

MATTHEW (LEVI)
Matthew 9:9-13

Lessons By The Lake Summer Series
June 10, 2012
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What impressions or feelings come to mind when I say the names Tom Petters or Bernie Madoff? Perhaps words like thieves, or deception, or greed come to mind. Perhaps you feel some anger and disdain for people like this who got rich, and lived lavish lifestyles, at the expense of others.

Well this is what the Jewish people in Jesus' time felt about tax collectors like the disciple Matthew. Jewish tax collectors were very much hated and considered unclean and sinful. In fact, righteous and upright Jews would totally shun them.

The reason they felt this way is because these Jewish tax collectors had sold out to the Roman authorities and had agreed to collect taxes for their oppressive Roman political system. These collectors were like custom officials who would collect duty taxes on the goods that would pass through Capernaum.

The deal was that these tax collectors had agreed on the amount they would need to pay the Romans, with anything collected above that amount going to the collector. As a result, these people often lived quite lucrative lives on the backs of their fellow Jews.

So you can see why they were considered traitors and why they were called every other evil name they could think of. And so the fact that Jesus one day, while walking by Matthew's tax booth, called him to follow and be his disciple is very significant.

And not only did Jesus call Matthew to leave his business, to give up everything and follow him, but Jesus also went and ate a meal at Matthew's house. And not only that, but there were many other tax collectors and sinners who were also present at this meal.

These facts alone really got the religious leaders, the most righteous people, to get their tongues and gossip going. For not only did Jesus choose one of the truly hated and despised in that society to be his follower, but he also went and ate with many others.

It is also important to note that in that culture being in one's home and eating with them was one of the most intimate things a person could do. It demonstrated love, and acceptance, and care. It was something you would do only with your closest friends and family.

So this whole scene, and all the facts around it, says a lot about Jesus and his mission. In other words, the calling of Matthew helps us better understand the heart and mind of Jesus. And his eating and associating with these people shows the Savior Jesus is for us today.

In fact, in the Gospel lesson for today Jesus responds to the question by the Pharisees, "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*" by saying, "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*" (Matthew 9:12-13)

Jesus is saying that if you think you are well, or think you've got your life together, or think you are righteous and spiritual, that then you really don't need him or his saving help. In other words, a person does not usually go to the doctor if they are in perfect health.

And yet if you don't have your life together; if you know you have failed and made mistakes; if you are honest enough to admit that you have sinned and fallen short of God's truth, then you are one who needs Jesus. You are one who needs his saving love and forgiveness.

It has been said that the church is not to be a museum full of saints, but rather a hospital for sinners. Jesus made it known even in the calling of his disciples that his mission is always to the lost, the hurting, to those who have fallen short of God's will.

And the good news is that if Jesus can take someone like Matthew—a person whose life and priorities were in the wrong place—he can also take you. Jesus changed Matthew's life through the power of his love to one that trusted in him—to one who then followed God's will and purposes throughout the rest of his life.

And the good news for you and me, my friend, is that whatever place your life is in. No matter what you done or have failed to do. No matter how far you may have strayed from God and Jesus, the good news is that Jesus is there for you.

Jesus is always there to welcome you back, to forgive your sins, to bring healing to your heart, and to restore your relationship with him. And in the same way he is there to call you, like he did Matthew, to follow him. With Jesus there is always hope for new life.

Now the calling of Matthew is also important as we study the Gospel that is attributed to him. Many scholars aren't sure whether Matthew actually wrote this book, or whether it was written by one of his fellow workers and supporters who sought to capture his message.

What we do know is that this Gospel writing captures many of the truths that would surely be important to Matthew. Being a Jew who wandered into a life of dishonesty and deceit, and who was judged and rejected by the people claiming to be righteous, Matthew had a vision for a new kind of community of believers centered in God's kingdom on earth.

Matthew, therefore, uses Jesus' words and teachings to stress that unbelievers, and sinners, and the lost are all welcome and invited to believe in Jesus and be part of his family. In fact, sharing the story of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners was a living sign that we are all welcome in God's kingdom.

In this he also includes the beautiful Beatitudes of Jesus: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted...Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy...Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."* (5:3-12)

Matthew had experienced this kind of rejection and pain through the words and actions of others, and he knew that many others had also suffered condemnation by religious and self-righteous people. So as he was saved and healed by the love of Jesus, Matthew wanted all people to know this amazing love.

Matthew also lifts up the words of Jesus which would bring renewal to the faithful. In fact, he uses Jesus' words to convict and try to correct those who thought they were righteous, and good, and above others—like the Pharisees.

Jesus' message is shared, *"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogue and on the street corners to be seen by others."* (Matt. 6:5-6) Matthew makes it clear that Jesus *"desires mercy not sacrifice."*

Jesus does not call us to religious outward actions, but to an inward relationship of faith that shines forth actions of love and care for all people. *"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."* Self-righteous posturing, according to Jesus, is not part of the Kingdom of God on this earth.

Another major theme of Matthew's Gospel is the emphasis on mission, on reaching out to the lost, on bringing the message of Jesus to the whole world. Matthew includes many teachings of Jesus on how his church should never rest until all people know Jesus their Savior by faith.

It is obvious that as Jesus reached out to Matthew, and as he found forgiveness and new life, that Matthew then wanted everyone to experience the new life he had found. It should be true, my friends, that if we know Jesus by faith, and if we allow him to change and renew us, that we too will want everyone to know and trust Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord.

Matthew recorded Jesus' words, *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into the harvest field."* Matthew wants people to know that Jesus is calling them to go—all are needed to be witnesses for Jesus.

Matthew also lifts up Jesus' parable about the Shepherd who will leave the 99 sheep and search until he finds the one lost sheep. And Jesus says, *"In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish."* (18:12-13)

And at the end of his Gospel Matthew proclaims Jesus' Great Commission: *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."* (28:19-20)

My friends, the disciple Matthew should be an encouragement to each one of us. For the good news is that Jesus came for each one of us, that he loves us no matter who we are or what we have done, and he calls us to follow him and be his disciples.

And the good news is that through God's life changing and renewing power, and through his forgiveness and new life, that we have the privilege of being Christ's witnesses in this world. In fact, as we come to know Jesus in a growing and deeper way we will want to do everything we can to help others know Jesus by faith.

Christ's marching orders, my friends, have been given to us as individuals and as a church. May God's Holy Spirit fill each of us with the passion of Matthew to *"go make disciples of all nations!"*