

Matthew, the Publican

Matt. 9:9-13

Cf. Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32

Intro: This is the only account in the life of Matthew which is recorded in the Gospels. He calls himself Matthew, which was quite evidently the name he used after he became an apostle.

Mark calls him Levi the son of Alphaeus; Luke calls him a publican, named Levi.

There is no doubt but that these accounts speak of the same person, but just the connection between these two names is hard to determine.

But probably Levi was used before his call; Matthew, afterwards.

Matthew lived in Capernaum which he calls in Matt. 9:1, Jesus' "own city." His custom house was evidently right on the shores of the sea of Galilee, or Lake Genesareth.

He probably was responsible for the taxation of those who traveled on the Lake.

It seems very likely that he must have known Peter, Andrew, James, and John, whom he mentions in Matt. 4: ~~20~~ 18-22.

and it is almost certain that he had seen and heard Jesus of Nazareth many times.

But, to appreciate this story, let us note, first of all, a little about

I. His occupation (v. 9a). He was a customs officer.

There was no occupation which was more despised. And it was even more contemptible if a Jew became a publican, as was the case with Matthew.

Why were they despised?

- (1) They represented the hated power of Rome.
- (2) They collected taxes from the people.
- (3) The fees were arbitrary, extortion was common. Their own income consisted of whatever they could collect above what they were required to pay Rome.
- (4) A man usually became a publican because his desire for money <sup>overpowered</sup> ~~overshadowed~~ every other desire in his life.
- (5) With regard to character, they were usually harsh, greedy, deceptive.

No one likes a tax collector.

But the Jews had other reasons for hating a publican (ΤΕΛΩΝΗΣ)

- (1) He was considered a traitor, a renegade, a collaborator.
- (2) Many Jews had serious doubts as to whether or not they should pay taxes believing that it was

a recognition of Caesar over God.

(3) The Rabbis forbade a publican from being either a judge or a witness.

(4) If a Jew became a publican, then it was thought that repentance was impossible for him.

Concerning his own people, a Jew literally forsook all to become a publican. In doing so he indicated his:

- (1) scorn for his nation,
- (2) contempt for Judaism as a religion, and
- (3) in all probability his disregard for God Himself.

Matthew himself gives us some of the feelings regarding publicans which were prominent in his day.

(1) Matt. 5:46, 47 - The ASV uses "Gentiles" in v. 47. So publicans were no better than Gentiles - outcasts, excluded from God, here because of their corrupt partiality - a characteristic condemned repeatedly in the OT as contributing to all kinds of evil.

(2) Matt. 18:17 - read from v. 15. Here again like a Gentile, an outcast, unable to get in.

(3) Matt. 21:31, 32 - linked with harlots

Keep in mind that Matthew a

former publican records these things.

Luke (15:1) <sup>also Matt 9:10</sup> adds another familiar combination: "publicans and sinners". Sinners were irreligious or non-practicing Jews (NASV, p. 129).

So all of this means that if a man were a publican, no ~~one~~ <sup>Jew</sup> gave him any hope or thought of him as having an future connection with God. He was finished! The attitude of the rabbis, the scribes, the Pharisees would only drive a publican farther from God.

However, one day Matthew suddenly was confronted with

## II. An opportunity (v. 9-mid).

Jesus Christ said to him, "Follow me".

Do you remember those words of Fanny Crosby?

"Down in the human heart,  
Crushed by the tempter  
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;  
Touched by a loving heart,  
Wakened by kindness,  
Chords that were broken will vibrate  
Once more." (Rescue the Perishing)

Men considered Matthew as hopeless, but only <sup>the Lord</sup> Jesus Christ knew what was going on in his heart.

What did He mean by those simple words, "Follow me"?

(Ακολουθει μοι)

- (1) I want to change your occupation. I want you to cease being a publican, I want to make you a disciple.

Was such a thing possible?

and if it were possible, would matthew even consider it?

and if he did respond, would not Jesus of Nazareth be jeopardizing His own ministry to the Jews by having such a man as one of his disciples?

Peter, or Andrew, or James, or John — but matthew, No!

This word of our Lord meant to matthew that there was hope. Jesus Christ recognized a hungry, empty, searching heart when no one else did.

But He meant another thing.

- (2) I want to change you.

a disciple is a learner.

He follows a teacher (v. 11), not just to be where the teacher is, nor just to learn things from the teacher, but to become like the teacher.

matthew had evidently desired this, but never dreamed of such a possibility. already his heart was no longer in his work, but all he could do was continue as a publican until the Lord Jesus called him. How different Jesus was from the rabbis! what followed?

III. Matthew's obedience (v. 9b).

"and he arose and followed him."  
 Luke adds that "he forsook all"  
 (Luke 5:28).

Peter and the others could have gone back to their fishing, but Matthew could never have gone back to tax-collecting. He was already despised by Israel; now he would be despised by Rome. If Jesus Christ failed him, he would have nothing left.

But Jesus Christ never fails, and he did not fail Matthew.

We don't know much about Matthew's future. Tradition tells us that he became a preacher for some 15 years who travelled into other countries with the Gospel - to the despised Gentiles. But see here

IV. The outreach (v. 10, cf. <sup>Luke 5:29;</sup> Mark 2:15)

Matthew was just starting, and did not know much, but he prepared a banquet - and who came? "Many publicans and sinners."

Mark tells us that many others followed

Rome had a job of getting many replacements.

When Matthew was called, others came. Hope for him created hope in the hearts of others.

And think how many, especially Jews, have found Christ as their Saviour by reading the Gospel "according to Matthew".

Concl: Did Matthew ever forget?  
 no! Read Matt 10:1-3, esp. v. 3.  
 And then read Matt 11:19!  
This is what he wrote  
about himself.

See. John Newton (Hymnody, pp. At 80, when his eyesight began to fail and friends advised him to stop preaching, he said, "What! shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?"

Near the same time when his assistant was helping him read his manuscript, he read twice, "Jesus Christ is precious." When informed about it as though he did not know what he had done, he responded by saying he would read it again, and he shouted, "Jesus Christ is precious."

From Christian Hymnody, pp. 303-305.

His epitaph, written before his death reads, JOHN NEWTON, clerk, once an Infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich Mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy."

"Matthew, the publican"

These words can speak to every person here this morning:

(1) For those who have never come to Christ, these words spell hope. If Matthew could come, anyone can come

(2) For those of us who know the Saviour - what is our epithet? What describes us as being characteristic of us - Only a sinner. Matthew the publican. (over)