
The Lord Calls Traitors and Hypocrites

...as follows in Jesus' name:

As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed Him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when He heard it, He said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (ESV)

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; **sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth.** Amen.* (John 17:17)

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

People loved by God, who graciously comes to call sinners of all kinds to repentance,

Today, we are observing another saint's day, which affords us the opportunity to learn and meditate upon God's grace and mercy to St. Matthew in this life, as well as many others in Jesus' life as well.

...

Like all of the apostles, we don't really know anything about St. Matthew's younger years.

We don't know if he was a good Jewish boy who went to synagogue with his parents every Sabbath, or if his parents absented themselves (and him) so that he grew up with minimal spiritual care.

But then again, we can tell that he was an educated man, not just in numbers (think of the tax records), but also in letters, since he wrote this first account of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

(The Gospel according to St. Matthew).

And not only did his education help him write it – by inspiration of the Holy Spirit –

but his knowledge of the OT and Judaism shines through in this Gospel written to his fellow Jews.

Because of the accounts of Sts. Mark and Luke, we know he was previously called Levi, a Israelite name.

But what led him into the tax collecting profession? Why would he take this particular occupation on?

Did you notice the Pharisees ranked tax collectors right along with the general label of "sinners"?

Because they collected taxes for their hated Roman occupiers (and exorbitantly so, at times),

they were viewed as traitors, & rated among the immoral, the cheats, the drunkards, the godless & pagans.

So was Levi a devout Jew, who disregarded the social taboos,

recognizing that tax collecting could be an honest profession,

and that it might be good to have devout, honest Jews in such a role?

Or did he like money, and he had already been cast out of accepted Jewish society for some reason,

and knew tax collecting could be a lucrative business?

Again, we don't know, and neither is it really important.

The fact remains that the Lord saw him at the booth, told him to "**Follow Me,**"

and leaving everything (which might have been a considerable wealth in the eyes of this world,

he rose and followed Him. Luke 5:28

Yet "What he left behind was so little compared with all he received in return." Ylvisaker p. 196

...

What a joyous occasion this was for Matthew.

We know this was because St. Luke reports that he didn't just invite Jesus to a meal at his house,

but **Levi made [Jesus] a great feast.** Luke 5:29

And as Jesus and his other disciples reclined at table,
they were joined by Levi's co-workers, **a large company of tax collectors and** ^{Luke 5:29} **... sinners.**
Already, immediately, St. Matthew has entered into the work of a disciple and apostle,
as he invites those he knows to come and meet Jesus, his new rabbi (teacher), the Christ.

Now what do suppose Jesus was doing at that feast, given in His honor?

Was He there to carouse with the tax collectors and sinners? To revel in their style of revelry?
Or do you suppose that He was there to rejoice with Matthew and to call the coworkers to repentance?
Notice how Jesus has table fellowship with these outcast souls;

He eats with them just as easily as He shares a meal with Pharisees and scribes.

He does not keep them at arms length but allows them to come into His presence.

He breaks bread and partakes with them, not to be brought down, but to bring them up.

What a difference this was for the tax collectors and sinners in the spiritual life of Judaism!
And what joy there must have been for Matthew to see Jesus at work among his former associates.

...

And yet, there came a little rain on St. Matthew's parade when the Pharisees saw what was happening.

They were quick to judge, and slow to understand... or even resistant to discerning the truth.

So they ask Jesus' disciples – likely wanting to sow seeds of doubt in their minds, rather than curiosity –

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

They were intimating the question: Does this sound like respectable, godly, or wise behavior to you?

Yet Jesus has no time for this line of questioning, nor for judgmental, self-righteous assertions.

He does not let His disciples wrestle with the question, but He answers for Himself straight away,
and in the process, puts the self-righteous Pharisees in their place – along with the other "sinners."

Jesus' first and last lines share much the same idea,

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ...

For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

What challenging words!

In a healthy mind, these words would require you to put away any feelings of self-security
and to examine yourself: Are you sick or healthy?

Would you consider yourself to be a "sinner" or righteous?

Now, for Christians, we know we need Jesus, the Great Physician.

And, as we go through the liturgy each week, we do, indeed, confess our sins and our Savior,
and we hear and receive the absolution, the declaration of forgiveness, as from God Himself.

But as can happen with things that occur so regularly, it can become something done mechanically,
that is, from rote and without much thought or self-examination.

I wonder if this is where we would have found the Pharisees in our text.

It's unlikely that any of them would have said, "I am perfect,"

(as Jesus' challenge to the men who wanted to stone the adulterous woman in John 8 demonstrated),
but there was definitely a feeling of "better (more righteous) than thou" going around.

They may not have struggled with the same temptations, nor fallen so publicly into *other shameful sin & vice*,
but wasn't their pride just as sinful?

And pride is a dangerous sin because it allows us to justify ourselves, our lovelessness toward others.

And this is what we see Jesus hit upon as He answers the Pharisees, again challenging them,
"Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'"

This would have been a stinging reprimand for the Pharisees.

They would have known the passage from Hosea 6:6 well,
and could have even told you that the context around that passage
was the Lord's reproaching of the Jews for their hypocrisy.

Listen: **Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away....**

**For I desire steadfast love [translated as, mercy] and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.**

Yes, they regularly offered the sacrifices for their sins,
but then they returned all the same to their self-justified, proud, wavering, conditional type of love.

...

I wonder if the Pharisees are the only ones that fall into this cycle. ...

or if the desire to proudly separate ourselves from others is also something that runs in our veins.

We see it so clearly in society, this "us" versus "them" mentality, & it tends to bleed into our own lives.

Now, to be sure, there are distinctions to be made. | Don't misunderstand me.

Not everyone's ideas are going to promote the safety and welfare of our society and country.

Not everyone is going to act in the best interest of other people, especially if it means self-sacrifice.

Not everyone is going to uphold moral conduct that builds up and strengthens a society.

So we need to be wise and make discerning distinctions.

But the temptation is to think of those who disagree with you as your enemy.

Because if they are your enemy, then you are self-justified in hating them, or at least not loving them.

But as we heard last week, that is not a thing that Jesus Himself ever taught.

Remember, as St. Paul taught us, **we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,**

**but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness,
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.** Ephesians 6:12

The people that disagree with you... the people that hate you... the people that rejoice at murder,
are no worse, nor better, than the ones that are gleeful when someone gets fired, even if you think justly so.

Do not fall into the trap of the Pharisees, labeling people in your own mind

and ostracizing them as "**sinners**", as if that were a special, lower, class of people than your people.

Jesus did not come to suffer for Jews or Gentiles.

He was not crucified for Democrats, Republicans, or Independents.

He was not forsaken for Pharisees or tax collectors.

He did not bleed for those who go to church or those who don't.

Jesus died for sinners... He died for you... and for me... and for "them."

and He comes, even now, to call sinners to repentance...

to confess your pride and your fickleness in showing love and mercy.

He comes, even now, to absolve sinners;

to cleanse you from all unrighteousness, and to declare you forgiven and holy.

He comes as the Great Physician to heal each sinner of your guilt and shame, your hurt and pain.

He comes to strengthen you against the assaults of **the cosmic powers over this present darkness**

and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, who are your real enemies.

And He comes to bless you with His humility and **steadfast love** (or **mercy** as its translated here), just as He did with His disciple, apostle, and evangelist St. Matthew.

Jesus humility and steadfast love do not mean that you are to be weak. Jesus Himself was not weak.

Nor does not mean that you are to accept, condone, or even bless sin;

just as Jesus clearly spoke against it and called sinners to repentance.

But like faithful St. Matthew, the associate of **tax collectors** and friend of **“sinners”**

and an evangelist who faithfully recorded Jesus’ own interactions with them,

you can, with concern and with steadfast, unwavering, and patient love, speak to their sin

and show them the Savior who calls them to repentance and to life

through His suffering, death, and resurrection for them.

...

But how does Jesus strengthen you for this today?

The Great Physician has this wonderful medicine that He has left His Church.

Ignatius of Antioch in his
letter to Ephesians

One of the Church fathers famously called it the *“medicine for immortality”*

and we recognize that in Christ’s own body and blood, He gives us not only forgiveness of sins,

but also spiritual and eternal life and salvation.

...And notice how the Church has recognized the blessings we receive from the Lord’s Supper

as we are taught to pray in the Collect of Thanksgiving,

that *of His mercy* (His steadfast love) *that He would strengthen us through them* (that is, His body & blood),

in faith toward Him AND in fervent (that is, steadfast) *love toward one another.*

So our Lord and Savior continues to break bread with sinners,

not to be brought down, but to bring us up.

Thanks be to God.

In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria