

## **Matthew, a Disciple?**

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The call of Matthew to be one of Jesus' disciples is a fairly well-known passage from the Bible. If I had met you at the door this morning and asked you, "What was Matthew's employment before he became a disciple?" I would imagine that I would have heard "Tax Collector" from many of you if not most of you. Probably all of you!

What does that mean to say that Matthew was a tax collector? We know that the IRS collects taxes for the federal government, so we frequently think of the Internal Revenue Service when we hear "tax collector" in the Bible. That overlooks the many other levels and means of taxation to which we are all subject that include local districts, special districts, cities, counties, and state units that also impose taxes and from whom we receive a multiplicity of services. Taxes and more taxes but our situation is very different than that described in the Gospel of Matthew and in the entire New Testament. Let's take a look at the situation as we can best understand it.

Matthew was a tax collector. What does that mean? The Roman government occupied Palestine and ruled the area that we call the Holy land. The Romans were a foreign force in control of the local population. They were the last in a list of occupiers from the Babylonians, to the Persians, next the Greeks, and then the Romans. The Roman government had a system of taxation that it imposed on the people of Palestine, and the way in which they collected those taxes was to offer up for bid the position of tax collector. Men would bid for these jobs, and, of course, the one with the highest bid would be awarded the contract. Certain taxes were set, but some were up to the discretion of the tax collector. He would be told that from this village you must receive a certain sum of money in discretionary taxes, so you decide how you'll get this money. That gave the tax collector the latitude to squeeze out of the villagers as much as he could possibly get, and if it was above and beyond what the Roman government set, then the tax collector had personal profit to keep.

Obviously, the people knew they were being taken but were unable to determine when the tax had actually reached that point. The amount was subjective in those discretionary taxes, so fraud and corruption were a normal part of the taxing mechanism. The only way the tax collector could make money was to be dishonest and deceitful. Everyone knew it and everyone resented it. They naturally resented the tax collector. Tax collectors were hated.

The resentment came from more than being ripped off by the tax collector who was a collaborator with the Roman government. It was through the taxes the Jews paid that the Romans financed their occupation of Palestine. So the Jews had to finance the oppression that kept them under the boot of Rome. And the tax collectors were the means by which this system worked.

The tax collectors also offended the faith of Israel. Israel had only one king, and it was the Lord God Almighty. The only sovereign they recognized was the Lord, so to pay taxes to an earthly king or ruler was a violation of God's right to be the one and only ruler of his Chosen People. Being forced to pay taxes to Rome was an insult to the faith of the Hebrews. As a consequence those who worked for Rome as tax collectors were prohibited from participation in the synagogue. They were held in the same lack of esteem as were robbers and murderers. Tax collectors were considered "Unclean" – not to be touched, or welcomed, and at all costs avoided.

Do you get the picture of the extremely negative feeling towards tax collectors? They were despised because (1) they cheated people, (2) they collaborated with Rome in subjugating the Jews, and (3) they represented a false authority over the Jewish people. Tax collectors were resented on personal, corporate, and theological grounds.

Such was Matthew.

And Jesus called Matthew to be a disciple. How preposterous! What was Jesus thinking? How was he going to attract any followers if he selected people like Matthew to be disciples? No wonder Jesus is criticized for associating with sinners and outcasts, like this tax collector. Table fellowship was symbolic of close and caring human fellowship, and Jesus ate dinner with Matthew and others like him. Matthew 9:10 reads, "And as he (Jesus) sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples." What kind of rabbi or leader would associate with people like that, the pariahs of Palestine?

Jesus simply replies, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). Thank the Lord. None of us would be here if it depended on our own righteousness. Instead of looking down our noses at Matthew or anyone for that matter, we are to be in fellowship with Matthew and others who are considered sinners and outcasts.

The Gospel of Christ Jesus offers such comfort with words of promise, presence, and pardon that we sometimes tune out the words of challenge, confrontation, and consternation. The call of Matthew disturbs us – at least it should. Such a call was not normal protocol, not regular procedure. Notice that Jesus did not say to Matthew, "Matthew, if you change, you can be one of my disciples." No, Jesus called him just as he was, and that changed Matthew.

We do not have to be pure, perfect, and pious to be disciples of the Lord Jesus. He takes us as we are and makes us a new creation by his power and grace, just he did for Matthew.

Matthew had to give up a lot to become a disciple. He lost economic security and income. He lost status in the eyes of the Roman government, the prevailing power structure at that time. He lost potential – continued profitable employment. He lost approval from the power people, his group. Matthew lost those things that the world declares commendable and good.

Some years ago I read a book entitled Hope for the Flowers. The story was about a caterpillar that knew it was time to climb a bush and spin a cocoon, but was tempted to join lots of other caterpillars who seemed to be climbing up some object – a tree trunk or pole, something like that - trying to reach the top which was unseeable. This caterpillar decided to climb and find out what was at the top that everyone was eager to find. So this caterpillar got in the mix and began to climb. Since no main trunk was evident, he, like all the other caterpillars, took hold of other caterpillars in an effort to ascend higher. It did not take long before he noticed every now and then a caterpillar fall off this pillar of caterpillars. He didn't pay any attention to why or what happened to them, for if he lost his concentration on climbing he might be the next one to fall. It took forever, but he kept at it, working diligently toward the goal of reaching the top. The climb took its toll, for he was getting more and more tired, and he seemed to notice more and more caterpillars falling. There must be something spectacular at the top for all these caterpillars to expend so much energy to reach the top, he thought. I must see it; I must get there. So he kept pushing his way up, climbing over other caterpillars that either stopped to rest, fell off, or gave up and were making their way down. He would ask, "What's up there?" All he heard were grunts and groans. So he pursued his goal – get to the top.

He finally made it, and what he found at the top were other caterpillars – just other caterpillars. He exclaimed, "Hey, what's this? I thought I'd find something wonderful, beautiful, and exciting up here." With that he felt another caterpillar trying to push him off, and his quick decision was to climb down before he got thrown down. There was nothing up there! He should have stayed at the bottom, found a bush, and made a cocoon and become a butterfly.

If we just follow the Word and the will of the Lord, we too can know that the constant striving to get to the top is useless, that doing the will of the Lord is so much more satisfying, fulfilling, and peaceful. If we but accept the call of Christ to trust and follow him – as challenging as that may be to all that we are and want – we will be led to be the best human and humane beings that the Lord God intended us to be.

It's not as if we are not following the Lord Jesus today and have been. We've all been involved in the Christian faith, some for a lifetime. But it is to say that in my life and in yours, a greater and deeper degree of discipleship is available. We all hide some corners of life – some way of thinking, behaving, speaking, and responding – that need further conversion. Lord Jesus, keep calling me, please. Continue to lead and direct me. Give me the food of eternal life that my appetite may desire what you feed me.

Matthew gave up earthly strivings for the gift of discipleship. He relinquished a lot in the eyes of the world to become a servant of Christ. As Jesus said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

We do not have to go looking, for the Lord Jesus calls. He speaks to us and lovingly invites us to follow him. Saying “Yes” does mean leaving some things behind, but it also grants us fullness of life both now and forever. And for that we, with Matthew, say, “Thanks be to God.” Amen.