

THE CALL OF MATTHEW

"And after these things He went forth, and saw a publican, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom, and He said unto him, Follow Me. And he left all, rose up and followed Him. And Levi made Him a great feast in his own house, and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them." Luke 5:27-29.

Any reader of the four Gospels is impressed by the fact that personal history occupies a large place in each of them. The wisdom of this is apparent when we remember that there is no better way to exploit the essential truths of the gospel than to show their effect upon a single human life, and perhaps there is no better way of presenting the gospel of Christ in order to win men to a saving knowledge of Him than by telling what the Saviour did for one who put his trust in Him.

God's Word has a marvelous way of summarizing a whole life in a single sentence. The Biblical biographies of many prominent people are strikingly and extraordinarily brief. Such is the one of Matthew, which our text records in a few simple and plain words.

I. His Character.

1. Matthew was a publican.

When Matthew was recording the names of the apostles he called himself a publican. This title was the name given to an employee of low degree, whose duty it was to collect the tribute money. Rome had conquered the Jewish nation, and she had asserted the privileges of the conqueror, not only making the vanquished help to pay for the conquest, but also to contribute to the cost of keeping themselves under the yoke. So taxes were levied upon Palestine by the imperial power, and Matthew was one of those who had secured a position in the civil service. These officials were not appointed directly by the government, neither were the rates which were levied definitely fixed. The business of collecting revenue was let to the highest bidder, who was then allowed to use his own method of collecting the money. It was considered that his duty was done if he paid a sufficient lump sum into the Roman exchequer, and all above that amount which he received from the populace he was allowed to put in his own pockets. This system immediately opened up magnificent opportunities for graft.

The effective organization of this despised tax-gathering business depended upon the willingness of the native-born ones to sell their services to the Roman conquerors for a price, to swallow their pride, and to lend their knowledge and skill toward carrying out the demands of the Roman Empire. So, you can readily see that no Jew could become a publican without surrendering every claim to moral integrity. No man could stay at that shameful business very long without having the taunts and hatred of his former friends and neighbors. Also, it was impossible for him to make any friends among the Romans by whom he was regarded as merely a useful tool; and he made nothing but enemies among his own people who despised and scorned him as a traitor while they hated and feared him as an extortioner. Every bit of money paid to Rome by the Jewish patriots was a sign and symbol of Israel's shame for the Jews regarded it a fundamental principle of their religion that they should not pay any money except to the Temple and to the Priests.

Matthew was found in this unpatriotic and ostracized position in Capernaum. As a part of this iniquitous organization he had yielded all right to the respect of decent society. He had become an outcast. He had forfeited the respect of honest men because he had become a dishonest, merciless, inhuman rogue. No widow has as much right to hate a man who, for a small mortgage which she is unable to

pay, will take the roof from over her head and take bread from the mouths of her children, as the Jews had to despise Matthew, who, for what money he could get out of it, made life's road rough for many of his own people. While he was fond of his business, all patriotic Jews despised it and even the heathen detested it. His profession was an exceedingly disreputable one. Matthew and all of the rest of the publicans were feared, despised, and hated because they were hard-hearted, extortionate, and utterly demoralized men.

2. Matthew was a lover of money.

He rejoiced when he saw the shine of money. Sunrise gleam and sunset glow were not as beautiful to him as the light of shining gold and silver. He loved to hear it clink and rattle. To him its rattle was sweeter music than the voices of singing women or the sounds from silver trumpets. Matthew just had to get money, with clean hands if he could get it that way, but if not, then he would get it with unclean hands. 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 the modest violet, and than the white of apple blossoms, was the yellow of gold. What he wanted most of all was money. What he loved most of all was money. What he worked for most of all was money. And he was unscrupulous as to how he got it.

3. Matthew was a successful money-maker.

Matthew had what it takes to make money. It seems that he had three qualities which made him a successful money-maker.

(1) Sagacity.

Matthew had a shrewd judgment, a discriminating sense of the value of money, and the power to concentrate on his task. He was not a fool by any means. He did not do the things which many money-makers do foolishly today. Now, some people spend their health to get wealth, and then have to spend all of their wealth in an effort to recover their health. Some men do some foolish things in making money, in investing money, in holding on to money, and in spending money.

(2) Tenacity.

Matthew kept at his business. He was on the job early. He stayed on the job late. He had the grit to stick. He met Jews who were as shrewd as he. From reluctant fingers he got more than was his due. From tight fists he squeezed many Jewish shekels. He got the best of the bargain in dealing with many rebellious skinflints. He had grit. He manifested gumption. He demonstrated that he was an expert at gouge. He had a large supply of all three--grit, gumption, and gouge.

(3) Audacity.

Matthew had to be a bold man in his business 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 knew nothing of retreat from his nefarious business. He turned deaf ears to their hisses, and made more strenuous efforts to loosen their purse strings. He met their maliciousness with masterful methods for making money. Instead of being a weakling, he was a master at his business. He was covetous but not cowardly. He was despised, but he was not a dupe. He was wicked, but he was not weak. He was stoical, but successful. He was malicious in money matters.

II. His Conversion.

For some time the Lord Jesus had been making His home in Capernaum. There He was well-known. Luke tells us, "Great multitudes came together to hear, and to be

healed by Him of their infirmities." It is quite probable that Matthew had heard Christ preach and teach. If so, he could not have banished the tones of His voice or the tender look of that face when he returned to his home. If he had not heard Christ personally, certainly he had heard of His fame which had spread throughout the city.

One morning the Lord Jesus left the house where He had been staying and started down through the town toward the shore of the lake. As He passed through the official quarter, He saw Matthew at his post at the receipt of custom. With a keenness far beyond that of microscopic scrutiny, the Master delightedly looked upon him whom the people despised. Christ recognized his gifts and coveted them for Himself and for the kingdom of God. He loved him, whom others despised.

Christ Jesus, who sees the man in the profligate, the son in the prodigal, the woman in the harlot, the chance for sonship in every wreck and waif of earth, saw Matthew the publican who was to become the author of His Gospel. 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 these great possibilities in Matthew. So, passing by where Matthew was busy with his cruel extortion and money-grabbing, He simply said: "Follow Me." In other words, "Transfer your business ability to Me and to My work. Put your courage on My side. Put your splendid independence to work for Me. Make your majestic will obedient to My will. Favor Me with your faculties of imagination. Turn over to Me your tenacity. Transfer your vision, your common sense, and your discrimination to My side." That was included in His appeal, "Follow Me." Yet, Christ did nothing but simply bid Matthew to follow Him. He never used any persuasion. He made no promise. He did not offer any inducement. But, there was not any hesitation on the part of the publican.

Our Lord knew exactly what was in Matthew, all his weaknesses and sins. And He also saw infinite possibilities in him, whom others had given up in despair. This incident shows us that Christ is on the lookout for big, high-talented men and women. He looks for those of disciplined gifts and powers of mighty achievement. Surely Christ will glorify the meager gift, but He certainly will not ignore the larger one. He wants the superb gifts as well as the slender endowments. He covets all of our gifts for His cause.

When Christ called Matthew to follow Him, and Matthew felt the impact of the Lord's personality upon his soul, the flood of pentup feelings at last broke loose, carrying everything before it. It was not at all easy for Matthew to answer the call of Christ, regardless of the charm of the Master for men. Matthew had no other means of livelihood, so far as we know. Jesus Christ was an itinerant teacher with no income. So far as money was concerned, He had nothing to offer him. For Matthew to follow Him meant to surrender the comfort and certainty of his worldly calling for the uncertainty of the Christian ministry as carried on by the Master Himself. Without a moment's hesitation, Matthew arose, left all, forsook his business, and literally followed Christ. He counted the cost, but he left all and followed Christ. In doing so he began a new life. He stepped out of his toll-booth of bondage into liberty, peace, and joy. We can almost see the look of great joy in his face, and hear the sigh of relief as he left the toll-booth and the sordid business in which he had been engaged. For him it was the birth hour of delight, joy and hope. It was the greatest hour that he had ever known. As an expression of his gratitude for the Master's call, and as an evidence of his conversion, Matthew changed his occupation, made sacrifices, identified himself with Christ, and had a genuine concern for his fellowmen.

III. His Consecration.

1. Matthew gave Christ the place of honor in his home.

When the Saviour suddenly commanded Matthew to follow Him, He used the present imperative, which is linear action and means to keep on following. He rose up

(aorist tense--point action) then and there and he followed (imperfect tense--kept on following) Him. Matthew was not a quitter. His first means of showing gratitude to the Saviour for his wonderful deliverance from that hateful bondage was in preparing a great feast for Him. He invited Christ to his home and gave Him the place of honor in it. In many homes today Jesus has no place. The praying Jesus would not be at home in them, because they never have any prayer. In some homes there is no conversation about the Lord and His church, so He would not be comfortable in them. Would Christ feel at home in your home? When Matthew invited Christ to his home, He accepted the invitation. He wanted an opportunity to help him and encourage him.

2. Matthew introduced Christ to his friends.

When Christ called Matthew and made him a clean, honest, upright, happy, self-respecting, God-honoring, Christ-loving man, so vital and so real was that experience that he began to tell others about his Saviour. So real was his sense of obligation, and so deep his joy, that he sought occasion to make Christ known to his friends. He decided that the best thing that he could do for his friends, whom he knew were as unhappy as he had been, and would be just as happy as he was if they were done forever with that shameful and degrading business, was to have a dinner and to invite them over to his house to meet Christ. He wanted them to see and to know what had come into his life by the miracle of regeneration. He wanted them to meet and to know Him Who can give men power to hate what they once loved and to love what they once hated.

The scribes and the Pharisees noticed the big crowd at the house of Matthew. They were not invited themselves, and they would not have accepted the invitation had they received one. But they did not hesitate to stand outside the house and make remarks about the conduct of Christ in eating with publicans and sinners. This pointed criticism in public was embarrassing to Matthew who had given the feast. He was getting his first experience of that public criticism that every preacher must endure who does anything worthwhile. The preacher has to learn how to take criticism, profit by some of it, throw off most of it, and go on with the work in spite of "They say."

3. Matthew enthroned Christ as Lord of his life.

Matthew's mind was mastered. His thoughts were different. His money-madness was mastered. When Christ called him he was money-mad, for the one thing uppermost in his mind was the making of money regardless of the means used. After that day he lost his love for money in the love of the Master. He learned what a fool a man was to get his money at the cost of those things which money cannot buy and which make life worth living, namely, character, honor, and friendship. From Christ he learned that the love of money can dry up the tenderest sentiments, break down the highest moral standards, stifle the noblest impulses, deteriorate the purest faith, and warp the fairest judgments.

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 foe." And he could truly sing:

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