

The Way of Striving, The Way of Grace

Good morning. My name is David Kayler, and for those of who think you might recognize that last name, yes, you've got me: I am Claude Kayler's son.

I come from a family of preachers – obviously, my dad is a preacher. His dad was a preacher too, and since I was young I've been doing everything I could to avoid their fate. I remember at one family gathering years ago, my grandmother called my younger sister over and said to her, "Well, Mary, looks like you're going to have to become a preacher now since your brother has forsaken the family call."

I like to think I just have a different call. As my dad may have mentioned at some point here, I spent the last four years teaching English at a high-poverty high school in Durham. This year I'm taking on a new challenge: a class of just one behaviorally challenged, emotionally unstable student with major barriers to effective communication. Yes, that's right – I'm a stay at home parent with a two-year old.

Now I know there are probably lots of questions that you'd like to ask me about how awesome it was to grow up with Claude as my dad, but I want to talk with you this morning about a story about Jesus. If you would, turn with me to Matthew 9:9-13. And as I read this Scripture, ask yourself, "Where do I see myself in this story? Who do I identify or connect with?"

Pray.

I love this story because of what it shows us about the character of Jesus. Looking at this story I think we get to see a clear division between the way the world works and the way that Jesus works – between what I'd like to call the way of Striving and the way of Grace.

The way of striving: that's the way I think we normally work. That's certainly the way the world works. Think back over your life for a second and I would bet that somewhere along the way you got handed some version of this basic idea: that if you work harder, if you push yourself and build your skills and grow your knowledge and prove how good you are – then, you'll get ahead and then, you'll really be somebody. In a lot of ways, we shape our whole lives around this climb-the-ladder idea. Whether it's in school or work or appearance or relationships, I think most of us have this feeling that we're not quite there yet, but if we just try a little harder, if we just reach a little further, then we'll accomplish something; then we'll get noticed; then people will look up to us and we'll win awards and we'll get promotions and we'll make a difference and we'll feel important. Then, we will matter.

That's the way of striving. It's a way of looking at the world that tells us that ultimately our value comes from our achievements, that our worth is based on what we do.

We know all too well how the way of striving works. We know what competition feels like. We're familiar with the grind, the race to the top, the constant anxiety of comparing ourselves to others. We know the longing to be the best, the yearning to make an impact, the fear we haven't done enough, the ache of knowing that we've failed.

We see the way of striving all around us. We live in it. And don't get me wrong: there are tons of things that are good about working hard and trying to improve ourselves, but what I think we don't realize is how often this way of thinking slips into our souls and shapes our understanding of how we see ourselves and everyone else.

The Pharisees in today's story – they were strivers. Now, I know that a lot of the time Pharisees tend to come off looking like jerks in these Jesus stories, but we've got to understand that they really were the good guys of their day. They were extremely religious in a religious society. They were passionate about scripture – they had huge portions of the Bible memorized by heart. They worked really, really hard to keep up with the complicated and difficult regulations of Jewish law. They prayed; they gave money; they fasted; they taught others. They were like preachers and lawyers and teachers rolled up into one. Most of society looked up to them as models of virtue and right living.

But in today's story, Jesus seems to be telling the Pharisees that their approach is all wrong. When they ask their question, he says to them: "Go and learn what this means," and then he quotes this old Scripture where God says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Now, the Pharisees knew all about sacrifice. They tithed and they gave; they worked and they fasted; they participated in all the animal offerings still going on at the Jerusalem temple. The Pharisees knew all there was to know about how to please God through sacrifice.

But mercy? The kind of mercy Jesus is offering to these tax collectors and sinners around the table? That, the Pharisees do not understand.

"Why is Jesus eating with these people?" We've got to get that the Pharisees are actually truly confused about this. More than confused, they're shocked!

You see what Jesus is doing by having dinner with Matthew is breaking some major cultural taboos.

First, he's hanging around with tax collectors. Now, still today nobody really likes people who take your money, but back in first century Palestine, tax collectors were absolute scum: they were traitors; they were sell-outs; they were morally bankrupt. Tax collectors were Jews who had aligned themselves with the oppressive Roman Empire. They sold out their neighbors to assist a hated enemy and then, they got rich from it. They were known for lying and taking more than what they were supposed to. They used their power to fatten their wallets while the orphans and widows around them went hungry. And so these guys weren't just disliked. They were disgraces.

Then there was that other group of people that the text just calls "sinners." We don't know exactly who they were, but based on other passages in the gospels – and the fact that they're hanging out with tax collectors – we can make a pretty good guess that some of these folks are prostitutes; some may be adulterers; several may be drunks. The

purity-focused religious codes that the Pharisees tried so hard to live by – their way of striving – actually made it illegal to mingle with people like this who lived outside the law.

And when we put it in that context, the Pharisees' question starts to make sense: Why would Jesus eat with these people? Not only do they have nothing to show for themselves, not only do they not deserve a visit from this up-and-coming religious teacher, but Jesus may actually be soiling himself just by being near them. In the Pharisees eyes, what Jesus is doing is not just weird – "It's a sin!"

Looking at this situation from the way of striving, what Jesus is doing makes zero sense. He's not racing to the top; he's gone right to the bottom. He has picked the losers, the failures, the wrong people to eat with.

You know, we're at a moment of deep, deep division in this country. I want you to think for a second about someone on the other side of a divide from you. Think about someone you find it hard to respect – someone you see as just low. Seriously. Think about someone who has made all the wrong choices; someone who has hurt people; someone who stands for everything you stand against.

That's who Jesus invites to dinner.

From a human point of view, what Jesus is doing here makes zero sense. But, Jesus, as he so often does, flips everything we think we understand upside down. He totally explodes the Pharisees way of looking at this situation because he doesn't approach the world from the way of striving; no, he lives in the way of Grace.

I want to go back and look really closely at what Jesus is doing in this story, because I think that looking at him is the clearest way we can learn about this other way – this way of Grace.

First, there's the calling of Matthew. Did you notice where Matthew was when Jesus called him? Was he in the temple praying and repenting or walking around the city giving back money that he had stolen? No, he's still at the

tax booth. He's right there doing the very thing that made him unacceptable. But Jesus looks at him and says, "I want you."

And then in the very next sentence, Jesus is at Matthew's house. Jesus doesn't wait for Matthew to clean up his life before becoming a guest in his home.

And Matthew's reaction to this acceptance? He throws a party! All of the sudden, we've got many tax collectors and sinners showing up and cramming themselves around Matthew's table right along with the disciples. A party and a crowd of sinners – it's sort of hard to picture this as a really formal, sanitized, stained-glass-religion kind of affair.

And yet Jesus seems right at home. We don't find him standing apart from this crowd; he's not looking at these outcasts and pitying them, lecturing them about how they need to shape up. No, the text just tells us that Jesus and his disciples are "sitting" at dinner and that these sinners "sat with them." Allow me to be very nerdy for a second and point out that that word probably has a footnote attached to it – the originally word used there is actually "reclining." See it was typical in those days to eat around really low tables. You didn't sit at chairs like we do; you leaned or lay on cushions and pillows. And so reclining was natural, but still I love the feeling that's conveyed by that word – there is an intimacy, a comfort, a vulnerability. Jesus isn't dining and dashing – he's hanging out, he's soaking it in, and the "sinners" around him seem totally happy to have him there.

Which is pretty strange if you think about it: this group of people who have heard over and over the condemnation of the religious elite – the message that they failures, that they are not acceptable to God – these people are now willingly crowding around a man who is clearly a religious teacher.

Clearly there must be something different about Jesus – something that makes Matthew and these other tax collectors and sinners want to get close to him. There's something he has that they're hungry for. There's

something in his eyes that looks like acceptance, something in his voice that sounds like love. There's something about his presence here that lifts away their isolation and their shame, making them feel somehow finally, okay.

I mentioned before that in the Pharisees' eyes, just mingling with these people was violating the law, but Jesus has actually gone way past that. You see, the table that this story centers around was a big deal in the first century Jewish mindset. Still today, the table is a symbol of fellowship and connection. For first century Jews, that sense was amplified.

Writer Brennan Manning put it this way: "In the Near East, to share a meal with someone is a guarantee of peace, trust, fraternity, and forgiveness – the shared table symbolizes a shared life.

Jesus knows that meal-sharing is no casual act, he understands the implications of what he is doing, and knowingly, purposefully he sits down at this table. He meets these "sinners" where they are and says, "I want to be with you. I want connection. I want a friendship." Jesus offers the acceptance of table-fellowship long before we are acceptable as table-mates.

And this is exactly what the Pharisees can't understand. Jesus' unflinching acceptance and undeserved forgiveness don't fit in their worldview. They don't make sense in a system where you make yourself worthy by what you do.

So we see pretty clearly contrasted here these two different worldviews: the way of striving and the way of Grace. But what does all this mean for us? How do we respond to this? What does it look like to live a life in Grace?

Three quick thoughts:

First, living in the way of Grace changes how we see ourselves.

A while back I asked you to think about where you find yourself in this story. And as much as we maybe don't like to talk about ourselves this way, I hope that we come to identify more and more with the sinners reclining at table. When Jesus tells the Pharisees that it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick, he doesn't mean that the Pharisees are already healthy so they don't need him – no, I think he's pointing out that they just aren't willing to admit that they're sick. These tax collectors and outcasts – they know they're sinful, they know they're broken, and so they are willing to claim their sickness and admit their need.

When we step out of the way of striving and into the way of grace, we are free to do the same. When we're living in the way of striving, we're always working to cover our flaws, to look strong, to make sure no one sees the ways we fall short. We are hiding from others and from ourselves. The way of grace invites us into the deep freedom and relieving honesty of accepting exactly who we are: someone terribly broken and boundlessly loved, someone wretched but also Wanted.

In the way of Grace, our value is not based on what we do or know or say or produce, but on the simple reality that Jesus loves us. And so when I'm living in the way of Grace I can stop trying to prove myself. I don't have to make every hour count, I don't have to compare myself to others, I don't have to be at the top of the class, I don't have to dwell on my failures or beat myself up because I know my worth doesn't come from what I do – it comes from who I belong to.

There is nothing more precious to a parent than their child. I mentioned my two-year-old son earlier. Over the past couple of years, little James has totally redefined the meaning of that word "precious" for me. He is the one thing I treasure most in all the world. And yet, practically speaking, he has done basically nothing for me. In fact, for the most part, he's made my life a whole lot harder: dirty diapers and sleepless nights, tantrums about nothing and huge messes after dinner. And yet I could not possibly love anyone more than him. And I think the same goes for most parents in the world. Why is that? Because children are not valuable because of what they do, but because of who they belong to.

The way of grace reminds me that my worth and identity and value are based solely and securely in the fact that the God who created the universe – atoms and oceans, ants and elephants, planets and stars and trees – that God loves me and says I'm worth dying for.

So first, the way of grace changes the way we see ourselves, and then, second, it changes the way we see others. It's hard to be a Pharisee if you're living a life in grace.

The way of striving teaches us compare ourselves to others; the way of grace reminds us that we are all equally unworthy and equally loved.

The way of striving tells us that the morally weak are failures; the way of grace reminds us that we're all in the same boat.

When we realize that we are the recipients of a grace that we could not possibly deserve, there is no room left for judgment. We can't stand at a distance and shake our heads at "those people." No, if we really love grace – if we have been moved by the compassion of Jesus – then we will be drawn to the places where his grace is at work. And that means we've got to go with Jesus to those people we can't stand. We've got to sit with Jesus at tables surrounded by people who will ruin our reputation.

So, the way of grace changes how we see ourselves; it changes how we see others; and then, third, it changes the way we see our relationship with God.

The way of striving is all about reaching; the way of grace is all about receiving.

The way of striving says it's about what we do; the way of grace says it's about what God has already done.

The Pharisees were focused on pleasing God through what they could do and what they could give. They fasted and prayed and tithed and taught – they sacrificed, hoping that it would bring them closer to God. But it's the sinners – the people willing to receive mercy – that end up reclining at a feast with Jesus.

The way of Grace reminds us that we don't reach God through our own effort. We don't make connection or spiritual growth happen out of our own strength. In the end, our relationship with God doesn't really depend on us. God in the flesh has already shown up at our table, saying "Come, share life with me." Our job is just to relax back into that, to recline next to him, to let God love us.

Back to my son again for a second. I said a minute ago that there's really nothing he has done for me, practically speaking – but he still manages to make me feel joy on a daily basis. How? By walking over and lifting up his arms and asking to be held. By choosing to come and sit on my lap. By smiling as soon as I walk in the door and running to give me a hug. James brings me joy just by letting me love him.

So how are you doing that with God? Are you letting go of your striving enough to just receive the totally free, totally freeing affection of God? Do you take time to just let God love you?

I want to close by doing something a little different. I want to take some time to practice relaxing back into the way of grace. I'm gonna read a few verses and I want to invite you to just close your eyes, let go of any of the tension you are holding on to, and for a moment just let God love you.

Let's pray: Father, Abba, Daddy, friend of sinners – come and be here now. Give us the grace to hear your voice, speaking these words over us.

Be still and know that I am God.

In returning and rest will be your salvation; in quietness and trust will be your strength.

Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands!

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

³For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

And you are precious in my sight,

and honored, and I love you ...