

THE MASTERY OF MATTHEW

Matthew 9:9-13

Mark 2:14-17

Luke 5:27-32

Scriptural information about the early life of Matthew is very scanty. About his family we know nothing except that he was the son of Alphaeus. Where Matthew was born we are not told, but he lived and worked in Capernaum. He was a Jew in religion and a publican by profession.

The Roman Empire had conquered the Jewish nation, and had asserted the privilege of the conqueror, not only making the conquered help to pay for the conquest, but also by forcing them to contribute to the cost of keeping themselves under the yoke. Needing money to support her conquering armies and her idle rich, the imperial power levied heavy taxes on her captives. The harder they worked the more taxes they had to pay.

Taxes were not imposed directly upon the conquered people by the Roman government. After the director of the imperial treasury had computed the total monetary needs of the government, the privilege of collecting the taxes in each province or district was awarded to the highest bidder. He was then allowed to use his own method of collecting the revenue. It was understood that his contract was fulfilled when the sum agreed upon was paid into the Roman treasury. All above that amount, which he could wring out of the unhappy people, he was allowed to put into his own savings.

This despised business depended upon the willingness of some renegade Jews to sell their services to the Roman conquerors. Publican was the name given to these employees of the Roman government whose duty it was to collect the tribute money. Any man who bought the lucrative office of publican by that act and at the same time sold his conscience, his companions and his country. He sold himself and all that was worth while for the opportunity of making money. He turned his back upon his people, his honor, his reputation and his religion for financial gain. The love of money caused him to sacrifice patriotism and principles, and to become the oppressor of his own countrymen. With the law in his own hands, a greedy and unscrupulous man found it easy to stifle his conscience, resort to the tricks of the trade and feather his own nest.

If a man had possessed much self-respect, or if he had cared much for public opinion, he would not have accepted the unpatriotic and ostracized position of publican and been despised by both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews despised and scorned him as a traitor, as well as feared and hated him because he was an extortioner. The Gentiles scorned him as a mere time-server who had sold himself for money. Everybody looked upon him as a despicable and contemptible renegade who received his income through extortion from an unwilling people. He had surrendered all claim to the respect of others. Not even the riches which he accumulated could win for a wretched publican that prestige which wealth often purchases. He was a social outcast. The religious leaders did not have either time or place for him. He was not permitted to worship in the synagogue. His gifts were not accepted there. Even leprous beggars refused to accept his money and spat upon it. These things accounted for the fact that "publicans and sinners" had become a term of loathing and disdain.

I. An Unpromising Case.

Among the successful bidders for the office of tax collector was Matthew. He must have paid a large sum for the position of tax collector in the choice location at Capernaum, which was on the main road from Damascus and the Far East to the Mediterranean Sea. Evidently, he confidently believed that his meticulous care

in collecting from the oppressed people would enable him to remake the substantial sum expended and far more.

Matthew was a lover of money. He rejoiced when he saw the shine of it. Sunrise gleam and sunset glow were not as beautiful to him as the light of shining gold and silver. He was delighted when he heard it clink and rattle. To him its rattle was sweeter music than the voices of singing women or the sounds from silver trumpets. Money warmed his palms strangely. To lose it was pain. To gain it was joy. Lovelier to him than the red of flaming poppy, than the blue of modest violet, and than the white of apple blossoms was the yellow of gold. What Matthew wanted most of all was money. What he loved most of all was money. What he worked for most of all was money. But, sad to say, He was unscrupulous as to how he got it.

Matthew was a successful money-maker. He had three qualities which enabled him to make money.

1. Sagacity.

Matthew had a shrewd judgment, a discriminating sense of values and the power to concentrate on his task. He did not do the foolish things that many money-makers do today. In these days many spend their health to get wealth, and then have to spend all of their wealth in an effort to regain their health. People do such foolish things in making money, in holding it, in investing it and in spending it.

2. Tenacity.

Matthew was on the job early and stayed late. He had the grit to stick. He dealt with Jews who were just as shrewd and calculating as he. From tight Jewish fists he squeezed many shekels. In dealing with many rebellious skinflints he got the best of the bargain. He had plenty of grit. He displayed gumption. He demonstrated that he was an expert at gouge.

3. Audacity.

In his business Matthew had to be bold because he was beset by social hatred. He had to fight every inch of the way. He dared the taunts and defied the bitterness of his fellow country-men. Even in the midst of hisses, he refused to retreat from his nefarious business. He met their maliciousness with masterful methods for making money. He was a master at his business. He was covetous but not cowardly.

II. An Unexpected Call.

Although the scriptures do not say so, it is quite likely that Matthew had heard Christ preach. If he had not heard Him, he had known of His fame. Certainly he had heard many things about His wonderful words and miraculous works.

One day the Lord Jesus went down to the toll booth where Matthew was at his post of duty. With a keenness far beyond that of microscopic scrutiny, the Master delightedly looked upon him whom the people despised. Aware of Matthew's sinfulness, need of forgiveness and possibilities in God's service, out of His great heart of love and longing for his salvation, Christ uttered a straight-forward and personal call to him, "Follow Me."

The way in which the Master spoke those two words, "Follow Me," and the look of love in His eyes caused Matthew to know that he should heed the call of the Saviour at once. Christ was not calling Matthew to follow Him on one short trip, but He was calling him to salvation, to intimate friendship, to holy fellowship and to sacred employment. That call involved the sacrifice of a lucrative post, the surrender of his ill-gotten gains, and the forsaking of his worldly interests and his former manner of life.

As one sees the oak in an acorn, the river in the rill, a conflagration in a match, a statue in cold marble, a diamond in charcoal and a tree in a sprout, so Christ saw tremendous possibilities in Matthew. To him our Lord said, "Follow Me." He never used any persuasion. He did not make any promise. He did not offer any inducement.

Our Lord knew full well all the weaknesses and sins of Matthew. He also saw infinite possibilities in him and coveted them in His service. He wants the superb talents as well as the slender endowments, and will use them in the furtherance of His cause.

III. An Unmistakable Conversion.

It was not at all easy for Matthew to answer the call of Christ, regardless of the charm of the Master for men. Nevertheless, when he heard the call of the Christ and felt the impact of the Lord's personality upon his soul, the flood of pent-up feelings broke loose and carried everything before it. Instantly, unhesitatingly and resolutely, without asking a single question, Matthew answered the sudden, clear, definite and effectual call of Christ, and stepped out of his bondage into liberty, peace and joy as he came into possession of eternal life. When he left behind him the stains of his sins, Matthew was gloriously saved and started to follow Christ. In my imagination, I can see the expression of great joy in his face and I can hear his sigh of relief as he left that place where he had been engaged in that sordid business. That hour of his conversion was the greatest that he had ever known. Because Christ had lifted him from a pit of sin and shame, he might have said in the words of another:

"From sinking sand He lifted me,
With tender hand He lifted me,
From shades of night to plains of light,
O praise His name, He lifted me!"

IV. An Unquestioned Consecration.

Because Christ had come into his life, saved him, transformed him and done so many wonderful things for him, Matthew wanted to express his genuine gratitude to Him. This he began to do by committing all of his talents and abilities to the Lord for use in His service. Matthew dedicated his pen to the Master and with it later wrote the gospel which bears his name.

So great was Matthew's joy and so real was his sense of obligation that he sought an occasion to make Christ known to his old friends. Instead of a feeling of regret at leaving his paying business, and acting as if he were making a great sacrifice for Christ, Matthew was anxious to honor Him, so he invited his Saviour to his home and gave a banquet in His honor.

To this feast Matthew also invited his former associates and friends. His purpose in doing this was to give outward expression of the inward change in his life, and to introduce them to the Saviour. He sincerely hoped that they too would put their trust in Him, be saved by Him and live for Him. He was anxious for his comrades and friends to share the joy which he had found in the Lord.

Christ cheerfully accepted Matthew's gracious invitation and was present at the feast which was given in His honor. He never looked down on Matthew or his guests, or on others for that matter, for that sort of thing was foreign to His spirit and practice. He did not eat with publicans and sinners because He approved their manner of life, but because He wanted to save, to transform, to elevate and to bless them. He had come to call sinners to repentance and to give them life eternal. To this good hour He has continued that sort of ministry.

Christ so mastered Matthew that his eyes saw the gold of the sunset was much fairer than the gold of money. He so mastered his feet that he walked in the ways of the Lord. He so mastered his hands that he wrote the gospel which bears his name. He so mastered his heart that he "broke down every idol, and cast out every for." With the song writer centuries later he could have sung:

"In loving-kindness Jesus came:
My soul in mercy to reclaim,
And from the depths of sin and shame
Through grace He lifted me."