

To Get To Know Him

The following article is a companion to the sermon of 6-7-2020 found on our church's web site. While some of the material here duplicates that of that sermon this includes more interesting if not critical information, of which there wasn't space to include it there. Thus, this is meant to supplement and expand. My prayer is that your mind will be edified and your spirit and soul enriched as we get to know Jesus better.

The idea of composing this article came during, or as a result of, my sermon preparation for June 7th, 2020. The subject matter was the story found in Matthew 9:9-13, the story featuring Jesus attending the supper sponsored by Matthew (who is identified as Levi in another Gospel) shortly after the call of Matthew and his conversion from tax-collector to disciple. Matthew put on a supper (often referred to as a banquet) for some of his fellow tax collectors and other unspecified "sinners" and to which Jesus had been invited and was now attending. Shocked, mortified, or in other ways negative, the observing Pharisees not only looked on in strong disapproval but voiced their not so disguised disdain to Jesus' disciples asking, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Consorting with the "wrong crowd" was unacceptable to the purist elite of Judaism. To their thinking, understanding, and application of God's "law" Jesus had transgressed a number of the greatest transgressions a good Jewish person, especially a rabbi, could ever transgress.

For the present moment, however, let me simply say that my study and research revealed a wealth of not only information but a plethora of life and religious lessons God, I am pretty sure, had in mind for people across many generations, not the least of which is ours today. What follows is a compendium of lessons to be learned, facts of the time and players, and sundry other bits of information I found not only fascinating but stimulating. My resources consulted include the NIV Bible, The NIV Application Commentary, Matthew, Wilkins, and the New Testament Commentary, Hendriksen. What follows pretty much follows the outworking of this research and learning experience. Let me say up front, one thing I learned is that I learned enough to challenge some of the things I had always heard, known, or thought was true in terms of Matthew. As it turns out I didn't know him as fully as I thought I did. Through my study I got to know him a lot better for who he most likely truly was. It is therefore not mere coincidence that this came about in terms of Jesus' final words of this passage. "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 come not to call the righteous, but sinners." Yup. That's me.

As found in this passage and surely an unknowable number of others Jesus challenged any form of elitism. He rewarded humility and repentance. He healed the marginalized and humbled the proud, arrogant, and stubborn. Discipleship is not based on economic well-being but based on subjecting one's whole life to Jesus' call and purpose for his life and ministry and ours.

As many know, but many others often refuse to accept or admit, people do not like to have their worldview rattled or challenged. This is true for the religious as it is for the non-religious and irreligious. The Pharisees (as a group though

there undoubtedly were exceptions) are a prime example. Thus Jesus finds stiff and caustic resistance from the religious establishment.

Ironically, in the present instance, Jesus is in essence accused of being in league with Satan (though this connection is found in the verses following our selected passage). It is supremely ironic that Jesus does a good thing and he is sneered at openly and, surely, by inference condemned silently in the minds and hearts of the attending Pharisees. If nothing else, Jesus broke, even shattered like brittle glass, a good number of social and religious conventions.

Pondering this it occurred to me to consider that to convert the "unclean" you have to go to or associate with the "unclean, the tax collectors and sinners." For whatever value it might have be aware that when Scripture elsewhere uses the term "publicans" it refers to tax collectors and "sinners" refers to a rather broad category of law breakers and folks who otherwise refuse to do the will of God. With the idea in mind that to convert law breakers, publicans, and sinners, I jotted down in my notes, "You can't do it by sending a card in the mail!" You have to go to them or in other ways be found to be in relationship with them.

One commentary used the phrase "unexpected discipleship" to describe this person Jesus called to be his disciple. To our mind, would a tax collector be a likely candidate for discipleship? Undoubtedly many and various responses are possible. Let us also know, as inferred above, since many of us know the story fairly well, and because we know something substantially true about Jesus we are likely to say, "Well of course Matthew is a likely candidate. Jesus was always calling those whom others would never see reason to call. It was Jesus' nature."

But from a somewhat different angle we might say, "Well, not really. Even if we didn't know the story's story line and outcome, didn't Matthew's vocation disqualify him? After all, all tax collectors were known to be ruthless, scoundrels, and cheats, particularly in that they fleeced their very own people. Although it's not exactly kosher to think of it this way, it's one thing to fleece those not of your own people, but to fleece your own? Isn't that an even higher crime? I'll leave that for you, dear reader, to consider for yourself.

But do we really know the case of Matthew? It occurred to me as I read and pondered my commentaries this very question. I wonder if we really know Matthew as well or as accurately as we think we do. "I wonder if we incorrectly, and perhaps wrongfully lump him, uncritically, in with all the other tax collectors of his era. But is this fair if we do? And is this a flat out condemnation of which we have no right to make?" How many of us have been lumped in with other Christians who make a mockery of Jesus and Christian discipleship. Hmmmmm.....

It kind of took me by surprise as I read the author's contention that the job of tax collecting, in and of itself, was not an immoral one as many assume. It was simply a job in a certain sense. Furthermore let it be remembered that they did not get paid a stipend, per se, from Rome but made their living by adding their fee to the tax that was collected and remitted to Rome. Every person has a right to a job and income, as long as it of course doesn't violate any of God's ethical and moral laws. Yes, there is no doubt that there was a tendency to excessive collection and extortion. This unavoidably made them a hated and

despised social class. "But being of a class doesn't necessarily establish or indicate guilt."

It was thus that I was moved to take a more refined and disciplined view of "Matthew as a person" in his own right, that is, asking the questions, what do we know as opposed to what we think we know and what we've been taught or told to know.

One thing that helped me go down this new and very different path was one author's pointing out that this story involving Matthew is the very same Matthew who would, some years down the road, pen the very Gospel we are reading and have as Holy Scripture. In this sense, this story is autobiographical, though in a very cloaked way. It hit me like a ton of bricks to consider for the first time Matthew felt inclined to include this very personal life event (which tells of his conversion and "attaining unto salvation" as the expression goes). In the greatest of economy, Matthew is telling the story of himself and Jesus. It is interesting, and most likely surprising, that Matthew responds to Jesus' call so quickly and seemingly so easily. It is interesting, if not puzzling, to find not a word offered as to how that came about. The story is not primarily the story of Matthew but of Jesus. There is no self-aggrandizing "how I was such a great sinner" recitation or other such information. It was all about Jesus. A perfect beginning for a new disciple.

With no explanation of how it came to pass we merely read that Jesus is having dinner with a rather nebulous group of sinners and others who likely were fellow tax collectors. We have no information as to why, when, or how this came about, only that it did. Remember, tax collectors were hated by the population (regardless of whether they fleeced the people or took merely and only what they had coming) so the calling of Matthew itself was nothing short of miraculous. But as Scripture tells us, nothing is impossible with God.

Thinking back a step, it's difficult to imagine what went through Matthew's heart and mind when he realized Jesus not only would, but wanted, to involve himself with Matthew. And to not only involve himself with Matthew but to call him as a "disciple"? Let me suggest that there is more to this than meets the modern eye.

A "disciple" of that day was a person who was considered by another term a "learner", a person who sat at the feet of a teacher, every day, learning what the teacher had to teach. The goal was to become just like the teacher in every way possible, not just in the sense of learning information. It was, by accepting the call to discipleship, an utter rejection of the life prior to that point, and the acceptance of the life that was to come. In short, it was the coming of salvation to Matthew. "Follow me," Jesus told him. And Matthew got up and followed him. A salvation story in the greatest of economy.

Again, one wonders what went through Matthew's mind. But on that matter the Scriptures are silent. If I were to speculate I might conclude, in Matthew's words, "Jesus thinks I'm somebody worth associating with." Can we imagine being a person despised and rejected such as most or all tax collectors were but then begin to consider that "maybe I am a person worth being associated with, and by rabbi Jesus?"

Always thinking ahead to application I asked in my prep notes, "Are there those with whom we don't want to associate, or at least don't want to be seen associating with?"

The church is often accused of being elitist and standoffish, not wanting to be seen with the unseemly characters of our world. This Gospel passage is a direct and unavoidable challenge to the church and every person who calls him or herself a Christian. This, too, hit me like a ton of bricks. I'd never considered this point in context of this passage.

Table fellowship was a supremely important social and religious convention in many groups of the ancient world. There were boundaries that were established to delineate those who were included and those who were excluded. Tax collectors were not only derided because of their vocation and whatever malfeasance and malpractice they were guilty of; they were also seen as religiously and ceremonially unclean by Judaism. They were deemed unclean by virtue of 1) their contact with the Gentiles and 2) because they worked on the Sabbath.

To the Pharisees, Jesus associating with tax collectors and sinners makes Jesus one of them. To eat with them was seen as condoning their behaviors and lifestyle. But one critical problem with this is that there isn't a shred of evidence that Jesus approved or condoned what they had done that was wrong. There is a key lesson here. In the form of a question, "How often do we attribute to others what we think is right and proper to attribute when, if we think about more gracefully and mercifully, we might realize we have no right to so attribute?"

Matthew, from the evidence available, has not brought or invited Jesus to his dinner for Jesus to praise his conversion, or in any way support, condone, or validate his fellow tax collectors and other sinners in attendance. It would seem that Matthew's purpose was for the possibility that these other folks might find the same healing for their souls as he had found for his. In short, Matthew wanted them to find what he had found.

One irony, and supreme tragedy, is that the religious establishment would rather that not happen. Do we understand the great tragedy in this? Matthew brings his sinful companions in close proximity to Jesus and the religious establishment is a barrier to such a desperately needed thing. At this thought I laughed mentally at the irony. Feel free to yourself.

The Pharisees were known for their fastidious adherence to the requirements of the law and observation of the various purity laws and rituals. And yet they could not see the need for mercy to come upon such a wicked class of folks as those "tax collectors and sinners." One wonders how it escaped them that probably more times than not, purer, holier, and more righteous lives come **after** a word of respect and worth being shared and felt, not as a prelude to it. Demanding purer, holier lives up front is often a barrier to transformation and salvation rather than a road map to it. Jesus reached out to, not shunned, blatant sinners and social outcasts. Not only does he reach out and associate with them, he takes one of them to be a disciple of his.

Again, note what Jesus did not do: condone or affirm what Matthew did, but only call him to a new way of life. There can be little doubt that Matthew

knew very well what was meant in accepting Jesus' call to discipleship. He would thereafter abandon the old life and study, learn, and adapt to and embrace a whole different way of life.

Then as now, to get up and follow means to reject all of the former life that didn't conform to what the teacher taught and then go down the path to a very different way of life. We call it the way of life. It is thus heavily ironic that the Pharisees were so caught up in their religious endeavors that they couldn't see the desperate need of these ungodly publicans and sinners.

As inferred above, I think it's safe to assume they were probably afraid what other "purists" might think if they were seen in the presence of and associating with such riff raff. By application, "What will my church think if they see me associating with unseemly folks such as these?"

The Pharisees (though there had to have been some exceptions) were ever ready, even eager it seems, to find fault. On top of that, at least in this instance, they did so behind Jesus' back by confronting not Jesus himself but his disciples. And on top of that, their attack was not directed only at Jesus but Jesus' disciples. "Why is it that YOUR teacher....?" [emphasis added] Their scathing question was rhetorical in nature, meaning it was something other than a request for information but intended as a statement. What they meant was something along the lines of, "You should not associate with or be seen associating with such reprobates. Since Jesus is YOUR teacher, by sitting under his tutelage, you are just as bad as he is." Their question was a stinging rebuke. Inferred, though unspoken, it surely ended with the message, "Shame on you!"

With application of all this coming closer let us consider again what Jesus was and was not doing. Jesus was not hobnobbing with people of ill-reputed for he purpose of supporting or "becoming a comrade in evil."

Jesus medical metaphor should speak clearly to us, but in reverse fashion. We know the great danger doctors, nurses, and others in the medical profession find themselves in when in the presence of deadly pestilence and disease. COVID-19 is a present instance. Medical professionals put themselves at great risk tending to the myriad of health issues found in our world. However, Jesus was in no danger of being contaminated with the disease of these patients. He was the Divine Physician who came to heal the sick.

If the Pharisees are so correct, as they surely are, in how sick and twisted are these "publicans and sinners", should they not have sought after, and even yearned for, the healing of these lost souls?

In a further point of irony, Jesus condemns their attitude based on their own reasoning.

Getting even closer to application I want to quote Hendriksen who asked, "Could it be that the Pharisees are neglecting their duty?" He furthermore writes, "Religion without goodness or kindness is worthless." To this we surely should respond, mercy has a better chance at persuading than condemnation.

My concluding thoughts include the following. My closest non-EPC minister friend (Rev. Carl Terry) frequently prays in his portion of the prayers he and I share fairly frequently, "O God, we thank you that you see past our faults and see to our needs....." Every time he prays those words I am reminded of

how great and gracious is the love of Jesus. Those words came to mind at the very onset of my preparations for Sunday's sermon and this article. It perfectly fits our Gospel story.

Furthermore, I occasionally remind folks that "the church is not a hotel for saints but a hospital for sinners."

If it is God's will that publicans and sinners be healed, refusing to go to or associate with them such that they might be converted, is sinful no less than the actions of said publicans and sinners. Is this a fair conclusion? The issue of fairness aside, it is a conclusion properly drawn from this passage of Scripture.

Thus, are there places we shun, are there people we avoid, are there social opportunities we refuse to accept or go to because of "who" might, or will, be there just because of their social or spiritual status? What will people think of us? What might the reaction be if it was made known that your pastor was seen in the local bar visiting with or having other association with _____? What about an Elder, or Deacon? Or a church member? What might the reaction(s) be? But what might the effect be? From one point of view, what Jesus did was scandalous. From a different point of view, it was precisely what he came to do.

From my heart to yours.....