

Bible Nerd Guide

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Mercy at the Table, Life in the Streets

Matthew 9 gives us two scenes that belong together: Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector and eats with “tax collectors and sinners,” then Jesus heals a woman with a chronic flow of blood and raises a dead girl. At first glance, the stories may feel like separate episodes. But Matthew has arranged them so that they interpret one another.

In both scenes, Jesus moves toward people marked by some form of uncleanness, shame, social exclusion, need, or death. Matthew the tax collector is morally and socially suspect. The woman with the discharge of blood is ritually unclean and likely socially isolated. The dead girl represents the deepest impurity and enemy: death itself. In each case, Jesus does not become contaminated by contact. Instead, his holiness, mercy, and life move outward.

The way of Jesus is mercy that moves toward the sinner, the shamed, the sick, and the dead.

1. Literary Context in Matthew

Matthew 9 sits inside a larger section, Matthew 8-9, where Jesus’ authority is displayed after the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5-7, Jesus teaches with authority. In Matthew 8-9, Jesus acts with authority.

In these chapters Jesus shows authority over disease, demons, storms, paralysis, sin, social boundaries, impurity, and death. This matters because Matthew is not merely showing Jesus as a compassionate miracle worker. He is showing Jesus as the King whose kingdom restores what sin and death have broken.

The sequence around our text is important:

- Matthew 9:1-8 - Jesus forgives and heals a paralytic.
- Matthew 9:9-13 - Jesus calls Matthew and eats with tax collectors and sinners.
- Matthew 9:14-17 - Jesus teaches about fasting, bridegroom imagery, and new wineskins.
- Matthew 9:18-26 - Jesus heals the bleeding woman and raises the ruler’s daughter.
- Matthew 9:35-38 - Jesus sees the crowds as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”
- Matthew 10 - Jesus sends the Twelve.

So Matthew 9:9-26 is part of the lead-up to mission. Before Jesus sends the disciples, Matthew shows us the kind of mission Jesus himself embodies: mercy, healing, restoration, table fellowship, and life.

2. Structure of the Passage

Scene One: Mercy for Sinners

Matthew 9:9-13

1. Jesus sees Matthew at the tax booth.
2. Jesus calls him: "Follow me."
3. Matthew rises and follows.
4. Jesus reclines at table with tax collectors and sinners.
5. The Pharisees object.
6. Jesus answers with the image of a physician.
7. Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."
8. Jesus defines his mission: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Scene Two: Life for the Unclean and the Dead

Matthew 9:18-26

1. A ruler kneels and asks Jesus to raise his daughter.
2. Jesus rises and follows him.
3. A woman with a twelve-year discharge of blood touches Jesus' garment.
4. Jesus sees her, calls her "daughter," and declares her healed.
5. Jesus enters the ruler's house.
6. The mourners laugh when Jesus says the girl is "sleeping."
7. Jesus takes the girl by the hand.
8. The girl rises.
9. The report spreads.

The two scenes are connected by the theme of Jesus crossing boundaries of social, ritual, and existential separation.

3. Greek and Linguistic Notes

"Follow me" Matthew 9:9

Greek: ἀκολουθεῖ μοι (*akolouthei moi*)

This is discipleship language. Jesus is not merely inviting Matthew to admire him, believe a fact about him, or attend an event. He calls Matthew into a new life of allegiance and apprenticeship.

Matthew is sitting at the **tax booth** when Jesus calls him. The call comes before Matthew has cleaned up his reputation. This does not mean repentance is unnecessary. Matthew does rise and follow. But grace initiates the movement.

The call of Jesus is not a reward for the already respectable. It is the summons that creates a disciple.

“Tax booth” Matthew 9:9

Greek: **τελώνιον** (*telōnion*)

A tax booth was a toll or customs station. Tax collectors were despised in Jewish society because they were often associated with exploitation, greed, and collaboration with foreign or compromised political powers.

Matthew’s occupation is not an incidental detail. His tax booth represents his compromised social location. Jesus does not call Matthew after he leaves the booth. Jesus calls him there.

This is one of Matthew’s quiet testimonies to grace.

“Tax collectors and sinners” Matthew 9:10-11

Greek: **τελώναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοί** (*telōnai kai hamartōloi*)

This phrase refers not only to people who are theologically sinners in the broad sense. It functions as a social label for people considered morally compromised, religiously suspect, or outside respectable covenant life.

The phrase does not mean Jesus thinks sin is imaginary. His physician metaphor only makes sense if sickness is real. But it does mean Jesus moves toward those who are sick rather than avoiding them.

Jesus’ mercy is not denial. It is healing.

“Reclined at table” Matthew 9:10

Greek: **ἀνακειμένου** (*anakeimenou*)

To recline at table meant to share a meal. In the ancient world, table fellowship carried social meaning. Eating with someone implied some form of welcome, relationship, and identification.

This explains the Pharisees’ question: “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Their concern is not random. Meals were symbolic. Jesus is publicly sharing fellowship with people whose lives were considered shameful or contaminating.

The scandal is not simply that Jesus spoke kindly to sinners. The scandal is that he sat at the table with them.

“Those who are sick” Matthew 9:12

Greek: οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες (*hoi kakōs echontes*)

Literally, “those having badly,” meaning those who are ill or unwell.

Jesus’ image is simple: sick people need a physician. But the image is also sharp. If the Pharisees agree that tax collectors and sinners are spiritually sick, then why are they offended that the physician is near them?

The physician image holds together two truths:

1. Sin is truly destructive.
2. Jesus moves toward sinners to heal them.

“Mercy” Matthew 9:13

Greek: ἔλεος (*eleos*)

Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”

The Hebrew background includes **hesed**, a rich word often associated with covenant love, steadfast loyalty, mercy, and faithful love. God is not rejecting worship itself. He is rejecting religious practice detached from mercy, faithfulness, and the knowledge of God.

This is one of Matthew’s major themes. Jesus quotes the same verse again in Matthew 12:7 when the Pharisees criticize his disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath.

In both places, Jesus is confronting a form of biblical seriousness that has somehow missed the heart of God.

“Knelt before him” Matthew 9:18

Greek: προσεκύνει (*proskynei*)

This word can mean bow down, kneel, pay homage, or worship depending on context. Matthew often uses it in contexts of deep reverence toward Jesus.

The ruler is a socially important person, but he kneels. His status cannot protect him from grief. His power cannot rescue his daughter. He comes to Jesus in desperate humility.

Matthew places a tax collector, sinners, a ruler, a bleeding woman, and a dead girl all in the same passage. Different social locations, same ultimate need: mercy from Jesus.

“Fringe of his garment” Matthew 9:20

Greek: κράσπεδον (*kraspedon*)

This likely refers to the tassel or fringe on Jesus' garment. Jewish men wore tassels in obedience to Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12 as a sign of covenant remembrance.

The woman reaches for the edge of Jesus' garment. This is not magic. It is faith reaching toward the covenant faithfulness of God embodied in Jesus.

Some readers also hear a possible echo of Malachi 4:2, where the “sun of righteousness” rises with “healing in its wings.” The word “wings” can refer to the edge or corner of a garment. Matthew does not explicitly quote Malachi here, so we should be cautious, but the resonance is rich: healing comes at the edge of Jesus' garment.

“Made well” Matthew 9:21-22

Greek: σώζω (*sōzō*)

This verb can mean save, heal, rescue, or make well. In context, it clearly refers to physical healing, but the word carries broader salvation resonance.

The woman is not merely cured. She is restored. Jesus sees her, speaks to her, calls her “daughter,” and returns her to wholeness.

Important caution: “Your faith has made you well” should not be twisted into blaming sick people for not having enough faith. The woman's faith is not a technique that controls Jesus. Faith is trust directed toward the mercy and authority of Jesus.

“Take heart, daughter” Matthew 9:22

Greek: θάρσει, θύγατερ (*tharsei, thugater*)

“Take heart” is a tender command of courage. Jesus uses similar language earlier in Matthew 9:2 when he says to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

The woman approaches from behind, likely hidden by fear and shame. Jesus turns, sees her, and names her “daughter.”

She comes looking for healing. Jesus gives healing, courage, and restored identity.

“Not dead but sleeping” Matthew 9:24

Jesus is not denying that the girl is dead. The mourners laugh because they know she is dead. Rather, Jesus is denying death's finality in his presence.

Sleep becomes a way of speaking about death when resurrection is possible.

For everyone else in the room, death has spoken the final word. For Jesus, death is sleep waiting to be interrupted.

“The girl arose” Matthew 9:25

Greek: ἤγερθη (*ēgerthē*)

This verb means “was raised” or “got up.” It is also resurrection language.

Matthew is not yet narrating Jesus’ resurrection, but this story gives a preview. Jesus brings resurrection life into the present as a sign of the kingdom.

4. Historical and Cultural Background

Tax Collectors

Tax collectors in first-century Jewish society were widely despised. They were often seen as collaborators with oppressive systems and as people who enriched themselves at the expense of their neighbors.

The tax collector was not merely disliked because nobody enjoys paying taxes. He was viewed as morally and socially compromised.

That means Jesus’ call of Matthew is scandalous. Jesus calls someone whose public identity is tied to compromise.

Matthew’s response is immediate: “he rose and followed him.” The tax booth is left behind. The sinner becomes a disciple.

Table Fellowship

Table fellowship was socially powerful in the ancient world. To eat together was to acknowledge relationship. This is why Jesus’ meals were so often controversial.

Jesus’ table with tax collectors and sinners is not casual background scenery. It is a kingdom sign.

The Pharisees see contamination. Jesus sees patients.

The Pharisees see a compromised table. Jesus sees the physician’s office.

The Pharisees see sinners too close to holiness. Jesus reveals holiness coming close to heal sinners.

Pharisees and Purity

It is easy to turn the Pharisees into cartoon villains. That is not helpful. The Pharisees cared deeply about Torah, holiness, purity, and faithfulness. Their concern was not that they hated Scripture. Their danger was that they interpreted Scripture in a way that could miss mercy.

That makes them more relevant, not less.

The warning is not, “Do not be like those obviously bad religious people.” The warning is, “It is possible to know the Bible, care about obedience, and still fail to recognize mercy when it is sitting at the table.”

Ritual Impurity and the Bleeding Woman

The woman’s condition likely evokes Leviticus 15. A chronic discharge of blood would render her ritually unclean. Ritual impurity is not the same as moral guilt. She is not sinful because she is bleeding. She is suffering.

But the social consequences would have been severe. Her condition could have affected worship, touch, marriage, family life, and community belonging. For twelve years, she has lived under a condition that isolates her.

Her touch would normally be seen as communicating impurity. But in Jesus, the direction is reversed. Uncleanliness does not spread to him. Healing spreads from him.

Death and Corpse Impurity

The dead girl also raises purity questions. Contact with a corpse made a person unclean according to Numbers 19. Jesus takes the girl by the hand.

Again, Matthew wants us to see the reversal. Death does not contaminate Jesus. Life flows from Jesus.

Jesus’ holiness is not fragile. It is contagious in the best possible sense.

5. Intertextual Connections

Hosea 6:6 Mercy, Not Sacrifice

This is the explicit Old Testament quotation in the passage.

In Hosea, God rebukes Israel for shallow repentance and religious ritual without covenant faithfulness. They may offer sacrifices, but they lack steadfast love and true knowledge of God.

Jesus uses Hosea to interpret his ministry. Eating with sinners is not a violation of God’s heart. It is an expression of God’s heart.

This matters for reading Scripture. Jesus tells the Pharisees, “Go and learn what this means.” They know the verse. But they have not understood its meaning.

Knowing the Bible and reading the Bible in the way of Jesus are not always the same thing.

Leviticus 15 Blood and Impurity

Leviticus 15 provides the background for the woman’s condition. Her discharge of blood would make her ritually unclean and affect those who came into contact with her.

Matthew does not quote Leviticus, but he assumes a world where purity, impurity, touch, and social boundaries matter.

Jesus does not dismiss the Law as irrelevant. Instead, he embodies the arrival of the kingdom reality toward which the Law pointed: restoration, cleansing, and life.

Numbers 15:37-41 Tassels and Covenant Faithfulness

The woman touches the fringe of Jesus’ garment. Tassels reminded Israel to remember the commandments and live as God’s holy people.

The woman reaches toward the covenant sign on the garment of the faithful Son of Israel.

This is a beautiful image: the unclean woman reaches toward the faithful Israelite, and instead of making him unclean, she is made whole.

Numbers 19 Contact with the Dead

Numbers 19 describes impurity associated with death. Jesus takes the dead girl by the hand. In ordinary purity logic, contact with death defiles. But in Jesus, life overcomes death.

This is not simply a miracle story. It is a sign of new creation breaking into the old creation.

1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4 Elijah, Elisha, and Raised Children

Jesus raising the ruler’s daughter recalls Elijah raising the widow’s son and Elisha raising the Shunammite woman’s son.

Matthew presents Jesus as standing in continuity with Israel’s prophets, but also as greater. Jesus does not need a prolonged ritual. He takes her by the hand, and she rises.

The life-giving power of Israel’s God is present in Jesus.

Isaiah 53 and Matthew 8:17

Just before Matthew 9, Matthew quotes Isaiah 53:4:

“He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”

Matthew interprets Jesus’ healing ministry as burden-bearing. Jesus’ miracles are not detached displays of power. They are signs of the servant-like mercy of God.

Matthew 9 continues that pattern. Jesus bears the misery of the sick, the shamed, the sinful, and the grieving.

Matthew 1:21 “He Will Save His People from Their Sins”

At the beginning of Matthew, the angel announces that Jesus “will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew 9 shows that salvation includes forgiveness, calling, healing, restoration, and life. Jesus saves sinners, but he also restores the human beings sin and death have damaged.

Salvation in Matthew is personal, social, embodied, and kingdom-shaped.

Matthew 12:7 Hosea Repeated

Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 again in Matthew 12:7:

“If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.”

This repetition matters. Matthew wants readers to notice that mercy is central to Jesus’ interpretation of Torah.

The issue is not whether Scripture matters. The issue is whether Scripture is read in line with God’s merciful purpose.

Matthew 21:31 Tax Collectors Entering the Kingdom

Later Jesus says that tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom ahead of the religious leaders.

Matthew’s own call in Matthew 9 becomes an early living picture of that kingdom reversal. The one sitting at the tax booth becomes a disciple. The ones critiquing mercy remain outside the celebration.

6. Matthew’s Narrative Craft

Matthew compresses the stories compared to Mark and Luke.

In Mark 5 and Luke 8, the ruler is named Jairus, his daughter is dying but not yet dead, and the story unfolds with more drama and delay. In Matthew, the ruler simply says, “My daughter has

just died.” Matthew shortens the narrative and intensifies Jesus’ authority over death from the beginning.

Matthew also shortens the bleeding woman’s story. Mark gives us more details about her suffering under many physicians and spending all she had. Matthew focuses instead on her faith, her touch, Jesus’ seeing, and her healing.

This does not mean Matthew is less interested in compassion. It means he tells the story with sharper theological compression.

Matthew’s emphasis is clear:

- Jesus has authority to call sinners.
- Jesus has authority to heal the unclean.
- Jesus has authority to raise the dead.
- Jesus embodies the mercy God desires.

7. Scholarly Conversation

N.T. Wright often emphasizes that Jesus’ ministry announced and enacted the arrival of God’s kingdom. In that light, Matthew 9 is not merely a series of private miracles. These are kingdom signs. Jesus is doing what Israel’s God promised to do: gather the lost, heal the broken, forgive sins, and defeat death.

R.T. France notes Matthew’s concern to show Jesus as the authoritative Messiah whose deeds reveal the kingdom’s arrival. Matthew does not present miracles as random wonders but as signs of Jesus’ identity and mission.

Craig Keener’s work on Matthew and ancient context is especially helpful for seeing the social scandal of table fellowship, the stigma attached to tax collectors, and the seriousness of purity boundaries around blood and death.

Richard Hays’ emphasis on figural and intertextual reading helps us pay attention to Matthew’s scriptural echoes. Hosea 6:6 is explicit, but the passage also resonates with Leviticus, Numbers, prophetic restoration hopes, and resurrection imagery.

Michael Gorman’s language of cruciformity can help us see Jesus’ mercy as self-giving presence. Jesus does not practice holiness as guarded superiority. He practices holiness as merciful, self-giving nearness.

Matthew Bates’ emphasis on allegiance helps clarify the call of Matthew. “Follow me” is not merely inward belief. It is embodied allegiance to the King. Matthew rises and leaves behind an old way of life.

Scot McKnight’s “King Jesus Gospel” emphasis also fits here. Jesus is not simply offering isolated spiritual benefits. He is enacting the reign of God and forming a people around himself.

8. Major Theological Themes

1. Holiness as Healing Presence

Many people think holiness means distance from contamination. In Matthew 9, Jesus reveals holiness as healing presence.

He does not become sinful by eating with sinners.

He does not become unclean when touched by the bleeding woman.

He does not become defiled when he touches the dead girl.

Instead, sinners are called, the unclean are restored, and the dead are raised.

Jesus' holiness is not fragile. It is life-giving.

2. Mercy Without Moral Indifference

Jesus' mercy does not mean sin is unimportant. The physician metaphor shows that sin is sickness. But Jesus does not treat sickness by avoiding the sick.

This is crucial.

Jesus does not affirm Matthew's tax booth as though it does not matter. He calls Matthew away from it.

Mercy is not permission to stay sick. Mercy is the healing presence of the physician.

3. The Reversal of Contamination

This may be the deepest "Bible nerd" thread in the passage.

In the world of ritual purity, impurity often spreads by contact. But with Jesus, the movement is reversed.

- Instead of sinners contaminating Jesus' table, Jesus' mercy transforms the table.
- Instead of the bleeding woman making Jesus unclean, Jesus makes her well.
- Instead of the dead girl making Jesus unclean, Jesus raises her to life.

Jesus is the place where purity, holiness, mercy, and new creation flow outward.

4. Faith as Desperate Trust

The ruler kneels and believes Jesus can bring life where death has already arrived.

The woman believes touching Jesus' garment will make her well.

Faith here is not vague optimism. It is trust directed toward Jesus' authority and mercy.

Faith says, "If Jesus comes, death is not final."

Faith says, "If I can get to Jesus, shame is not final."

Faith says, "If Jesus calls me, my past is not final."

5. Restoration Is Bigger Than Cure

The woman receives more than physical healing. Jesus sees her and calls her "daughter."

This is relational restoration. Her body is healed, but her identity is also spoken back to her.

The gospel does not only address guilt. It also addresses shame, isolation, fear, and exclusion.

6. Resurrection Power Has Entered the Story

The raising of the girl is a preview of resurrection. Matthew uses "arose" language that points forward to the larger resurrection hope.

Jesus' own resurrection will be the decisive victory over death. But already in Matthew 9, death is being interrupted by the presence of the King.

9. Questions for Deeper Reflection

1. Why do you think Matthew places the call of Matthew, table fellowship with sinners, the healing of the bleeding woman, and the raising of the girl so close together?
2. What kinds of people are considered "too messy" or "too complicated" by religious communities today?
3. How does Jesus hold together moral seriousness and radical mercy?
4. What is the difference between mercy that heals and tolerance that ignores sickness?
5. Why is Hosea 6:6 so important for understanding Jesus' ministry?
6. How can someone know Scripture well and still miss the heart of God?
7. What does the bleeding woman's story teach us about shame?
8. Why is it important that Jesus calls her "daughter"?
9. What does this passage teach us about the direction of holiness? Does impurity move toward Jesus, or does healing move outward from Jesus?
10. Where do you need Jesus to speak "take heart" over you?
11. Where do you need to hear the call, "Follow me"?
12. What would it look like for the church to embody the mercy of Matthew 9?

10. Summary

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 reveals Jesus as the merciful physician and life-giving King. He calls a tax collector, eats with sinners, restores a suffering woman, and raises a dead girl. Along the

way, Matthew shows us that Jesus' holiness is not threatened by sinners, impurity, or death. His holiness overcomes them.

The way of Jesus is not purity by avoidance.

The way of Jesus is mercy that heals.

The way of Jesus calls sinners, restores daughters, and raises the dead.

And those who follow Jesus are called to become people of that same merciful way.