

Matthew 9: 9-13

The Calling of Matthew

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.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

In the chapter before the call of Matthew in chapter 9, Jesus has done astonishing things. He calmed a storm, healed those demon possessed, and Peter's Mother-in-Law talked about the cost of following him, and as he moves on from Nazareth he calls Matthew - elsewhere called Levi. A tax collector.

As a class, the tax collectors were hated by their fellow Jews. This was almost inevitable. They represented the foreign domination of Rome and collected their taxes. They would have had to know details of everyone, including their income - never a popular job That they often overcharged people and pocketed the surplus is almost certain. In the synoptic gospels they are bracketed with "sinners". This shows the common attitude of the Jewish people toward them. They were considered to be renegades, who sold their services to the foreign oppressor to make money at the expense of their own countrymen.

We can picture Matthew sitting at a gateway to the market where taxes would have to be paid. He would have kept a record and ticked it off against the census so the Roman authorities knew who had not paid. Taxes were high in Judea, and went to the Emperor.

Why would Jesus have picked out this man, despised ignored by the general population, probably wealthy, to give it all up to follow him?

Perhaps Matthew was a Jew, conscience stricken by Jesus' teaching, and the position he was in. Possibly because he would have been well educated, he was conscripted, perhaps he realised exploiting his fellow taxpayers was not good in God's eyes, and Jesus offered him away out. Though I can't believe the Romans wouldn't have extracted some compensation for him leaving his post. Whatever the reason, Matthew turned away from his records, his money, his status with the Romans, and followed Jesus as his Lord. And much later Matthew would be the one who wrote, or perhaps compiled, the gospel we know.

The people he had moved among were other tax collectors and publicans, who were also in the same line of business, but Jesus went to eat with them at Matthew's house despite the Pharisees disapproval; and this was not the only time

Jesus replies, "I have not called the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

What He was asserting was that there is forgiveness for even the worst sinner who will repent. The refusal to repent of their self-righteousness was the crowning sin of the Pharisees, as Jesus vividly pictured in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Do you remember that parable? Again, a vivid picture of a pharisee and a tax collector, praying near each other, one congratulating himself he is not like the tax collector but who keeps the law and thinks he is pure. The tax collector, knowing who he was and what he did, says "God have mercy on me a sinner". Jesus commends the one who was humble and repented, and not the Pharisee who thought he had no need to repent.

The third instance where Jesus takes notice - even commends - a tax collector is when he saw Zacchaeus, trying to see him as he went along - yet keeping out of the way of the crowd who might abuse

him by climbing a tree. Jesus, though, spots him and goes to have dinner with him, which leads to Zacchaeus' repentance of any exploitation of which he might have been.

In Jesus' acceptance, even friendship with Matthew, Zacchaeus, and eating with their colleagues, He asks us, how can we show all people we meet the good news of Jesus, and show our acceptance of them. Show that everyone can follow Christ, even if they think they are not good enough: even if we think they are not "good enough" - none of us are "good enough". All it needs is repentance - which involves turning round acknowledging we need Jesus to be Lord of our lives - as Matthew did, and accepting a new way of life which may mean sacrificial living. That is what secures salvation.

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