

**(CONNECT) A HOSPITAL FOR SINNERS**  
**Luke 18:9-14**

**Connect January Message Series**  
**January 3, 2016**  
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The church is to be a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints. I'm not sure who first coined this phrase but it is true. From its very beginning the church of Jesus Christ was never intended to be a fellowship made up of perfect people; of people who have everything together. Jesus rather established the church as a refuge for those whose lives are broken by sin.

Jesus makes this truth very clear in the parable he told in Luke 18. Jesus tells about a Pharisee and a Tax Collector who went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like certain sinful people (like this Tax Collector); he praised himself for all the good and wonderful things he had done.

On the other hand the Tax Collector stood in the corner and with much sadness/humility prayed, *"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."* He didn't feel he could even look up to God.

Yet Jesus concludes this parable by saying that this Tax Collector went home from the temple justified instead of the Pharisee. Jesus declares, *"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

What made this parable (teaching) so radical of course was that the tax collectors were despised by the Jews at that time as traitors. When the Romans came to power they made a deal with these Jewish men that if they would collect Roman taxes from their fellow Jews they could then collect a generous profit on top for themselves.

The result was these men became very wealthy at their own people's expense; most of them cheated their Jewish sisters and brothers out of money they did not deserve to have. Needless to say the reputation of the tax collectors was about as low as low could be.

They were considered the scum of the earth who had sold their souls to the hated Romans. Therefore when Jesus said that the Tax Collector went away justified; when he said this man would be exalted that was enough evidence for the people to conclude that Jesus was a phony.

On the other hand the Pharisees were a small sect of Jewish men who were strict followers of the law. There were actually 613 laws they believed they followed to the letter. The Pharisees firmly believed that they were the true example of a Godly and righteous person.

So when Jesus came along he caused lots of concern among the Pharisees because he openly challenged this group and their beliefs. Jesus proclaimed instead that every person is sinful and unclean; that no one is righteous or better than any other person; that those who think their good works make them deserving of salvation are completely lost.

While people like this Tax Collector who humble themselves before God; who ask God for mercy and forgiveness; who rely completely on Christ for their life and salvation—they are justified right now in God's eyes. And when they die they will be saved eternally.

Jesus further threatened these long held beliefs by reaching out to the exact people the Pharisee thanked God he was not like. Jesus reached out to the tax collectors; the disenfranchised; the poor and needy; those entangled in sexual sins; those in trouble with the law; those of different religious and political backgrounds—he offered each one healing and forgiving love.

It was from this group of repentant and forgiven sinners; from these people whose lives were completely broken and hurting that Jesus built and assembled his church. He established his church from the very beginning as a hospital for sinners.

Yet how are we as members of Christ's church doing today? Is the Christian church in our country and throughout the world following this example Jesus sets forth? Is our church here at Messiah functioning as a hospital for sinner? Are we reaching out in love and mercy to all?

What so often prevents us from being a hospital for sinners of course is the Pharisee in each of us. It is so easy for us to get wrapped up in our own self-righteousness; to separate ourselves from certain people; to stand in judgment of others; to thank God for how good we think we are. We are often guilty of pushing people away through our words and actions.

The tax collectors and sinners the church often rejects today are those who are a different race, ethnic background and religion; those who are homeless and on welfare; those experiencing addictions to drugs, alcohol and pornography; those who are in trouble with the law.

The writer Hansi in her book, *“Don't Shoot I'm Already Wounded,”* says that the most difficult time during her divorce was when so-called warm evangelical Christians failed to love and accept her. It is so easy for us in the church to become like Pharisees—to shoot people when they are down; to judge people rather than meet them where they are at with love and care.

We need to always remember that the church is not a collection of saints; it is rather a hospital for sinners. We welcome and care for all people. Christ loved all and so should we. Our Lord had no favorites when it came to loving, serving and blessing people.

It has also been said that the ground is always level at Jesus' cross. No one stands higher—Jesus loves each one the same. It is only as a person is welcomed and cared for at their point of need that they will ever know the love of Jesus and will find healing and wholeness.

So how about Messiah? How can we truly become a hospital for sinners? One very important and fundamental way for us to be the church Jesus calls us to be is for each of us to humble ourselves. This means we need to be more honest about the people we are; to let others know our joys and sorrows; our successes and failures; our hopes and fears. Only as we are honest with each other can we truly support one another.

One of the biggest blocks to our church being a center for healing and strength is that we often

wear masks when we come to church. We put on our spiritual masks to try to impress each other with our piety. We put on our “everything is fine” mask; we smile and act like everything is okay even though the tears and pain on the inside are almost too much to bear.

How often have we heard people say, *“I just can't believe so and so is having such terrible problems—he or she seemed to be such a pillar of strength with everything in their life all together.”* How often have we said, *“I'm shocked to hear that so and so is having problems in their marriage—she and her husband always seemed to have the perfect marriage and family. Whenever I talked with them they said everything was great.”*

If in the church we would all remove our masks; would humbly admit our sins and weaknesses; would see in each other true love, compassion and help; would look for help and support from a trusted friend and/or small group before the problem progresses and gets too far down the road—more problems would find healing. Then our church will also be what Jesus intended from the beginning—a center for forgiveness; transformation; healing; love and wholeness.

It is this kind of church and Christ-centered community that is at the center of our mission and purpose for Messiah. In fact our mission statement is--*“Seek – Connect – Impact...A Spiritual Journey Through a Jesus Filled Life.”* Messiah's mission is to help each person who comes here to connect with God and with others—to connect in authentic community and groups where each person can grow in their spiritual journey together.

During the month of January we at Messiah will be discussing and looking at ways each one of you can connect more closely together; ways you can perhaps connect in a group for some intentional fellowship, caring, learning and growth. This morning I'm going to have Charis come up and share some words about this process. (Charis share).

Oscar Wilde once said, *“If a friend of mine...gave a feast, and did not invite me to it, I would not mind a bit. But if a friend of mine had a sorrow and refused to let me share it, I would feel it most bitterly.”* The church is to be a family where we can take off our masks and find community where people will weep when we weep; will rejoice when we rejoice.

Let us all dedicate ourselves to the mission of helping Messiah to truly be a hospital for sinners. Let us be a caring community who acknowledges that we are all sinners in need of God's grace; where we reach out, welcome and care about all people; where we open ourselves up to community and small groups where we we can find strength, help and support from each other.

Remember what Jesus said, *“For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*