

The Trouble with Matthew

You Asked For It, Part 1

Luke 5:27-32

Some time ago I came across this story, evidently told by a native born North Carolinian.

A Texan, a New Yorker, and a North Carolinian were drinking their favorite beverage in a North Carolina Saloon. The Texan drained his glass to Tequila, threw the half-empty bottle up into the air, drew and fired his pistol, shattering the bottle to pieces. The other two were shocked. The Texan simply drawled, "Where I come from, we already have plenty of that stuff."

The New Yorker, not to be outdone, finished his glass of wine and threw his bottle into the air, drew and fired his pistol, shattering his bottle to pieces. He looked over at the other two men with an air of superiority and announced, "Back in Manhattan, we already have enough of the finest wines available."

The North Carolinian drained his glass of sweet ice tea (the only recommended drink in this story), threw his glass into the air, drew his revolver and shot the New Yorker . . . and said to the Texan, we already have enough people here from New York."

How many of you here are from New York? That's okay . . . the real question is, do you pull for NC State?

That's the real test of fellowship.

Frankly, if you lived during the days of Christ, you would have discovered a gulf of division between all kinds of people . . . just like today . . . only it was for real.

In the days of Christ, there was one particular person who, because of his occupation, was especially despised.

Anybody who had the job was automatically hated because of it.

They weren't allowed to step foot inside a synagogue because they were considered perpetually unclean . . . they were beyond the saving grace of God.

And they couldn't testify in court either because their word was entirely untrustworthy.

Religious leaders during the days of Christ would have shot them as easily as look at them.

But Jesus Christ will just so happen to call one of them to become His disciple.

His name was Matthew . . . and his occupation was that of a tax collector.

And that was the trouble with Matthew – he worked for the Roman IRS.

If you'll turn to the Gospel by Luke, you'll find a brief, but rich, retelling of that moment when Matthew met Jesus.

1. The Character of Matthew

The opening lines of Luke chapter 5 and verse 27 inform us that after healing a paralyzed man – *Jesus went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth.*

Now before we take note of their conversation, let me fill you in on Matthew's occupation.

First of all, many believe that Levi was his Jewish name and Matthew was his Roman name.ⁱ

Just as many Bible scholars and I would throw my hat in with them, believe Jesus gave him the name Matthew, just as He gave Simon the name Peter.

It was a new name with a significant meaning. Matthew means, gift from God – and he's not only about to receive the gift of salvation from God, he's about to become a gift from God to the lives of so many others.

Let's go back to his occupation for a moment.

During the days of Christ there were several kinds of civil taxes everyone had to pay.

There was a poll tax that everyone paid. You paid this tax to Rome because you simply existed . . . I suppose because you were breathing Roman air.

There was a ground tax where you handed over 1/10th of whatever your fields produced. They fed the army with that tax, among other things. There was also an income tax which was 1% of your income.ⁱⁱ

And then there were what the Roman government called duties. These were taxes for all kinds of things; like docking your boat at the pier; for importing and exporting goods; for traveling on Roman road systems.

They even had a cart tax where each wheel of your cart was taxed.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sounds familiar doesn't it?

My daughter is home from the mission field for a few more weeks and she decided, along with one of her girl-friends, to go to New York City, visit some sites and attend the worship services at the Brooklyn Tabernacle Sunday services.

When they got through New York and were on the highway in New Jersey she called me and said, "Daddy, we didn't even think about the toll roads – we don't have any cash – but don't worry – we were able to just drive through one lane that said EZ Pass – my friend said their technology is so advanced they're probably just taking pictures of you when you go through and then mail you the fee.

I said, "Hang on" and I googled New Jersey EZ Pass. I said, "Well whaddya know – you can drive through that booth without even slowing down, if you've joined EZ Pass and you have a sticker on your license plate.

"Yes, they have developed the technology and yes they are taking pictures of you . . . I said, "Is there anybody behind you with blue lights flashing?"

Can't wait to see what we get in the mail.

Do you think New Jersey will have compassion on a missionary?

The idea of toll roads actually goes all the way back to the Romans. The Roman highways were incredible developments – but you couldn't drive on them for free.

Jesus referred to this when He said, go invite people to my banquet from the highways and the byways (Luke 14). The highway was the paved toll road; the byways or hedgerows were for poorer people who didn't have the money and had to travel on uneven cart paths on either side of the elevated highway.

Jesus was effectively saying, "Both the rich and the poor get the same invitation to heaven."

You had to your cart tax and your income tax and your poll tax and you import and export tax to the tax collector.

The Roman government would assess a district at a certain tax figure and then sell the right to collect that figure to the highest bidder.

Typically men involved in organized crime got the bid. And they typically hired thugs and enforcers to make the collections.

They were actually known as gangsters.^{iv}

You see, they had free rein from Rome to tax people more than Rome demanded. As long as Rome got the amount they expected, the tax collectors in each region could keep the extra.

Tax collectors in Jewish regions, like here in Capernaum, were considered all the more evil, because these Jewish men were doubly treacherous.

Not only did they extort from citizens and pad their pockets, they were traitors to the Jewish people by working for Rome.

The Jewish people so hated these men in particular that they were never allowed to darken the door of a synagogue . . . and they usually didn't want to anyway.

A Jewish tax collector like Matthew would have been known throughout his city as a thieving, traitorous, uncaring, impious extortionist who had forsaken his people and abandoned his God.

Rabbis taught the people that if a tax collector set foot in someone's house that everything and everyone inside that home was immediately unclean.^v

With that understanding, we're ready to appreciate the shocking scene that unfolds.

2. The Call of Matthew

Notice verse *27 again. After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me."*

I love this . . . Jesus goes to his office. I imagine Him entering a doorway flanked by two burly men guarding the inner office of their boss.

That didn't slow down the Lord. He walked right up to Matthew, perhaps sitting there behind his desk and effectively said, "Matthew . . . follow me . . . now."

Notice *verse 28. And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.*

I would agree with scholars that Matthew had already become aware of Jesus. He more than likely knew about the Zebedee fishing business of John and James; He had no doubt heard of the miracles that were happening in his home town – the leper who'd been miraculously healed and the paralytic that was even then dancing through the streets on his way home.

And there's another clue – this word in my text that reads, "*Jesus noticed a tax collector (in verse 27).*"

That verb "*to notice*" is from *theaomai*, which means to study – to study . . . to stare . . . to look with attention.^{vi}

Jesus comes into Matthew's tax office and levels His omniscient gaze on Matthew – and just stands

there and looks at him and through him . . . you could have heard a pin drop.

We're not told, but in that moment, in the heart of Matthew, which Jesus would have been fully aware of, Matthew came to the God-granted realization that this man Jesus was none other than His master – His living Lord.

And Jesus said, - “act on it . . . *follow me.*” Literally, walk my road.^{vii}

And Matthew grabs his coat and locks the door and never comes back. The verb here in *verse 28* – *he left everything* literally means, “he *forsook* everything and followed Him.”^{viii}

Matthew is the last person in the world Jesus ought to be choosing.

He's only going to pick 12 guys . . . this is one of the twelve?

You're calling a leading member of the mafia . . . the godfather of Capernaum . . . Lord, don't you know the trouble with Matthew? Jesus would say, “Oh, I know who Matthew is . . . I know what Matthew's done . . . but I know what Matthew can become.”

3. The Change in Matthew

Matthew's so blown away with his conversion to Christ that he does what he knows what to do best – he throws a party.

Look at *verse 29*. *And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd – notice – of tax collectors and other people (Matthew and Mark's Gospels call them sinners) – tax collectors and other sinners reclining at the table with them.*

Can you imagine this crowd? If you'd been invited you would have made sure you left your jewelry at home.

You would have wanted to leave your jewelry at home.

What Matthew is doing here is bringing Jesus into his world of acquaintances because he wants to introduce all of his acquaintances to Jesus.

The main attraction here is not Matthew, it's Jesus Christ.

In fact, you ought to underline the key phrase in this verse – notice again – *and Levi gave a big reception for Him.*

Hey everybody, I want you to meet Jesus Christ – this man changed my life – and everything you know about me is going to change . . . everything about my life is now all about following Him.

I can just imagine Matthew saying, “I used to tax all of you for driving your cart down the highway – now I'm giving my life to follow this Man – My Messiah – down whatever road He travels . . . no matter what the cost.

You see, Matthew not only wants more of the presence of Christ – inviting Him into his home; he also wants to assist the purposes of Christ.^{ix}

You see, he's gathering a congregation for Jesus to preach to that night . . . we're not told the content of the message, but they're all there reclining at the meal, listening no doubt to Jesus Christ speak of repentance and forgiveness.

In fact, down in *verse 32*, Jesus will respond by informing the spiritual leaders that He's not just having a party because He thinks Christians ought to go to all the office parties and never be guilty of being viewed as a stuffed shirt or a party pooper, right?

Oh no . . . Jesus is actually – *notice – calling sinners to repentance* – “Every one of you need to look at where you're heading . . . and turn around . . . repent . . . confess . . . get on my path too.”

Jesus is delivering to this congregation the gospel.

You see, they'll never come to the synagogue to hear Him either . . . they're all unclean too!

They can't get inside the synagogue . . . Matthew knows that . . . so he invites them to his home and introduces them to Jesus Christ.

4. The Complaint of the Pharisees

Now this reception hasn't gone unnoticed.

Notice the key question that Christ will answer on more than one occasion – *verse 30*. *The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?”*

Sharing a table, in the first century was the same thing as sharing a life.^x

It symbolized trust and kinship.

That's why you kept to your family; you stayed inside your circle.

In fact, we know from history that one of the ways the religious leaders and Pharisees in Jesus' day showed devotion to God was by not having any social contact with people who were not respectable or religiously affiliated with them.^{xi}

How can Jesus eat with the mob? Doesn't He know the trouble with those people? I mean, you have problems with Matthew, now you've got a

houseful of Matthews and sinners. You are really overboard now!

5. The Counter from Jesus

Jesus overhears them and He delivers this brilliant answer – *verse. 31. And Jesus answered and said to them, “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick.*

I love this analogy.

Jesus basically says, “Listen, I’m a doctor . . . and who do you think needs me most – healthy people or sick people.”

I know the trouble with Matthew. He was terminally ill . . . he needed a heart transplant . . . I’m the only one able to perform the surgery.

You see all these people in here . . . the difference between them and you is they know they’re ill – they know they’re in trouble with God – and you guys think you’re perfectly healthy.

Who would you hang around with if you were the Divine Physician – and I am . . . you see earlier that day Jesus had healed a paralyzed man and at the same time said to him, by virtue of his faith, your sins are also forgiven you.

What a physician! So Jesus effectively asks these leaders, “*Tell me, who do you think needs me the most . . . wouldn’t you agree, it’s Matthew?*”

And so one of the first questions delivered to Jesus in the Gospel by Luke, is answered with deep, soul searching, divine wisdom.

Let me pull from this scene two lessons:

Two Timeless Challenges From Matthew’s Conversion

- **No unbeliever is beyond redeeming**

Jesus provides here a scandalous tale of redemption that will have tongues wagging all throughout Capernaum.

And Matthew couldn’t be happier.

I’m marked here by the courage of our Lord, early in His ministry . . . He hasn’t even called His twelve around Him and He’s standing alone . . . He’s breaking down barriers . . . He’s rattling the cages of those caught up in the status quo.

Matthew is the most unlikely disciple – he had all the wrong connections . . . and what a reputation.

But he will prove to be a faithful and courageous disciple – ultimately writing the first Gospel Account in your New Testament – the Gospel of Matthew.

He never did quit talking about Jesus.

The first lesson is that no unbeliever is beyond redeeming.

The second less is that:

- **No believer is exempt from reaching**

He’s not saved more than a day and he’s planning his first evangelistic outreach.

Shouldn’t he wait a while? Shouldn’t the Lord polish some of those rough edges just a bit? Somebody slow Matthew down!

No . . . let the redeemed of the Lord say so! (*Psalm 107:2*)

We have a wonderful Divine Physician . . . He makes office calls; He heals the sin-sick in the first visit . . . and then He pays the bill in full.^{xii}

What a doctor! Wouldn’t you tell people about that doctor too?

You’ve seen the same kind of excitement out of children haven’t you – maybe your own. They’re fearless when they understand the gospel.

And they don’t understand why most adults grow out of it.

I remember when my twin sons were in second grade, attending a public magnate school downtown Raleigh for a couple of years; our youngest daughter at the time was in Kindergarten; Marsha was expecting our fourth child. One of my sons had to write a paper for his second grade project and he turned it around to explain the gospel to his teacher in a short paragraph; he concluded his paper by writing, “And if you want to get saved call my Dad.”

Imagine being a teacher, getting a paper with some 2nd grader effectively saying, “You need to get saved . . . and I’ve got the person you need to talk to.”

That’s exactly what Matthew is doing here.

Who said we were supposed to outgrow that kind of courage?

Our kids don’t have all their ducks lined up . . . their theology isn’t fine-tuned . . . but they got the basic story down – they’ve got the highlights.

I had in my notes that one of the twins came home from school one day – still in second grade – and said, “Hey Mom and Dad, two guys got saved on the playground during recess today.” I said,

“Really? How long is recess?” Already, I’m kicking into my theological skepticism. He said, “Its’ about 15 minutes . . . I said, “That was fast . . . what’d you say to ‘em”. Well I said, “Hey do you want to be able to fly one day when you die and not

go to Hell? They said, ‘Yeah’; so we prayed and they got saved.”

He had the second grade level highlights down! Can you imagine telling someone you know, with just a little more sophistication, “Hey, would you like to one day have a glorified, immortal body like Jesus and wouldn’t you really like to avoid going to hell? I’ve got somebody I’d like to introduce to you.”

Listen, the responsibility to share the gospel is ours. The responsibility to save is God’s.

We, like Matthew, simply introduce them to the Great Physician – our lives become a reception in His honor . . . we refuse to keep Him to ourselves . . . this Savior who is ever ready and willing to eat dinner with sinners like you and like me.

He saved us . . . He healed us . . . and then we discover that He has already paid the bill in full.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/20/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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