

MATTHEW

Mt. 9:9 And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him. ... Mk. 2:14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the receipt of custom, and said unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed him. ... Lk. 5:27 And after these things he went forth, and saw a publican, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he said unto him, Follow me. 28 And he left all, rose up, and followed him. 29 And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them. 30 But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners? 31 And Jesus answering said unto them, They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. 32 I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

In our study of the disciples we have looked at Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, and Nathanael ... we come now to Matthew. ... In the list of disciples in Acts 1:13, the order is presented as Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew ... whereas, in the Gospels Matthew and Thomas are always paired together, Mt. 10:3 Thomas, and Matthew ... Mk. 3:18 Matthew, and Thomas ... Lk. 6:15 Matthew and Thomas ...

It is interesting that none of the twelve disciples came from any religious institution, - none of them belonged to the religious elite. It is equally amazing that despite the priests and the scribes and the synagogue rulers and the Pharisees and the Sadducees professing to be students of the Old Testament ... literate, educated, theological men ... none of them, - with all their cleverness and wide knowledge, - were selected to become disciples. ... There was no one from the religious establishment for, by and large, it had developed into a corrupt system. Despite that, however, the twelve who Jesus called unto Himself *also* included one who formerly was the epitome of corruption, Matthew.

Mt. 9:9 And as Jesus passed forth from thence ... Lk. 5:27 And after these things he went forth ... Jesus has been in Capernaum, - near the north-western corner of the Sea of Galilee, - and He has healed a paralytic man whom his friends had lowered down from the roof into a house. As He was leaving Capernaum He saw a tax-collector (τελώνης) sitting in the local tax office, - it was immediately recognisable what he was and what he was doing. The man's name was Matthew ... also called Levi. Now, it wasn't impossible for a tax-collector to be honest ... but it was extremely rare! ... In Lk. 3:12 some tax-collectors came to John the Baptist and asked him about what the evidence should be concerning their true repentance. John the Baptist simply told them, 13 Exact no more than that which is appointed you. ... They were infamous for taking more from the people than was legally required. ... Indeed, being an honest tax collector was a very rare commodity!

The name Matthew (Ματθαῖος) comes from two Greek words meaning 'gift of Jehovah' ... and it is also a derivative from another name, μάχομαι, which

draws its meaning from ‘one who contends at law for property and privileges’. Its origin is a Hebrew name, *Mattityahu*, ‘gift of Jehovah’. ... Whereas Matthew is a Greek form of a Hebrew name, - probably to make him more ‘in’ and ‘up to date’ with the people he worked and spent his time with, - his real name was the Jewish name Levi.

He would have been originally called after Levi, the third son of Jacob and Leah, **Gen. 29:32** And Leah conceived, and bare a son, and she called his name Reuben: for she said, Surely the LORD hath looked upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me. **33** And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Because the LORD hath heard that I was hated, he hath therefore given me this son also: and she called his name Simeon. **34** And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have born him three sons: therefore was his name called Levi. So, Matthew’s *real* name was Levi which meant ‘joined’. Under Moses’ ministry the tribe of Levi was the priestly tribe, the Levites. ... What a ‘come-down’ ... from belonging to the honourable priestly family to becoming a hated and despised tax-collector.

They were hated, of course, because they were traitors. They had sold their souls to the Romans for money. They were the lowest of the low ... you could not have got any lower! ... And for Jesus to consider such a man to become a disciple and an apostle was beyond any decent human being’s comprehension.

The Romans always introduced a system of taxation throughout every country they conquered whereby the local people would pay a certain amount. There is nothing wrong with the concept of taxation ... but before the money got to the Romans it had to be first collected by the tax-collectors who then passed it on to the local authority, - who in the case of Galilee was the vile Herod Antipas. So, Herod ‘needed’ his ‘cut’ ... and not only did he need his ‘cut’, but the men who collected their taxes, - the tax collectors, - needed their ‘cut’ too! ... Therefore, you had to exorbitantly overpay your taxes so rascals like Matthew would get their ‘cut’ before men like Herod would their ‘cut’ so that the Romans would get the amount the law requires. It was an absolute ‘fiddle’ as it made its way ‘along the chain’!

Now, to reach *that* low depth of morality you had to sell your birthright because you were extorting money from your own people, you own fellow-Jews. And you were also abusing your nation’s history to accommodate the enemy to ‘feather your own nest’. Imagine, Matthew, - *Levi*, - ... a man who

was born into the priestly family of the Levites, - called of God for the highest purposes of service ... and here is one of their descendants ... who had adopted another name to fit in ... and he was a traitor to his people, and a friend of the enemy! ... Matthew could not have sunk any lower!

And you didn't even have to come to their office for them to extract money from you. If they saw you in the streets, or the roads ... or anywhere, they could examine your possessions and extort from you, - with all their perverted self-made regulations, - any amount of money they desired! ... They were rotten to the core! No wonder they were so hated!

They were barred from the synagogue because they were spiritually 'unclean'. They weren't allowed in because their presence would have desecrated the place! They were also forbidden to give evidence or testimony in a court of law.

Even among themselves they were crooks ... with different levels of 'crookery'! In his *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* Alfred Edersheim relates how the *Talmud*, - the Jewish 'law book', - identified two types of tax collectors. The first type was called a *gabbai*. They were a general type of tax collector, mainly dealing with the regular taxes such as land tax, property tax, and ground tax which included taxes on crops and grains. Obviously there was an abundance of opportunities to manipulate the system ... but a worse group than the *gabbai* was the *mokhes* who were even more corrupt because they could extort much more money from their victims ... They could make up any kind of tax 'on the spot' and you would have to pay it. It might not have been legitimate but you had to pay it anyway ... bridge tax, travel tax, mileage tax, wheel tax, cart tax, etc ... Indeed, they 'made it up' as they went along.

In fact, at the root of the word 'mokhes' is oppression and injustice. They were the lowest form of this hopelessly corrupt business ... And they were further divided into two more groups, - there were the *great mokhes* (who employed people and had a large franchise) and there were also the *little/minor mokhes* who were the ordinary tax collectors. ... And if you didn't, - or couldn't, - pay what they said you owed them, they would get it out of you some way or another! ... Matthew was one of these *little mokhes* for Jesus found him sitting at the receipt of custom (Mt. 9:9; Lk. 5:27).

So, Matthew was right out ‘at the coal-face’ of this horrible business. He was one of the many extortioners the people saw every day. He was the dregs. He was the scum. He was the type of person you could never forgive ... And yet, Jesus *saw* him and *called* him to be a disciple! ... *That* is unbelievable! ... In fact, Luke uses a very specific word, *θεάομαι*, ... Jesus picked Matthew out from everyone and He *stared intently* at him. Jesus saw no one else except this man, - this vile tax collector, - Matthew *sitting at the receipt of custom*.... Both Matthew and Mark use the normal word to see, *εἶδῶ*, but Luke uses this very special word to describe how Jesus was looking at this sinner.

And in this very powerful scene is demonstrated the true and perfect grace of God ... for Jesus to set His gaze upon a sinful wretch such as Matthew. That *is* electing grace for there was nothing anyone could have found about Matthew to remotely warrant the call of salvation. Matthew would not even have considered *himself* worthy of God’s love and grace!

And Jesus went over to him and said, *Follow me*. That was all. There was no sermon, and no list of the changes he had to make if he was to be considered for the role of disciple. No, Jesus looked straight into Matthew’s eyes until they penetrated his heart ... and Jesus knew all about him for the spotlight of God’s grace shone into every darkened corner. ... And Matthew was ‘arrested on the spot’! He could not move or escape Christ’s irresistible call ... and Jesus knew that when He said, “Follow Me”, Matthew would get up from his seat, leave all the ill-gotten funds he had illegitimately acquired, and follow Him ... never to turn back again.

That is what God’s electing grace does. It takes the filthiest, most abhorrent and vile individual who is absolutely rooted in sin ... and He frees them and saves them! ... The only way out of that lifestyle for Matthew was to follow Jesus, and he knew it, and so he did it, as directed and led by the Holy Spirit.

To Jesus, Matthew was not scum ... Matthew was a sinner needing to be saved. Matthew would not have known everything there was to know about Jesus ... in fact, he would not have known an awful lot ... and yet God’s grace called him, **Lk. 5:28** *And he left all, rose up, and followed him.*

Well, how do we know Matthew’s life was changed? Simple ... Jesus said, **Lk. 5:32** *I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.* Matthew was *saved* that day he met Jesus for he repented of his sins and that is how he had no

bother leaving behind *all* (Lk. 5:28) his corrupt accretions with their despicable practices and ill-gained rewards. He walked away from a lucrative career to follow Jesus ... and never look back. The verb that is used to describe *how* he left is a verb tense known as the aorist and it is only to be found in the Greek language. It means that he left all he had and never ever returned to them again, - a once and for all commitment to Jesus. That is how real his conversion was! ... That is real proof ... with the true conversion comes the change ... and Matthew truly changed! He became a new creature in Christ for the old things had passed away and everything had become new because he left his tax collecting desk to follow the Saviour (II Cor. 5:17).

He lost his earthly security, his job, his home and his former companions ... but he gained the riches and the fellowship of Christ. He understood that Jesus came to save *him* ... and that Jesus passed by that way *for him*.

And Matthew/Levi brought Jesus home to his big house that had been paid for by his ill-gotten gains, and he *piled a great company of publicans and of others* into his house for a special meal with Jesus. ... This was a Gospel evangelistic opportunity, - he was starting the Christian life as he meant to go on for he brought Jesus to his home, and he also brought such a crowd of his former associates in for Jesus to meet because Matthew knew that since Jesus could save *him*, He could save these other men also. Matthew turned into an evangelist straightaway! ... If *I* can be saved, these men can be too ... and so he brought them to the Saviour. ... Jesus was the Guest of honour at his home.

Looking at Matthew/Levi's name again ... he was *the son of Alphaeus*. Yes, he was someone's son. I don't suppose his father would have been proud of him. In fact, I don't suppose he would have frequented his father's house very often for he had brought a terrible shame on the family. I reckon his family would have rejected him ... but *Jesus* received him.

... He wasn't always a tax collector, a traitor, the lowest of the low. He began life as someone's beloved son. He would have been brought up under the tender care of a loving mother. He would have been introduced to going to the synagogue with his father, and learning the Old Testament stories, passing through his *bar mitzvah*, celebrating the various feasts throughout the year ... and then he went in a very different direction by taking on the career of a

defiled tax collector ... and his life rapidly spiralled downwards until Jesus met him.

There is an encouragement for many whose children were brought up in the things of God but who have turned away. I am sure Alphaeus never intended any son of his to become what Matthew became ... and yet, in the Lord's timing, Jesus called him and saved him. In fact, it took Matthew to become such a wretch in order for the Saviour to save him! ... Never give up hope for the salvation of your loved ones but keep on bringing them before the throne of grace trusting in the Saviour to find them, to stand and gaze at them, and to call out to them to follow Him ... Never give up praying and trusting!

We don't know much about else Matthew, except that he wrote this Gospel ... mainly intended for a Jewish readership. He is known as Matthew the Evangelist. Tradition records his main ministry was to the Jews at home in Israel and also further abroad, before eventually being martyred for his faith ... The earliest traditions indicate he was burned at the stake for Christ.

... And so the story of the life of Matthew is the story of a man the Lord lifted out of society's gutter ... It is the story of someone who had it all, but who left it all in order to give all of himself to the Saviour. ... It is a beautiful story and I trust we would glean much from his humble example! Amen.