

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

*Matthew: Celebrating New Life*

**Matthew 9:9-13**

John Breon

After forgiving and healing a paralyzed man, Jesus again goes out beside the lake. And, again, a large crowd gathers around him and he teaches them. As he is walking along, he sees Matthew sitting at his tax collector’s booth. Matthew is like a customs agent or toll collector. As merchants travel through Capernaum, or goods are exported, he collects a percentage as a toll or tax for King Herod and for the Roman government. As a Jew, Matthew is despised by his countrymen. Not only does he squeeze all he can from the people to pad his own account, but he works for a foreign government that occupies their country and oppresses them.

Imagine you’re driving across Oklahoma on the turnpike. When you get to the tollbooth, the flag of a foreign country is on display. You learn that a corrupt governor has ties to this foreign government and is funneling turnpike money to the other country. There are state troopers standing by to make sure you pay the toll. You take out your frustration and anger on the person working in the tollbooth. That’s Matthew.

Matthew would have been an outcast in Jewish society. “Good” people would have stayed away from him. He would have been excluded from the temple and synagogue. He may have had lots of money, but few friends. And the friends he had would have been other social and religious outcasts like himself.

This lonely, wealthy, guilty man sees the crowd coming along the shore toward him. He notices the figure who seems to be the center of attention. He’s the rabbi Matthew has heard about.

And then Jesus walks right up to Matthew and, as with the four fishermen earlier, he says, “Follow me.” Jesus saw Matthew, wanted him, chose him and invited him. Jesus saw something in hated and rejected Matthew. Jesus specializes in rejects. He sees their value that others, and the people themselves, often fail to see.

Michelangelo is said to have rummaged through discarded pieces of marble because he could see something in the blocks that others had rejected. And from some of those discarded pieces he fashioned some of his greatest works.

Seeing the person Matthew could become, Jesus said, "Follow me." Matthew heard those words and somehow saw in them the chance to leave his dirty business behind and find the fulfillment of his deepest longings. And Matthew left the greed and the threats, the ties to Herod and Rome, the business, and the loneliness. He left it all and went with Jesus. He became a disciple, an apprentice, a follower of Jesus.

Jesus' gracious invitation breaks into Matthew's world and changes his life. Matthew responds with repentance and faith, seen in his leaving his old life and beginning a new journey with Jesus. He couldn't go back, but he had never felt so free. Nothing mattered now except following Jesus.

Matthew was mindful of taking the tax  
And pressing the people to pay  
But hearing the call he responded in faith  
And followed the Light and the Way  
And leaving the people so puzzled he found  
The greed in his heart was no longer around  
And it's hard to imagine the freedom we find  
From the things we leave behind

(Michael Card, from the album *Poema*, 1994,  
<http://store.michaelcard.com/poema1994.aspx>)

Matthew then invited Jesus and the other disciples to his house to celebrate his decision and his new life. And Matthew invited his friends to the banquet to celebrate with him—and maybe introduce them to Jesus.

I once heard about Mary, a woman who was unchurched but who responded to an invitation to attend church. After a time, she went forward at the invitation and was converted. Following the service when she was baptized, the church threw a party to celebrate her new life. They had sent invitations to her family and friends and co-workers to come to the service

and the party. Many of them did. During the party, the pastor took a few minutes to explain to these guests what had happened to Mary and what her baptism meant. Then he invited them to return and experience for themselves what she had experienced. For the next several Sundays, at the invitation, Mary came down the aisle again, each time bringing one of her friends (George Hunter told this somewhere years ago). Maybe that's something like Matthew's dinner party after he became a follower of Jesus.

All of Matthew's friends are tax collectors and other "sinners." Tax collectors were hated and excluded. So were the other people called "sinners." These were probably people who would not live according to the Pharisees' rules of righteousness. They disregarded the Law in one way or another. A "good" Jew would not associate with them because "you're known by the company you keep." Also, contact with such people would contaminate the good people and make them unable to participate in religious activities. The Pharisees would have been glad for these sinners to repent and straighten up their lives. But until they did, the Pharisees really wanted nothing to do with them.

Jesus, however, seems to enjoy their company. He eats with them. In that culture, eating with someone showed a close relationship. It meant committing yourself in friendship to the person you ate with. Sharing a meal was an intimate social contact that created a bond between the people eating together. For religious Jews, eating with a person implied religious acceptance of that person. So Jesus' eating with these "sinners" was a sign of his accepting them and forgiving their sins. Even more than a sign, his meal sharing was an act of acceptance and forgiveness.

And that's what the scribes and Pharisees had trouble with. They believed that God's kingdom would come *after* Israel repented and people got their lives straightened out. When the people (or at least most of them) obeyed the law, then the kingdom could come. Jesus was saying, and acting out, the reality that God's kingdom would come to a sinful Israel by God's free and gracious initiative. Jesus' ministry was the opening event of this move of God's. For Jesus, the best way to demonstrate that God's kingdom comes by divine grace and initiative and does not wait for a program of religious reform of Israel is to go to well-known sinners and

welcome them to divine favor (Larry Hurtado, *Mark Good News Commentary* 26). Like healing and driving out demons, like teaching with authority, Jesus' table fellowship with all kinds of people was a demonstration of the kingdom's presence and power. And like those other signs, his inclusion of outcasts called for a response: "repent and believe," "follow me."

The Pharisees saw their table as a miniature temple, so they would not welcome and eat with anyone there who was not pure in their view. And, they thought that if Jesus was a true rabbi and truly righteous that he too would avoid social contact with such people. But Jesus is right in the middle of them, eating with them and accepting them.

So some Pharisees ask Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" The disciples may have been wondering that themselves. But Jesus overhears the conversation and replies, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, sick people do. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The Pharisees are challenging Jesus. And he insults them by suggesting that they don't know the Scriptures. He implies that they've never even read Hosea, who addressed people satisfied with their ritual but displeasing to God. Even though these Pharisees knew the Bible, they missed the point in some ways. God is most interested in mercy—covenant faithfulness and love.

Jesus came to call sinners to repent and to invite them to God's great final banquet. Jesus' table fellowship with sinners now is a foretaste of that heavenly banquet. This ministry of Jesus to the ceremonially unclean is an act of mercy that pleases God more than the Pharisees' fussy attention to sacrificial offerings (on this, see Craig Keener, *Matthew IVP NT Commentary*; Robert Mounce, *Matthew Good News Commentary*).

This scene in the Gospels captures what Brennan Manning, in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, describes as the gospel of grace. His comments on it are so good I want to read them to you:

Here is revelation as bright as the evening star: Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, hookers, addicts, IRS agents, AIDS victims, and even used car salesmen. Jesus not only talks with these people but dines with them—fully aware that his table fellowship with sinners will raise the eyebrows of religious bureaucrats who hold up the robes and insignia of their authority to justify their condemnation of the truth and their rejection of the gospel of grace.

...Jesus, who forgave the sins of the paralytic (thereby claiming divine power), proclaims that he has invited sinners and not the self-righteous to his table. ...

In effect, Jesus says that the Kingdom of his Father is not a subdivision for the self-righteous nor for those who feel they possess the state secret of their salvation. The Kingdom is not an exclusive, well-trimmed suburb with snobbish rules about who can live there. No, it is for a larger, homelier, less self-conscious caste of people who understand they are sinners because they have experienced ... moral struggle.

Manning then reminds us that the church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners (19-21).

Matthew shows us the gospel of grace because he experienced it. In Mark and Luke, this tax collector is named Levi. But in Matthew's Gospel, he's named Matthew. We think that's because Matthew was telling his own story and subtly putting his signature on the Gospel. In the lists of apostles, his name is always Matthew. Possibly Levi was the name his parents gave him and Matthew ("gift of the Lord") was a name Jesus gave him—like with Simon Peter. Whatever the case, we can call him Levi Matthew.

He was probably well educated, had many contacts and was wealthy. He left everything to follow Jesus. But Jesus put those gifts to work for the kingdom of God. Matthew learned from Jesus, he went on mission trips with the other disciples, he ran away when Jesus was arrested. But he came back and saw the risen Lord.

The New Testament doesn't tell us any more about Matthew. Church tradition affirms that he traveled and preached in many places. How he died is unclear. And there are several fanciful legends about him. Though there is debate about his writing the Gospel that bears his name, it's still pretty widely accepted that he either wrote it or was the source of information for whoever did write it. The Gospel of Matthew stands as a witness to Jesus who fulfills God's plan revealed in the Old Testament, who is our Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend, who is God with us, and who sends us in mission to all people everywhere.

Kenneth Wyatt wanted to focus on Matthew's eyes in his painting because he wanted to call attention to how Jesus looks into the hearts of people and sees us for what we really are. He wanted to portray Matthew as seeing more than just what is obvious. He found his model for Matthew in a young schoolteacher named Randy Russell who was traveling with a wagon train across Texas during the state's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was the schoolmaster for the wagon train that spent months crisscrossing Texas (*The Apostles* 30).

Matthew was a tax collector who became a teacher, a traitor who became a witness to God's faithfulness, a worldly success who left that security to become a disciple, a sinner who became an example of God's mercy.

As we come for Communion, Jesus again welcomes sinners and eats with them. He offers the same mercy that he gave Matthew and his friends, the mercy that he died to give to all who would receive it. Come and join him at the table. Come and receive mercy. Come and celebrate the new life Jesus gives.