic. Maybe it's a lack of self awareness.

Either way, like John said a few weeks ago when we were in the Psalms, the first step we need to take is to confess our sins in order to begin our relationship with God, or to remove barriers that might be stopping us from hearing his voice or resting in His presence. So let's end by praying together, and thank God for being so merciful to us, even when we were yet sinners. Let's come before Him, knowing that we're sick and in need of His love and His healing.