

The Calling of Matthew
Matthew 9:9-13
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 8-9 provides us with the account of ten miracles that serve to prove the authority of Jesus over all. Matthew has organized these miracles into groups for the purpose of presenting Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.

- Miracles of healing (8:1-17)
- Miracles of power (8:23-9:8)
- Miracles of restoration (9:19-34)

The first group of three miracles all involved physical healing, showing Jesus as having authority of physical ailments. The second set of three miracles involved Jesus' power. Between each of these three sets of miracles, there is an intervening narrative regarding discipleship, including verses 9-13 and the calling of Matthew.

The story of the calling of Matthew is also recorded in Mark 2:14-22 and Luke 5:27-38. In each synoptic Gospel, the calling of Matthew follows the story of the healing of the paralytic. Therefore, we can conclude that this story was both chronologically and thematically placed in Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus visits Matthew in his tax booth (9:9)

The most obvious issue between the Gospel accounts of this story involves the difference between the name Matthew in this Gospel and the use of the name Levi in Luke 5:27, 29 and the Mark's added detail of Levi, the son of Alphaeus in Mark 2:15. Because of the high degree of similarity between Matthew's account and what was recorded in the other Gospels, it is certain that all refer to the same incident and that the accounts do not represent different people. Jews often had two names (cf. Acts 4:36) and this Gospel writer preferred to refer to himself in this story as Matthew.

Matthew in the Greek text is MATTHAIOS, which was a Greek name. It is possible that this was transliterated from a Hebrew name. If so, it would carry the meaning of "gift of God," derived from the name Mattaniah (cf. 1 Chronicles 9:15). Perhaps Matthew preferred this name for its meaning? Probably more likely, this was how he was known among his fellow tax-gatherers and associates when Jesus called him and said "Follow Me!"

The disciples were all Jewish and it would be expected that Mark and Luke use the Hebrew name of Levi instead of Matthew when recounting this story. This is likely because this is how the disciples would have known him during their years of following Jesus together. A similarity would be how Christ changed Peter's name from Simon. When James refers to Peter in Acts 15:14, he uses the name "Simeon" that he had always called Peter.

Tax-collectors were notorious for their corruption. For example, we see another tax-gatherer named Zaccheus admitting to his practice of defrauding people in Luke 19:8. They were charged with collecting customs (taxes levied on imported goods) and excise taxes (a tax levied on a specific good purchased) for Rome. No one enjoys paying taxes. This is particularly true for travelers who may not be prepared for the custom tax they would have collected from them.

Beyond collecting taxes, tax-collectors personally benefited from the Roman system that allowed additional charges levied against the population. Tax-collectors lived a very comfortable life, much to the chagrin of their fellow residents. The populous would view tax-collectors as living well off their work.

Matthew was a tax-collector near Capernaum. We know this because Matthew notes the calling occurred "*As Jesus passed on from there.*" Capernaum was situated along a caravan route between Egypt and the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. As such, it was one of the better locations for a tax-collector to work, since it would produce greater revenue. Matthew held a lucrative position within the system of tax-collectors and would have lived an even better life, financially speaking, than many of his contemporaries.

Jesus saw Matthew sitting in his tax booth, a small office along the trade route. Just as Peter and Andrew responded to Jesus' call in Matthew 4:20, "*Immediately they left their nets and followed Him,*" so now Matthew is described as leaving his tax booth and following Jesus. Unlike Peter and Andrew (and James and John), Matthew could not have easily returned to his profession once he departed his post.

By following Jesus, Matthew would be joining an existing group of disciples. This group is listed in the following chapter (Matthew 10:2-4). Certainly Peter, Andrew, James and John preceded Matthew in following Jesus so they would have been faced with the addition of someone who they would never associated with in their existing relationships.

Since some of the disciples were originally from Bethsaida, a town six miles northeast of Capernaum along the coast of the Sea of Galilee, they may have had to pay taxes to Matthew previously. Certainly they had been paying poll taxes and paying taxes on their profits from their occupations, such as fishing. They were well acquainted with the function of tax-gatherers in their community.

As with all people, first century Jews did not enjoy paying their various taxes, yet the inclination of tax-gatherers extorting more money from them was more loathsome. However, the greatest affront to the sensibilities of the Jewish people were the Jewish tax-gatherers who joined with the Romans to oppress them for the sake of money. These were considered to be so traitorous that they were not even worthy to be considered as Jews but were grouped with the Gentiles. *“Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”* (Matthew 18:17).

Therefore, Jesus’ calling of Matthew placed such a hated person in the midst of others who had left everything to follow Him. One of the twelve disciples was Simon the Zealot (Matthew 10:4). The Zealots were a sect of Judaism that were more actively opposed to the Romans. They actively sought to incite their countrymen to rebel against the Romans by force. This would lead to the Jewish-Roman war (66-70 AD) that led to the destruction of Jerusalem.

As a Zealot, Simon would have been particularly opposed to someone such as Matthew who was oppressing the Jews on behalf of the Romans, for his own personal gain. That both Matthew and Simon could follow Jesus together is a remarkable example of the unity that only faith in Jesus Christ could possibly bring to such different people.

Jesus visits Matthew in his house (9:10-13)

Matthew responded to the call of Jesus by inviting Him to a meal at his house. According to Luke’s Gospel, this was a large gathering with a great crowd of tax-gatherers eating and drinking (Luke 5:29). Matthew notes the disciples accompanied Jesus to this reception. These tax collectors were Matthew’s colleagues and friends (“sinners”).

Jesus was not opposed to going to such a reception for Him, and His disciples dutifully followed Him. The Pharisees would never have attended such a meal or even entered the home of a tax collector. How they saw Jesus is not addressed and they likely confronted the disciples about Jesus’ conduct after the dinner had ended.

To the Pharisees, sinners were not only ungodly but they specifically did not observe their traditional interpretations of the Old Testament regarding ritual purity, Sabbath observance and other codes of conduct as they prescribed as teachers of Israel. These would be Gentile and Jews who were so lax in their religious duties as to be considered to be living as Gentiles.

For Pharisees and many other Jews of the day, to socialize with such people implied a unity and support of their behavior. By Jesus eating with the tax collectors, He was viewed as siding with them in their sin. This was the quintessential “guilty by association.” Beyond this, to eat with such sinful people placed those participating in danger of ceremonial defilement. They therefore considered Jesus to have an inadequate view of the Law and the responsibility of the Jews to follow it. It furthered the ongoing conflict with Jesus over the understanding of obedience to the Law.

All three synoptic Gospels note that the Pharisees question the disciples about the conduct of Jesus. Earlier, the scribes were reluctant to address Jesus directly (Matthew 9:3) and here they are as well. But it nevertheless was an attack on Jesus. They were critics of Jesus and their opposition to Him would continue to build.

Jesus heard their objection and He responded to the Pharisees with an analogy that associated sin with disease. His answer to them would be understood by the Pharisees, as the tax collectors and sinners were the ones who were unhealthy and were in need of spiritual healing. This analogy by Jesus put Himself in the role of the physician to the unhealthy.

This analogy of Jesus in the role of the physician was spoken to earlier, in a synagogue in Nazareth, when Jesus told the Jews, “*And He said to them, “No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself!’”* (Luke 4:23). This would be fulfilled when the chief priests, scribes and elders joined together to mock Him on the cross, “*He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him”* (Matthew 27:42).

God spoke in the Old Testament as being the healer of Israel:

“*For I, the LORD, am your healer*” (Exodus 15:26)

“*It is I who heal*” (Deuteronomy 32:39)

“*Behold, I will heal you*” (2 Kings 20:5)

The Lord is the one *“who pardons all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases”* (Psalm 103:3).

The Messiah of Israel is referenced as the one who will bring healing:

- *“they will return to the LORD, and He will respond to them and will heal them”* (Isaiah 19:22)
- *“On the day the LORD binds up the fracture of His people and heals the bruise He has inflicted”* (Isaiah 30:26)
- *“For I will restore you to health and I will heal you of your wounds,’ declares the LORD”* (Jeremiah 30:17)

While the Pharisees would have understood Jesus to refer to the sinners as unhealthy, Jesus actually does not specify this. He makes a general statement, which applies to all the unhealthy, which of course includes the Pharisees. Jesus came as a physician for the unhealthy – all people – because *“there is none righteous, not even one”* (Romans 3:10). Those who understand their need will seek the Physician and the self-righteous will see no need for the Physician.

This point was emphasized by Jesus when He gave a parable regarding these very same people, a Pharisee and a tax collector:

“And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted”” (Luke 18:9-14).

In rebuke of the Pharisees, Jesus instructs them to *“go and learn what this means.”* This phraseology was used by rabbis of the day to exhort their students to restudy the Old Testament text. Jesus told them that they misunderstood the Scripture and directed them to Hosea 6:6, *“For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”*

The implication of Jesus' quotation of Hosea was that the Pharisees were valuing sacrifice over compassion and mercy. This certainly is seen in their objections, which will continue throughout the Gospels in demonstration of their failure to learn what this means.

By referencing Hosea 6:6 to the Pharisees, Jesus put those words to them in the same way the word of the Lord did to the people of Hosea's day. Both the pre-exilic Israelites and the Pharisees had lost the heart of worship in the midst of the pursuit of their rituals. *"But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; There they have dealt treacherously against Me"* (Hosea 6:7).

The Pharisees had transgressed the Scripture by having no compassion on people. They were just like their forefathers whom Hosea addressed, the Israelites whom God judged through the Assyrians. Later Jesus would say to them, *"So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?"* (Matthew 23:31-32).

Jesus demonstrated godly compassion by coming to call sinners to repentance. He did not come for the self-righteous, those like the Pharisees who had no sense of their need. Their sacrifices were in vain and their external righteousness was worthless. *"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5:20).

Conclusion

As followers of Jesus, we must follow Him in humility, not self-righteousness. We cannot follow the Pharisees, with an exalted view of ourselves in the external practice of sacrificial religion. This does not please God and will exclude us from the kingdom of heaven.

As followers of Jesus, we must also follow Him in compassion, not in condemnation. It is not those who are healthy who need a physician (i.e. those who perceive that they have no need), but those who are sick (i.e. those who perceive their true need). Our attitude toward those who are suffering under bondage to sin ought to be a heart of compassion. *"Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd"* (Matthew 9:36).

As followers of Jesus, we must also follow Him in service, not selfishness. Jesus came to call sinners, *"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke 19:10). Since Jesus sought out those in need, we must also. *"Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest"* (Matthew 9:37-38).

Matthew's story of his response to the call of Jesus is a wonderful example to us as we seek to serve our Lord with the gospel. Matthew brought Jesus and His disciples to his fellow tax collectors and sinners. He did so out of his faith in Christ and his concern for his associates. We have our own associates who are equally in need of meeting Jesus Christ. Our heart of compassion must move us to lead others to know Jesus.

Matthew's invitation was not limited to Jesus but also included His disciples. As we seek to serve others in their knowledge of Jesus, we also have the opportunity to involve the disciples of Jesus. Jesus works through His ambassadors to call sinners to Himself. We can help those who we know learn of Jesus by introducing them to our fellow believers in Christ. *"As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me"* (John 17:18-21).

The self-righteous Pharisees had no interest in eating with sinners. They were critical of Jesus for doing so. There is no lack of professing Christians who likewise have no interest in eating with those whom they consider to be unrighteous. Separation from the world's system in our pursuit of holiness has been confused with separation from the world's people in our pursuit of helping. By separating ourselves from sinners in need of salvation, we fail to follow Christ's command to go to the unsaved (Matthew 28:19).

Clearly, Jesus did not instruct His disciples to avoid sinners. Any concern that we may become unholy by our association with sinners misunderstands the means of sanctification. Those professing Christians who espouse external, self-righteous religion are far more dangerous to our Christian faith than those sinners who are distressed and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd.