

Matthew 9:9-13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 9 verses 9 to 13 In Matthew chapter 9 we have an account that we also find in the book of Mark chapter 2 and Luke chapter 5.

Matthew the tax collector is called by Jesus to follow him. In the other gospels account the calling of the tax collector is the calling of Levi. In the other gospels as here in the gospel of Matthew, Matthew is listed as one of the 12 apostles but only in this gospel is he identified with the tax collector who is called.

We see this identification in chapter 10 verse 3. We aren't told of any prior acquaintance between Jesus and Matthew. However it would not be surprising if there were one. Several of Jesus' disciples seem to have had some prior acquaintance with him whether as relatives or people he knew within a wider circle.

Some for instance as former disciples of John the Baptist. The fact that Matthew follows Jesus so readily perhaps suggests that there had been some prior interaction. The instruction that Jesus gives to Matthew to follow him should recall such events as Elijah's call of Elisha at the end of 1 Kings chapter 19.

Jesus is another great prophet who calls people to follow him, to leave their daily vocation and to join his mission. After Jesus has called Matthew, the next scene is that of a shared meal. It seems to have a festive character to it.

[1 : 56] While people would more generally sit up while they were at the table, to recline at table was associated with an extraordinary or festive meal, not just a regular meal. The meal is celebrated in the house.

If we were reading this purely in the context of Matthew's gospel, we might have presumed that the house was Peter's. But reading this in the light of Luke chapter 5 verse 29, we know it is the house of Matthew.

Along with Matthew there are a lot of tax collectors and sinners. In addition to being complicit with the Romans and the governing authorities, the tax collectors were also seen as unjust.

As those who oppressed the poor and were seen to betray their nation, they would scandalise both religious along with more typical nationalistic sentiment. The sinners who were also present at this meal would have been those who have abandoned the law and live more like those outside of the covenant.

Both groups would be associated with Gentiles, with the outcasts of the people. And they weren't just the good outcasts, the people who were oppressed. Many of these people would have been the oppressors of the poor insiders.

[2 : 57] Jesus, in the episode that immediately preceded this, had forgiven someone's sins. While forgiving someone's private wrongdoings might seem okay, to forgive someone who is involved in that sort of oppression is a bit more scandalous.

And as elsewhere in the Gospels, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, eating a meal had significance. It was a sign of the renewal of the kingdom around Jesus. The table fellowship was a sign of who was in, as well as who was out.

It was an anticipation of the wedding feast on the last day. And so, in the context of such a prophetic symbol, including tax collectors and sinners would be quite scandalous. We might wonder why it was so scandalous.

What was so offensive about what Jesus was doing? If he is getting tax collectors and sinners to repent, and in the case of characters like Zacchaeus, to give back any wrongful gains that they had, shouldn't he be a folk hero?

Perhaps the answer to this is found in some reflection upon human psychology and its twists and devious turns. For many people, righteousness is about belonging to a privileged moral class.

[3 : 59] It is about a religion of respectability and status. It allows you to look down upon others, and in judging them, to feel better about yourself. To include the dregs of society, and what's more, to centre them within the life of the people of God, is deeply offensive to people with such a vision.

A true religious teacher should centre the people who are respectable religious folk, while the tax collectors and sinners, if they repent, should be treated like beggars at the doorway. They can have some of the scraps, perhaps, that are left over, but they'll never attain to or enjoy the status of those who are religious and upstanding within such a system.

They will always be somehow on the outside. Jesus' practice is offensive precisely because he does not follow such a model. His statement about the physician is similar to various other proverbial sayings of the time.

The point is not that there are some people who are well who have no need for a physician. Rather, it's the fact that if we are to see ourselves as people of God, we have to belong to the class of those who are thought of as sick.

Unless we can see ourselves among the tax collectors and the sinners, we don't truly belong as people of Christ. This is the first time that the Pharisees really come into the frame of the Gospel. And throughout the Gospel, it seems that it is the Pharisees in particular who exemplify this mode of religion, an exclusionary mode of religion that builds itself up in its self-righteousness by freezing other people out or judging them as sinners.

[5 : 23] Jesus responds to the Pharisees by highlighting Hosea chapter 6 verse 6, a statement that he also refers to in chapter 12 verse 7, when he's challenged concerning his disciples eating the grain on the Sabbath.

This reference to I desire mercy and not sacrifice is not found at this point in the other Gospels though. The way that Jesus makes this appeal to the Word of God is very important. The Pharisees should have known all of these things already.

This is not something new that Jesus is bringing. Rather, the Pharisees, for all of their pride in their knowledge, did not know the Scriptures. They had missed its key point. And the point of this particular text is that cultic observance, rituals and sacrifices, aren't what God is really looking for.

What he wants more than anything else is justice, mercy and faith. In the Sermon on the Mount we see some of this. The righteousness of the true people of God should exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees.

And it will achieve this as a proactive, restorative righteousness. Not just a righteousness of avoidance of pollution and sin and anyone who might be an outsider. This true righteousness is committed to mercy, to healing what is broken, to restoring those who are outside and to extending the salvation of God.

[6 : 34] Jesus teaches a similar thing when he teaches concerning the greatest commandment. The greatest commandment is not just about avoidance of sin. It's about the positive duty of love.

They're straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. True keeping of the law of God is about covenant loyalty. It's about the restorative grace and mercy received and given to others.

God desires mercy, not just this ritual observance. And the Pharisees, with their preoccupation on scrupulous religious observance, minus the inner heart of the law, the spirit of the law that should always animate it, are in fact obstructing the salvation of God.

He has shown remarkable grace and made part of the people of God, included at the table of grace. According to tradition, he is the one who bears witness to Christ within this gospel of Matthew.

No one stands as a passive and uninvolved bystander who is just a spectator. No one who has not been transformed by the encounter with him can be a true witness to Christ.

[8 : 57] One who declares with personal experience what the forgiveness of Christ really means, what it means to be a recipient of this, and what it means to be part of a kingdom that is defined around such forgiveness, where one's standing in the kingdom is not on the basis of one's moral worth, but is purely on the basis of Christ's unmerited grace and favour.

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