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Matthew 9:9 - 9:13



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage, Steve Gregg discusses the story of Matthew, a tax collector who becomes a follower of Jesus. Gregg notes that tax collectors were widely disliked by the Jewish community for their association with the Roman government and their perceived greed. However, Jesus approaches Matthew and invites him to join his cause, demonstrating his willingness to associate with those considered outcasts. Through this encounter, Gregg highlights Jesus' message that all individuals, regardless of their perceived flaws and status in society, are welcome to repent and follow him.

Transcript

Let's turn now to Matthew chapter 9, where we will resume our study of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, who is called the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, and the Lord of all. And when we call him Lord of all, we mean by that he is the one who is the master and owner of all, and to whom we must all give account, ultimately, someday.

Certainly, it behooves us to know him, and to know his life and his teachings, so that our own lives and thinking can be measured against the truth that he taught and demonstrated. That is certainly one of the major reasons for doing these studies. We're looking at Matthew chapter 9, beginning at verse 9, where we read, Then as Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, Follow me.

And he arose and followed him. And so it was, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with the tax collectors and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said to them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Well, there's a lot in this passage.

Jesus is walking down the road, and he sees this man Matthew. This man Matthew is the same Matthew to whom this book is attributed. He is the author of this book.

Now, I should point out that the book of Matthew in the original, it is an anonymously written book. The author does not identify himself as Matthew. But the reason that it is attributed to Matthew traditionally is because the early church understood that Matthew had written it.

And we have no reason to doubt that Matthew is the author. Although, like most biblical writers, he refers to himself in the third person when he speaks of himself. He doesn't say, Jesus came by and saw me.

He says, Jesus came along and saw a man named Matthew. Now, in the parallel accounts in the other Gospels, we find that Matthew had another name by which he was known, and that name was Levi. Now, Levi, of course, was one of the twelve sons of Jacob.

And the Levites were the tribe from which the priesthood came. It is likely that a man who was given the name Levi by his parents was probably of the tribe of Levi. It would be common enough to do that.

And therefore, he might have been a man who had been of the very tribe that had been given the privilege of being priests in the tabernacle and of being the caretakers of the tabernacle. However, this man had taken up a different vocation, and that was that of a tax collector. In the King James Version, he is called a publican.

And the more modern translations tell us what that means. A publican was a tax collector who collected the Roman tax. Now, remember that the Jewish people in Israel at this time, and that's where this whole story is taking place, were a subject people.

They had been conquered about 63 or so B.C. by the Romans who were conquering everybody in sight. And the Israelites were the ones who were conquered in the course of that conquest and became subject to Rome and had to pay tribute to Rome on a regular basis, had to pay taxes. Well, for the purpose of taxing the people, the Romans often hired Jewish people to tax their own countrymen.

This may have been because Romans who were not soldiers were often killed. In fact, Roman soldiers were often killed by bands of vigilantes. The Jews hated the Romans.

They did not like being occupied by these Gentiles. And there were zealot Jews who actually ran raids against Roman soldiers. But any other Romans, like tax collectors who were not armed, would likely be beat up and even killed many times by the Jews because they were hated.

They were hated oppressors and they were an occupying army. Now, perhaps to avoid this from happening so often, the Romans hired Jewish people to collect the taxes from their own countrymen. And while the Jewish people may not have attacked these tax collectors with the same vehemence, if they were their own countrymen, they did resent them deeply.

A Jewish man who collected taxes for the Romans against his people was a man who had turned against his people as far as most people were concerned. If anything, a Jewish tax collector might have been resented by the people more than a Roman doing the same job because the Romans would be expected to be loyal to their country, but the Jewish tax collector was seen as a man disloyal to his people. And tax collectors were considered to be the lowest scum of Jewish society because of this turncoat activity.

Now, if Matthew indeed, because his name was also Levi, if we would deduce that he was a Levite, that would mean that he had turned from a high calling of being one who serves in the tabernacle, or in this time, the temple, to become a servant of Rome, the enemy of his people. And that's falling pretty far from a very lofty calling to a very low and despised calling. And as such, he would probably be very much hated by his own countrymen and an outcast.

He sat at a receipt of custom, as the King James calls it, or a tax collector's booth alongside the road. And people had to come by and negotiate with him what their taxes were and pay them there. But apart from those doing business with him, he probably was largely shunned in terms of social life.

The Jews probably wanted very little to do with him, and the only people that would be his associates would be other tax collectors and other people who were likewise outcasts from society, like prostitutes and others who were living a lifestyle that their countrymen rejected and did not approve of. So this man was probably a social outcast among his people, and it must have been a great surprise to him when this famous rabbi, of whom he could not have helped hearing, came by and said, follow me. Consider this.

This man was collecting taxes in Capernaum. This is the same town where Jesus had not too long earlier cast a demon out of a man in the synagogue service. He had healed everybody in town in Peter's house one Sabbath night.

He had crowds of people so thick that a man who was paralyzed had to be lowered through the roof in order to get near to Jesus to heal. Everybody in town knew about Jesus, his healings, his casting out demons, and no doubt his preaching as well. And they knew he was a man from God.

They also knew that he had followers. This man Matthew had apparently not been able to go to the meetings, but he could not have helped hearing about Jesus. And we don't know to what degree in his own heart he wished that he could have been close to Jesus.

It's very possible he would have heard that just in the previous story, Jesus had said to a paralyzed man, Son, your sins are forgiven you. I imagine that Matthew is a man who felt some conviction about his own sins and would very much like to have had his sins forgiven as well. Now, I deduce this not only from the fact that he was a tax collector, because there were perhaps many tax collectors who did not feel too guilty and didn't

care about the forgiveness of sins.

But I deduce it from the fact that as soon as Jesus called him, the man immediately left his job and became a permanent follower of Jesus and eventually was assigned to a position as an apostle in the movement. The fact that Matthew responded so suddenly and so quickly, without hesitation, when Jesus called him, tells me that he was more attracted to Jesus than he was to the money he was making in his job. And if he was so attracted to Jesus, then he must have had at some point a bit of a change of heart prior to this.

He was working still as a tax collector, but no doubt feeling somewhat guilty about it. Probably feeling a bit lonely as a social outcast. Probably wishing he could go back to square one and start over again with a clean slate.

Wishing he could be forgiven and go back to his earlier innocence of life. No doubt wishing that he could be like some of those who followed Jesus around, but thinking for sure that if he would approach Jesus, that Jesus would shun him like the rest. Because after all, Jesus was a holy man and Matthew was a sinner, an outcast.

And yet Jesus walks by, he looks over at Matthew and says, you follow me. And Matthew must have been so surprised and yet so elated that Jesus would consider him and invite him to be part of his movement, that he fairly leapt over the table and left his job without giving two weeks notice and just became a follower of Jesus instantaneously and permanently after that. This is a marvelous story of a man who had fallen into great sin and had left a worthy calling to become a turncoat against his people and yet got a second chance and got an even more worthy calling.

More worthy than being a Levite. More worthy than serving in the temple. He was called to serve Jesus, the Messiah, and follow him and eventually become an apostle of his.

So it was, we read, that Jesus said, follow me, and he arose and followed him immediately. In verse 10 it says, and so it was as Jesus sat at the table in the house. Now interestingly, Matthew in this gospel does not tell us whose house it was.

But in the other gospels that tell the same story, we read that it was his own house, it was Matthew's house. Jesus, that night, was in Matthew's house and Matthew apparently had called a great feast and invited all his tax collector and sinner friends. Remember Matthew had been an outcast.

He had not been in polite society very long because he was ostracized by his profession. But he had a network, a social network, and a circle of friends of the less reputable sort. But when Jesus showed the mercy to invite Matthew to be part of his movement, Matthew wanted all of his sinful friends to become aware of Jesus and his mercy and his grace.

And he wanted to introduce them all to Jesus. And many times that is the case, that people who are forgiven out of a great sinful background are even more eager to introduce all their friends to Jesus than those who are raised in the church and have never felt shame very deeply over their sin. People who are raised Christian are sometimes prone to take Jesus for granted.

But those who have been sinners and know they're sinners and then receive great forgiveness are often so excited they can't keep it to themselves. Frankly, we should all be that excited. I was raised in a church.

I became a Christian as a child. But I must confess that I was not one who took it for granted. I was witnessing to people from my childhood on up.

But I did know many who knew Christ from childhood and were raised in the church who simply took their faith for granted and their salvation for granted. Yet in what was called the Jesus Movement in the 1970s in Southern California where I lived, there were many, many people being saved out of immoral and drug-addicted backgrounds. And when these people got saved, they were zealous to tell all their friends.

And that's what caused the Jesus Movement to happen. These people experienced the grace of God and the cleansing and the forgiveness of Christ. And they could not help but tell all their friends.

And they had many friends who needed Christ. So did Matthew. He threw a feast in his home.

It was sort of his retirement feast. He was leaving the profession of tax collecting. And he wanted all of his friends to get a chance to meet Jesus.

And so he invited them. Well, Jesus was not one to stand on ceremony. He had no objection to eating in the presence of these people, although all of them were social outcasts.

Now, I hear Jesus was different than many religious people even today, and very different from the religious people of his day. In fact, not only would the Pharisees not eat with the tax collectors and sinners, they were critical of Jesus because he would. They figured that his character could be defined in terms of the company he kept.

It says, And so it was, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with him, and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? It's interesting. This question was posed to the disciples, but we don't read of the disciples giving an answer.

Jesus gives the answer. I imagine the disciples were somewhat wondering the answer to

that question themselves. I wonder why Jesus is hanging out with this scum.

Now, the disciples themselves, of course, were not of the Pharisaic sort. And some of them had sinful pasts of a notorious sort themselves, and therefore maybe were not so condemning of Jesus for hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. It's hard to say exactly how his disciples were taking this.

But they certainly must have wondered at Jesus' strategy, because here he was the Messiah. He was a holy man. He was a prophet of God.

And yet he's not addressing, he's not making his appeal to the polite in the religious society, the holy people, the Pharisees. He's reaching out to the lost, to the downcast, to the fallen. And this did not seem characteristic of rabbis to do.

And so I'm sure that when the disciples were asked, Why does your teacher eat with these people? The disciples were probably at a loss to know what the answer was. But Jesus, fortunately, always has the right answer. And when Jesus heard that, he said to them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

Now, this is something of an analogy, because he's not really talking here about people who are physically sick or physically well, nor was he talking about his role in healing sicknesses, although he did that often enough. That was not what he was doing at this time. He was speaking of sinners as if they are sick.

Sick with sin. They need to be cured. And the one who can cure them of their sin is Jesus.

And you would therefore expect him, the great physician, to be among the sinners. That's what he's saying. It's not the well people that the doctor has to be with.

The well people don't need a physician. Those who are sick do. Now, if I might make an aside here, Jesus was not teaching this directly, but indirectly he certainly taught this.

It was not his main point, but he did make this statement. Those who are well don't need a physician. That certainly challenges the whole mentality of much of our Western culture, our modern technological culture, our medically oriented culture, because many times people who are well go and see physicians all the time.

It's called preventative medicine. And there's many people who spend a great deal of money, or at least insurance money, hanging out with physicians on a regular basis, although they are not sick, and just getting check-ups. I will tell you this.

There are some people who take their babies for well baby check-ups all the time, even though they are well babies. By definition, these check-ups are for well babies. And somehow the medical profession has convinced us that we need them even when we're not sick.

Even when we're well. Of course, it's very lucrative for the physicians to not only get paid appointments from sick people, but also from people who aren't sick. It's a tremendous racket, it seems to me, because Jesus said people who are well don't need a physician.

I'll tell you, I don't go to doctors when I'm not sick. What a waste of money that is. I realize, however, that there are times when people may suspect that they're sick, or they're trying to catch cancer or something in the early stages.

But I dare say that there's a great deal of confidence in physicians that is unnecessary. There's a lot of surrender of our lives to physicians in many ways. I think physicians, to a large extent, have a tremendous authority that goes beyond that which is appropriate.

Because people are afraid of cancer. They're afraid of sickness. They're afraid of death.

And for that reason, they trust themselves into the hands of physicians. And I don't think it's wrong if you are sick to go to a physician. In fact, it's interesting that Jesus here did not deny that it's okay to go to physicians if you're sick.

You know, there are people who think that you should never see a doctor because you should just trust God to heal you. But Jesus didn't say that. Jesus said those who are sick need a physician.

Now, of course, Jesus can be that physician. Jesus can heal people. But Jesus didn't heal everybody.

And therefore, with this statement, he made it legitimate. Sick people do need a physician. Now, of course, if Jesus heals them, they don't need another physician other than him.

But if Jesus doesn't heal them, there's nothing wrong with them seeing a physician, it would appear. So, of course, Jesus is not really talking about physicians here as a principal point. But he is making a comment that he expects everybody to recognize the validity of so that he can then make an analogy to what he's doing here.

And that which he thought was self-evident, although it's not necessarily self-evident to all today, is that people who are well don't need to see a doctor. People who are sick, however, do need to see a doctor. Or at least they need to address their sickness in some reasonable way, perhaps a doctor or some medicines or herbs or something else.

People need cures, in other words. A doctor is one place that you go to get cured. But people who are sick need a cure.

That's what Jesus is saying here. And he's saying that the reason he hangs out with these tax collectors and sinners is because they need a cure. They need a cure for their sinfulness.

And so, having said that statement about physicians, he goes on and makes the application. He says, But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. If people are righteous, they don't need to be cured. They don't need to repent.

But he says, I have called sinners to repentance. That is, calling the sick to be cured. How is one cured of sickness? By repenting.

By the way, the phrase to repentance here is not found in all of the manuscripts. The so-called Alexandrian text omits the words to repentance. And so, it just says, I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

However, in the parallels in the other Gospels, the manuscripts do include these words. And so, we know that Jesus didn't just come to call sinners. He called sinners to repentance.

He loves sinners. But his call to the sinner is that they must repent. A righteous person doesn't need to repent, if such a person exists.

Now, Jesus was not affirming that there are people who are righteous and don't need to repent. He was simply saying, if everyone I hung out with was righteous, I wouldn't have anyone to minister to. That is why I hang out with sinners.

They are the ones who need to repent. He was not denying that the Pharisees need to repent. But they didn't know they were sick, and therefore, they didn't see any need to.

They certainly, however, should be able to acknowledge that the sinners needed to repent. And that justified Jesus spending time with them to call them to that. Now, he quotes a verse from Hosea 6.6. He says, go and learn what this means.

He quotes it, I will have mercy and not sacrifice. Now, what this means is that God is more concerned about showing compassion to people in need than he is concerned about observing the details of ritualistic religion. Sacrifice to the Jew was part of his ritual religion.

Mercy was more of an expression of the compassion of God toward human misery and need. And Jesus said, you should read your own prophets. Hosea 6.6 says, God says, I will have mercy rather than sacrifice.

In other words, God's priorities are different than the Pharisees. The Pharisees were, it was important to them not to violate the ritual customs. And hanging out with sinners, like Jesus was, would violate a ritual custom.

Religious people don't brush and have contact with the sinners. However, these sinners need help. These sinners are sick people needing a physician.

They need someone to call them to repentance. And it was the mercy of God that caused Jesus to reach out to these people rather than shunning them. He did not hold out for a strict ritual cleanness in his ministry as the Jews typically did.

But rather, he was concerned about expressing mercy, the heart of God, the compassion of God for sinners. God loves sinners. Jesus was a friend of sinners, as he was accused of being.

And he came to call sinners to repentance. If you're a sinner, and I guarantee you, you are, Jesus has come to call you to repentance. And if you repent, you will find forgiveness and a new way of life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

You may be sick with sin, but he can cure you if you repent and turn to him.