

Lesson 10 – Reformation: The Willingness to Grow and Change

March 7, 2021

Background Passage: Matthew 9; Mark 2; Luke 5

Lesson Passage: Matthew 9:9-13 (NASB)

Background: Matthew was a dishonest tax collector driven by greed, until Jesus Christ chose him as a disciple. We first meet Matthew in Capernaum, in his tax booth on the main highway. He was collecting duties on imported goods brought by farmers, merchants, and caravans. Under the Roman Empire's system, Matthew would have paid all the taxes in advance, then collected from the citizens and travelers to reimburse himself. Tax collectors were notoriously corrupt because they extorted far and above what was owed, to ensure their personal profit. Because their decisions were enforced by Roman soldiers, no one dared object. On the same day Jesus invited Matthew to follow him, Matthew threw a great farewell feast in his home in Capernaum, inviting his friends so they could meet Jesus too. From that time on, instead of collecting tax money, Matthew collected souls for Christ. By surface appearances, it was scandalous and offensive for Jesus to pick a tax collector as one of His closest followers, since they were widely hated by the Jews. Matthew displayed one of the most radically changed lives in the Bible in response to an invitation from Jesus. He did not hesitate; he did not look back. He left behind a life of wealth and security for poverty and uncertainty. He abandoned the pleasures of this world for the promise of eternal life.

In the beginning of Matthew 9, Jesus heals and forgives a paralyzed man. A paralyzed man is healed and forgiven and the religious leaders act negatively to the healing. They call Jesus a “blasphemer”. Jesus hears the evil hearts of the scribes. He later asserts His authority over both sin and disease and at the man's healing, the crowd properly gave God the glory for this miracle. Jesus obviously did not draw attention to Himself by the manner in which the healing was done. Our Scripture in Matthew opens with Jesus' call of Matthew, the tax collector. First a leper, then a paralytic, and now a tax collector! If Jesus were running for public office, he ought to be more careful about the company He is keeping. But Jesus has a higher mission than popularity: “to proclaim freedom to the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and to heal the brokenhearted” (Luke 4:18), and the needy aren't always clean or respectable.

Introduction: He was called a “sell-out-- and that was being kind. He was hated with a passion that ran deep through society. Not only was he working for “the man”, there was little doubt that he was adding insult to injury by his own double dealing; but he also had the nerve to hold a banquet that is attended by others of his caliber. His house was full of scoundrels and outcasts of society. And to make the event more of a spectacle, the guest of honor was none other than Jesus the Christ. Levi-Matthew, a rich man, who by his profession, was considered the lowest of society, had recently become a disciple of Jesus. While most considered his life a closed book of shame, his heart had been open to the teachings of Jesus. A conviction of sin had pierced his heart and he readily accepted Jesus' invitation. It was at this feast at Matthew's house where the ever-present scribes and Pharisees began their insinuations against Jesus. “Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?” (Luke 5:30). Surely a man of His caliber would not be found in company as despicable as those who were now seated all around Him. Being in a state of denial and with closed minds, these religious leaders were clueless to their own need for the spiritual healing that Jesus freely offered to all.

Scripture Reference: Matthew 9:9-13 (NASB)

*9 As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He *said to him, “Follow Me!” And he got up and followed Him. 10 Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table*

in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Memory Verse: *As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He *said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him. (Matthew 9:9) NASB*

Topic Explored: *"The Willingness to Grow and Change"* This week as we talk about the *willingness* to grow and change, we must first pause long enough to ask ourselves if change is needed. Here is the inconvenient truth: we will never work on what we don't believe needs work. We will not seek a physician if we don't believe we're sick. This truth is just as true today as it was when spoken by Jesus in Palestine thousands of years ago. Like Matthew, who went on to become one of Christ's closest followers, by observing, we too can become changed. By beholding the love and compassion Jesus exhibited as He walked this earth as a man, we can begin to sense the changes needed in our own cold hearts. In place of our selfishness and self-centeredness we will long for a heart like God. Instead of living to make a name for ourselves we will live to make His name known in every way we can.

Lesson Explored: Matthew 9:9-13 (NASB)

Verse 9 ~ Mark 2:14 says that this man was also named Levi the son of Alphaeus. Matthew 10:3 mentions that there was another disciple who was a son of Alphaeus (James, often called James the Less to distinguish him from James the brother of John). So, it seems that both Matthew and his brother James were among the 12. Tax collectors were not only notorious sinners; they were also properly regarded as collaborators with the Romans against their fellow Jews. Nobody liked the man who sat at the tax office. The Jewish people rightly thought of them as traitors because they worked for the Roman government, and they had the force of Roman soldiers behind them to make people pay taxes. They considered them extortionists because they were allowed to keep whatever they over-collected. Therefore, there was a lot of incentive for tax collectors to over-charge and cheat any way they could. It was pure profit for them. *"He was at this time busy taking, but he was called to a work that was essentially giving."* (Spurgeon) Understanding how almost everyone hated tax collectors, it is remarkable to see how Jesus loved and called Matthew. It proved to be a well-placed love. Matthew responded to Jesus' invitation by leaving his tax collecting business and following Jesus - and eventually writing this same gospel account.

Verses 10-12 ~ The context suggests that this was a gathering of Matthew's friends and former business associates. We might say that Jesus took advantage of Matthew's decision to also reach those whom he knew. *"Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"* The answer to this question was simple: Because Jesus is the friend of sinners (Romans 5:8). Those who are well have no need of a physician. This was the principle that the criticizing Pharisees did not understand. The Pharisees were like doctors who wanted to avoid all contact with sick people. Of course, they wished that sick people would become healthy, but they wouldn't risk getting infected themselves. We are most fortunate that God calls sinners and not just saintly people. Jesus came to benefit those who understood their inherent need for Him (those who are sick and the poor in spirit of Matthew 5:3). Yet the proud who see no need for Jesus (those who are well) benefit nothing from Jesus.

Verse 13 ~ *"I desire mercy and not sacrifice"*. Here Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6. In Hosea's day, God's people were still good at bringing sacrifice (Hosea 5:6), but they had forsaken mercy, and they abandoned mercy because they gave up the knowledge of God and truth (Hosea 4:1). God would rather have right hearts, full of truth and mercy than sacrifice. I will have mercy, and not sacrifice - quoted from 1 Samuel 15:22. These are remarkable words. We may understand them as implying, 1) That God prefers an act of mercy, shown to the necessitous, to any act of religious worship to which the person might be called at that time. Both are good; but the former is the greater good, and should be done in preference to the other. 2) That the whole sacrificial system was intended only to point out the infinite mercy of God to fallen man in his redemption by the blood of the new covenant. 3) That we should not rest in the sacrifices, but look for the mercy and salvation prefigured by them. "Mercy" means benevolence or kindness toward others. "Sacrifices" were offerings made to God on account of sin, or as an expression of thanksgiving. They were commonly bloody offerings, or animals slain; signifying that the sinner offering them deserved to die himself, and pointing to the great sacrifice or offering which Christ was to make for the sins of the world. "Sacrifices" were the principal part of the worship of the Jews, and hence came to signify "external worship in general." This is the meaning of the word here. The sense in which our Savior applies it is this: *"You Pharisees are exceedingly tenacious of the "external" duties of religion; but God has declared that he prefers benevolence or mercy to those external duties. It is proper, therefore, that I should associate with sinners for the purpose of doing them good"*.

Life Applications/Let's Talk:

- **Who in our society would correspond to the rich outcasts like tax collectors were in Jesus' day?**
- **Why do we Christians feel so uncomfortable around blatant sinners? Why did Jesus succeed in making Himself so at home in their presence?**
- **In light of the lessons of this passage, what kinds of people around us should we be reaching out to?**

Application(s)

- Jesus loves you, whatever you've done. And calls you to follow him. Will you, like Levi, leave everything, get up, and follow him? If so, why not right now? He's waiting.
- All true obedience comes from the heart.

Closing Prayer: *"Lord Jesus, your love can span gulfs that no one else would even attempt. But you reach across to rescue us, and call us to our best alongside you. Thank you for your amazing graciousness. Help us not to cling to the rag-tag remnants of our former life, but to leave it behind, get up, and fall in step with you. In your powerful name, we pray. Amen"*