

# ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

## NEW YORK CITY

### **JESUS: FRIEND OF SINNERS**

**Matthew 9:9-13**

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 8, 2008**

Although this story is occasioned by the call of Matthew, a tax collector, however the real point is Jesus' rejection of the Pharisaic position with respect the righteous and the sinners and His recognition of a community inclusive of tax collectors and sinners. In the opinion of the Pharisees, Matthew and his friends were mere "tax collectors and sinners," the kind of people with whom they would not associate. However, it is precisely sinners that Jesus came to save, and Matthew is happy to put himself in their company as merely another sinner saved by grace. There is no evidence of any previous direct contact between Mathew and Jesus, but Jesus was by now well known in Capernaum. That this popular Rabbi should take the initiative in calling an outcast to be His disciple was a sign of acceptance to which Mathew understandably responded readily.

**The Calling of Matthew:** The story of the calling of Matthew is related simply enough in the Gospel According to Matthew. It is not to be thought that Matthew had never seen Jesus before. No doubt Matthew had heard about this young Galilean who came with a message breathtakingly new, who spoke with an authority the like of which no one had ever heard before. So he found Jesus standing before him and Jesus with sovereign authority, said, "Follow Me." Matthew accepted that challenge and rose up and left all and followed Him. Jesus did not pick someone who was qualified for discipleship by piety or behavior. Jesus did not ask for credentials or references. Nor did Jesus use some gifts of persuasion to coax the man or to indicate his expectations for him. Just the opposite is true.

This man, Matthew was not likely to bring prestige and character to the movement Jesus was organizing. Matthew was religiously unacceptable. He was considered unclean. Jewish law barred tax collectors from all synagogue services on the basis of Leviticus 20:5, which required orthodox Jews to cut off anyone who was guilty of "prostituting (himself) to Moloch." Tax collectors were not even allowed to witness in a court of law. The man was a public disgrace to his fellow citizens. Taxes were a controversial necessity. But to collect taxes for an alien and occupying government was

nothing short of treachery; particularly when the tax collectors were known to profit personally from their collections. Moreover, Matthew's name was Levi, and he had disgraced the name of those Levites who served the tables of God in the Temple, serving instead the table of the enemy Caesar. Any man that collected his fees knowing full well how the people felt had to be most contemptible. Yet when Jesus commanded the man to follow Him, Matthew rose from his table and did so immediately.

**An Act of Forgiveness:** Was Matthew truly converted? He certainly was, and he showed in three ways: **(1.)** He “got up” and followed Jesus. An inactive faith is no faith at all. Saving faith shows in one's actions. **(2.)** He left everything to do it. Nothing is ever allowed to stand in the way of one who is a genuine disciple. Truly converted people leave houses, land, family, and everything else to follow Jesus. **(3.)** He arranged to have his friends meet Jesus. This is another link between the story of Matthew's calling and the story of the healing of the paralyzed man in verses 1-8. In the first story, the friends of the paralyzed man brought him to Jesus to be healed. Here, in verse 10, Matthew tries to do the same thing with his unconverted friends. This is a natural act for those Jesus has saved, and it makes us ask, Are we in that great company of witnesses? Are we introducing our friends to Jesus? We cannot make people Christians; it is something only God can do. But we must do everything possible to tell them about Jesus and have them meet Him.

The calling of Matthew was just like all the wonderful acts Jesus had performed for the benefit of others. The drama so obvious in the healing and helping of others is present here also. The kind acts that became standard in His ministry expressed the fullness of our Lord's compassion and grace. Yet as ordinary as the event of the calling of Matthew may appear to the reader, those who witnessed it must have been awed by the manner in which this man was taken captive by the love of our Lord. Matthew walked away from a way of life that had both enslaved and condemned him. Our Lord accepted and took under his wing one whom society could not tolerate. Jesus emphasized the completeness of His acceptance and forgiveness for Matthew when He went home with him.

This is utterly amazing, for of all the people in Capernaum, Matthew was the most unacceptable to be one of Christ's disciples. Jesus sought out the man no one else wanted; the one everyone else wished would fall under the immediate wrath of God. This, of course, was to become one of the

trademarks of Jesus' ministry, as such notables as Mary Magdalene and many other nameless men and women would attest. Jesus saw a man in Matthew, not a category, and He knew what that man could become.

Centuries ago a number of workmen were seen dragging a great marble block into the city of Florence, Italy. It had come from the famous marble quarries of Carrara, and was intended to be made into a statue of a great Old Testament prophet. But it contained imperfections, and when the great sculptor Donatello saw it, he refused it at once. So there it lay in the cathedral yard, a useless block. One day another sculptor caught sight of the flawed block. But as he examined it, there rose in his mind something of immense beauty, and he resolved to sculpt it. For two years the artist worked feverishly on the work of art. Finally, on January 25, 1504, the greatest artists of the day assembled to see what he had made of the despised and rejected block. Among them were Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Pietro Perugino, the teacher of Raphael. As the veil dropped to the floor, the statue was met with a chorus of praise. It was a masterpiece! The succeeding centuries have confirmed that Judgment. Michelangelo's "David" one of the greatest works of art the world has ever known.

The Lord Christ saw in the flawed life of Matthew the tax collector, a Matthew, the writer and evangelist. The Gospel relates: "And as He (Jesus) sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Him and His disciples." From Mark and Luke we learn that "the house" was the home of Levi, whom we presume is Matthew. The incident underscores the fact that Matthew and his tax collector friends were lumped together socially with the other outcasts. They had to find their companions among the people who were labeled sinners. These people were flagrant violators of social mores. They were an embarrassment to the decent and upright citizens. They belonged to the company of skid row and red-light district. Worst of all, they did not appear to be serious at all about doing their part to usher in the kingdom of God by living righteously.

**The Opposition Grows:** Our Lord's willingness to associate with these dregs of society did not go unnoticed. Although Jesus' calling a tax collector to be one of His disciples was shocking, it was not out of character with the unusual things Jesus had been doing. At least the tax collector gave up his obnoxious and traitorous profession. The enemies might have had to concede one good aspect to this incident. However, that did not reverse their judgment on Matthew for having done what he did.

The evangelist noted; “When the Pharisees saw this, they said to the disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” This was an attack on Jesus’ morals, for the obvious implication was that if He associated with low types, He must be like them. He was with “sinners” because He liked and wished to share in their sin. The Pharisees, who were separatists, though attending the banquets, carefully avoided ritual impurity from contact with others who did not keep the tradition. To them, it was an unforgivable disgrace for Jesus, who claimed to be a teacher of the Law to disregard their time-honored customs. To greet these people on the street might be one thing. To sit at a table and dine with them, however, was to show the highest form of respect for them. One dines with one’s peers and intimate friends. Jesus was signaling that He accepted these social misfits as His friends and intimate companions.

There are Christians who operate on similar unspoken suppositions. In nineteenth-century England, there was a poor woman who attended a church women’s meeting. She had been living with a man of another race by which she had had a baby, and she brought the child with her. She like the meeting and came back again and again. But then the vicar came to her and said, “I must ask you not to come to this meeting again.” Seeing her questioning look, he continued, “The other women say that they will stop coming if you continue to come.” Looking at him in poignant wistfulness, she asked, “Sir, I know that I’m a sinner, but isn’t there anywhere a sinner can go?” Fortunately the Salvation Army found her, and she was claimed for Christ. That is precisely what Matthew was up against until he met Christ.

**The Response:** Our Lord’s response to the Pharisees who interrogated the disciples was forthright. We are not sure whether the question was conveyed by the disciples or if Jesus overheard it. At any rate, Jesus did not hesitate to state why he befriended sinners. Jesus said; “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” Jesus did not defend the life-style of the people He befriended. He did not approve of the things they did or cherished. He explained that they were sick. “It is not the healthy who need a doctor,” He said, “but the sick.” This was supremely common-sense answer the doctor needs to visit the sick. To be sure, they needed help. They were afflicted with the condition common to all people born into the world. Jesus was the one who was willing to offer them help by being their spiritual physician. A person may diligently go through all the motions of orthodox piety, but if their hand is never stretched out to help the man in need, he is not a religious person.

The cure that Jesus brought was not all that easy. His cure required, first of all, the admission of one's sickness and need. Matthew, like his companions from the seamy side of life, responded to Jesus as one who recognized their sickness and as a physician who was also willing to do something about it. Jesus did not isolate them from society but brought to them the love and forgiveness necessary for their recovery. The Great Physician went among them that He might free them from the plague of sin and guilt that dominated and controlled their lives. Jesus was a true realist about what kind of people they were. He was also the one who could hold out the highest hope for their rebirth through the application of His love.

In Jesus Christ we experience the love, and mercy by which we are reborn and through which we can make all things new. Amen.