Matthew the Publican


The call of Matthew clearly illustrates a very prominent feature in the actions Jesus performed in public. He had absolute disregard for precepts that were based on worldly wisdom. A publican (tax-collector) disciple, and how much more a publican Apostle, could not be other than a stumbling-block to Jewish prejudice. He would be, at least for the time being, a source of weakness rather than strength. Yet, while perfectly aware of this fact, Jesus invited this one who had pursued the occupation of a tax-collector to be a part of the intimate fellowship of His disciples. At a later time, He selected him to be one of the Twelve. His recruiting procedure is remarkable in this case. This is true especially when it is contrasted with the way He treated others who had attractive outward advantages and showed their readiness to follow Him by volunteering to become His disciples. We have an example in the Scribe who came and said, “Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go” (Matt. 8:18-20). This man’s social position and professional accomplishments seemed to point him out as a very desirable addition to Jesus’ group of men. But the Teacher deliberately scared him away by giving him a gloomy picture of his own destitute condition. He said, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”

Jesus’ eye was single as well as omniscient. He looked on the heart and only paid attention to spiritual fitness. He had no faith in any discipleship based on misunderstandings and secret purposes. On the other hand, He had no fear of the drawbacks which arose out of the external associations or past history of true believers. He was entirely indifferent to what had taken place in anyone’s past. Because He was confident in the power of truth, He chose the humble things of the world rather than the things that were held in honor. Being assured that they would conquer in the end, He went calmly on His way, fully aware that both He and His disciples would be despised and rejected by people for a season. He chose for His companions and agents those whom He wanted and was undisturbed by the opposition from His generation. He knew that His work concerned all nations and all time.

The publican disciple bears two names in the Gospel history. In the first Gospel he is called Matthew; in the second and third Gospels he is called Levi. The same person is intended, and we may regard it as a matter of certainty. It is inconceivable that two tax-collectors would have
been called to be disciples at the same place and time and in the midst of circumstances which
are so remarkably similar. We do not need to be surprised that the Gospel writers did not note
the difference in the names. The first readers of the Gospels would have been so familiar with
the two names that it would have made the information superfluous.

In all probability, Levi was the name of this disciple before his call; and Matthew, his name as a
disciple. The new name became a symbol and commemoration of the more important change
in his heart and life. Similar symbolic changes in names occurred frequently at the beginning
of the Gospel. Simon, son of Jonas, was transformed into Peter; Saul of Tarsus became Paul; and
Joseph the Cypriot received from the Apostles the beautiful and well-deserved Christian name
of Barnabas (son of encouragement) because of his love, generosity, and spiritual wisdom.

Matthew seems to have been employed in Capernaum, Jesus’ adopted city, as a collector of
revenue at the time he was called. For while Jesus was at home “in His own city,” as Capernaum
came to be called, a man afflicted with palsy was brought to Him to be healed. From all the
evangelists (Matt. 9:9; Mark 2:13; Luke 5:27) we learn that He saw Matthew when He was going out
of the house where the miracle was performed. He said to Matthew, “Follow Me.” The inference
from these facts is plain and important. It helps to explain the apparent suddenness of the call
and the speed with which he responded to it. Jesus and His new disciple were living in the same
town and had opportunities to see each other on previous occasions.

The time of Matthew’s call cannot be precisely determined, but there is good reason for placing
it before the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew’s Gospel contains the most complete report about
it. This, in itself, is strong evidence in favor of this chronological arrangement. Such a full
account of the sermon was not likely to come from one who did not hear it. And when the Gospel
of Luke is examined, probability almost becomes certainty. Luke has a prefix to his abbreviated
account of the sermon which contains a note about the members of the apostolic company. He
represents Jesus as descending from the mountain “with them” - the Twelve, whose names he
has just cited - to the place where the sermon was delivered (Luke 6:13-17). Of course the act
of appointing them as Apostles must have been preceded by the separate calls to each of the
men. This would have included Matthew’s call which is reported by Luke in an earlier part of
his Gospel (Luke 5:27). It is true that the position of his call in Luke’s narrative proves nothing
in itself, since Matthew relates his own call after the sermon. Moreover, neither one of them
systematically adheres to a chronological arrangement of his story. We base our conclusion on
the assumption that when any of the evangelists declares that he is giving a sequential order,
his statement may be relied on. In addition, Luke obviously commits himself to chronological
reporting by placing the ordination of the Twelve prior to the preaching of the Sermon on the
Mount. Further still, Matthew’s arrangement in the early part of his Gospel is obviously not
chronological. He reports in a topical fashion. In chapters 5-7, he shows Jesus as a great ethical
teacher; chapter 8-9, as a worker of miracles; chapter 10, as a Master - choosing, instructing, and sending the Twelve on an evangelistic mission; chapter 11, as a critic of His contemporaries and One who asserts His own prerogatives; chapter 12, as One who is exposed to the contradictions of unbelief; and chapter 13, as a teacher who uses parables to present the doctrines of the kingdom.

Matthew’s Call
Moving on from these minor points to the call itself, we observe that the narratives about the event are very brief and fragmentary. There is no indication of a previous meeting with Jesus which might prepare Matthew to comply with the invitation given to him. This does not necessarily mean that they had never met. We know from the case of the four fishermen that their call is reported in the Synoptic Gospels with the same kind of abruptness, while John tells us that at least three of them were previously acquainted with Jesus. The truth is that in regard to both calls, the evangelists were only concerned about the crisis. This is why they silently passed over all the stages of preparation and did not consider it necessary to inform intelligent readers that, of course, neither the tax-collector nor any other disciple blindly followed someone he did not know simply because asked or commanded to follow. We have already established the fact that Matthew, while a tax-collector, resided in Capernaum. This makes it absolutely certain that he knew of Jesus before he was called. No one could live in that town in those days without hearing about the mighty works done in and around it. Heaven had been opened right above Capernaum so everyone could see, and a multitude of angels surrounded the Son of Man. Lepers were cleansed and demoniacs delivered; blind men received their sight and lame men the use of their limbs; one woman was cured of a chronic illness and another, the daughter of Jairus, a distinguished citizen and the ruler of the synagogue, was brought back to life from the dead. These things were done publicly, caused a lot of uproar, and were talked about frequently. The evangelists report how the people “were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him” (Mark 1:27); how they glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this” (Mark 2:12); or, “We have seen remarkable things today” (Luke 5:26). Matthew himself concludes his account of the raising of Jairus’ daughter with the remark, “And this news went out into all that land” (Matt. 9:26).

We do not maintain that all these miracles were performed before the time of Matthew’s call, but some of them certainly were. When we compare one Gospel with another to determine the historical sequence, we conclude that the greatest of all these mighty works - the raising of Jairus’ daughter - occurred before the call. Think, then, what a powerful effect that wonderful work would have had in preparing the tax-collector for recognizing in the solemnly spoken
phrase, “Follow Me,” the command of One who was Lord both of the dead and of the living. It would have also prepared Matthew for yielding to His request in prompt, unhesitating obedience!

By acknowledging that Matthew had some previous knowledge of Christ, we make his conversion to discipleship appear reasonable without diminishing its moral value. It is not to be assumed that he would become a follower of Jesus just because he had heard or seen His wonderful works. Miracles, in and of themselves, could not make anyone a believer, otherwise all the people of Capernaum would have believed. The facts proved differently. Later, Jesus complained about the towns along the shore of the Sea of Galilee where most of His mighty works were done. He mentions Capernaum in particular. Of this city He bitterly said: “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day” (Matt. 11:23). Christ’s complaint against the residents of these favored cities was that they did not repent; that is, they did not make the kingdom of heaven their chief good and chief goal in life. They were amazed at His miracles, talked a lot about them, and followed Him so they could see even more of the same kind of works, all the while feeling a new sense of astonishment. But after a time, they relapsed into their old stupidity and apathy. Morally, they remained the same as they had been before He came among them. They were not children of the kingdom, but children of this world.

**Matthew’s Repentance**

But this was not true of the collector of taxes. He not only wondered and talked, but he repented. We cannot tell whether he had more to repent of than his neighbors. It is true that he belonged to a profession which, when seen through the prejudiced eyes of the people of that time, was all bad. Many tax-collectors really were guilty of fraud and extortion. But Matthew may have been an exception. His farewell feast shows that he possessed means, but we must not assume that he obtained them dishonestly. We can only say this: if this tax-collecting disciple was covetous, the spirit of greed was now exorcized. If he had ever been guilty of oppressing the poor, he now hated his past. Matthew had grown weary of collecting revenue from a reluctant population and was glad to follow One who had come to take burdens off instead of laying them on. He had come to cancel debts instead of rigorously collecting them. And so it came to pass that the voice of Jesus acted on his heart like a spell: “And he left everything behind, and rose up and began to follow Him” (Luke 5:28).

According to the accounts of all the evangelists, this great decision was followed shortly afterwards by a feast in Matthew’s house. Jesus was present (Matt. 9:10). From Luke we learn that this party had all the character of a great occasion, and that it was given in honor of Jesus.
Few people would have valued this honor, however, because of the kind of guests who were present. “There was a great crowd of tax-gatherers and other people who were reclining at table with them” (Luke 5:29). Among the others were some who were either sinners or were considered to be sinners to a high degree (Luke 5:30).

As far as we can tell, this feast was as rich in moral significance as the food that was placed on the table. For the host himself, it was a gala event which commemorated his emancipation from drudgery, incompatible relationships with others, and sin - at least the temptation to sin. He was now entering the free and blessed life of fellowship with Jesus. This moment was a kind of poem, expressing for Matthew what Doddridge's familiar lines express for many others, but perhaps not as well:

\[
\text{Oh happy day, that fixed my choice} \\
\text{On Thee, my Savior, and my God!} \\
\text{Well may this glowing heart rejoice,} \\
\text{And tell its raptures all abroad!}
\]

\[‘Tis done; the great transaction’s done: \\
I am my Lord’s, and He is mine; \\
He drew me, and I followed on, \\
Charmed to confess the voice divine.\]

The feast was also an act of worship to Jesus. Matthew gave his splendid feast in honor of his new Master, just as Mary anointed Him with her precious ointment. It is the way of those to whom much grace is shown and given. They manifest their grateful love in deeds that bear the stamp of what Aristotle called magnificence. Scoundrels call it extravagance. But irrespective of those who might find fault with such acts of devotion, Jesus always accepted them with pleasure.

The ex-tax-collector’s feast, furthermore, seems to have had the character of a farewell party for his fellow publicans. From this time forth, he and they were to go their separate ways. He would part with his old comrades in peace.

We can believe that Matthew meant for his feast to be the means of introducing his friends and neighbors to Jesus. With the typical zeal of a young disciple, he sought to encourage others to take the step which he had resolved to take himself. At least he hoped that some sinners who were present might be drawn from their evil ways into the paths of righteousness. And who can really know if it was at this feast or at some other similar occasion, that gracious impressions were made whose final outcome was a loving display of gratitude that would not even be spoken.
at the other feast in Simon’s house (not Peter, but a Pharisee by that name; see the story of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with her tears and perfume in Luke 7:36). At this latter feast, neither tax-collectors nor sinners were admitted.

When looked at from within, Matthew’s feast was a very joyful, innocent, and even edifying event. But take notice! Looked at from without, it was seen very differently, like stained-glass windows. In fact, it was nothing short of scandalous. Certain Pharisees watched the guests come and go. They observed the character of these people and, according to their habitual practice, made their wicked remarks. When the opportunity presented itself, they asked Jesus’ disciples a question that was both complimentary and condemning: “Why do you eat and drink with the tax-gatherers and sinners?” (Luke 5:30). The ones asking the question were, for the most part, local members of the pharisaic sect, for Luke calls them “their scribes and Pharisees.” This implies that Capernaum was important enough to be honored with the presence of men who represented that religious party. However, it is by no means unlikely that among these unfriendly spectators were some Pharisees who had come all the way from Jerusalem. The seat of religious government was there, and they were already tracking the Prophet of Nazareth, watching His every move just like they had watched John the Baptist. The news of Christ’s wonderful works soon spread all over the land and attracted spectators from everywhere - from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and Peraea, as well as Galilee (Matt. 4:25). We may be sure that the Scribes and Pharisees of the holy city were not the last to go and take a look. We must admit that they performed their duty of religious espionage with exemplary diligence.

**The Great Physician**

The presence of evil men belonging to the pharisaic order was almost a regular feature in Christ’s public ministry. But it never disturbed Him. He went calmly on His way doing His work. And when His conduct was called into question, He was always ready with an irrefutable answer. Among the most stunning of His answers to those who questioned Him were those in which He vindicated Himself for spending time with publicans and sinners. There are three such situations. The first occurred at Matthew’s feast; the second in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36); and the third on an occasion that is not given to us in detail, when certain Scribes and Pharisees brought against Him the serious charge, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). His defenses for loving the unloved and the morally unlovely are full of truth and grace, poetry and emotion. They are also not without a touch of quiet, charming ridicule directed against the holier-than-thou fault-finders. The first can be distinguished as the professional argument, and goes like this: “I go to the places where sinners go, because I am a physician. They are sick and need healing. Where should a physician be but among his patients? Where should I go most frequently? Shouldn’t it be to those who are the most seriously afflicted?” The second one may be described as the political argument, and its premise is this:
“It is good policy to be the friend of sinners who have much to be forgiven. For when they are restored to the paths of virtue and godliness, how great is their love! See that penitent woman? She's weeping for sorrow and for joy, bathing her Savior's feet with her tears. Those tears are refreshing to My heart, like a spring of water in the arid desert of pharisaic coldness and formality.” The third may be called the argument from natural instinct: “I meet with sinners, and I eat with them. This way I can restore them. I do it for the same reason a shepherd goes after a lost sheep and leaves the flock in the wilderness. He does it because it is natural to seek the lost and to have more joy in finding things lost than in possessing things which never have been lost.

People who do not understand these feelings are alone in the universe. For angels in heaven, fathers, mothers, shepherds - all who have human hearts on earth - understand them well and act on these feelings every day.”

Using these reasons, Jesus argued with His accusers beginning with their own assumptions. He accepted their evaluation of themselves (that they were righteous) and of the class with whom they thought it was dishonorable to associate (that they were sinful). But He was careful, at the same time, to make certain that His judgment about these two groups of people did not coincide with that of His questioners. He did this at Matthew's feast by challenging them to go study the text, “I desire compassion, and not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13). He meant to imply that while they were very religious, the Pharisees were also very cruel, full of pride, prejudice, harshness, and hatred. He was proclaiming the truth that this kind of person was far more detestable in God's sight than those who were addicted to the crude vices of the multitudes, not to mention those who were “sinners” in the imaginations of the Pharisees.

Our Lord's last words to the people who questioned His conduct provided a strong rebuttal to their arguments. But His words were also judicial. “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13). He was being clear that His purpose was to let the self-righteous alone and to call to repentance and to the joys of the kingdom those who were not too complacent to care about the benefits offered. To them, the gospel feast would be a real entertainment. His words contained a significant hint that a religious revolution was coming in which the last would become first and the first last. Jewish outcasts and Gentile dogs would be made partakers of the joys of the kingdom. The righteous, on the other hand, would be shut out. It was one of His pregnant sayings whereby Jesus revealed to those who could understand that His religion was a universal one. It was a religion for humanity, a gospel for mankind, because it was a gospel for sinners. This He declared by using words. But His conduct spoke louder than His words. It was a threatening thing to express loving sympathy for publicans and sinners. The instincts of the Pharisees discerned it to be true, and they rightly became alarmed. It meant death to the privileged monopolies of grace and to Jewish pride and exclusiveness. All people are equal in God's sight and welcome to salvation on the same terms. In fact, it was a virtual announcement
of Paul's teaching about a gospel that is universal. A certain school of theologians maintain that the Twelve stringently opposed this gospel in the same way the Pharisees did. Isn't it strange that the men who had been with Jesus were so ignorant that they did not even understand - even to the very end - what was involved in their Master's fellowship with the lowly and the lost?!

Was Buddha more fortunate with his disciples than Jesus with His? Buddha said, “My law is a law of grace for all.” He was directing these words against the prejudice of the Brahmin caste (the Brahmins are the highest caste among the Hindus). And his followers understood what it meant: that Buddhism, a missionary religion, a religion even for Sudras (the lowest of the four great castes among the Hindus; Untouchables, or Dalits), and therefore one for all mankind!