

Jesus said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” That sums up what we see in His call of St. Matthew, and in His call of every Christian. As we consider this account, and the example of the man who would later be used by the Holy Spirit to write the first gospel, we today are given both instruction and comfort.

So who was this man, this “Matthew”? We know that he also went by “Levi,” as that is the name used in this event as described by Mark and Luke. We might also speculate that his brother was James the Lesser, another of Jesus’ apostles, as they are both described as the son of Alphaeus.

But the main point that’s made in our text, written by Matthew himself, is that he was a tax collector. You may remember a thing or two about tax collectors from other places in the gospels. They collected taxes specifically for the Roman government. The Jews hated the Romans, hated being under their rule, and therefore also hated those who worked for Rome.

Tax collectors, in turn, often overcharged those who were required to stop in at their tax booths. An ordinary person from Judea or Galilee probably lacked thorough knowledge of Roman tax law – complicated tax laws are nothing new under the sun – and even if they did, the court of appeal, the customer service representatives, were the Roman soldiers guarding the tax collector. They knew that taxes paid their wages, and that Jews hated them for being Roman soldiers, so they were certainly less than sympathetic.

Matthew, then, would’ve been despised in his community. Those living in his city would’ve seen him as a traitor and a thief. He would’ve been shunned, avoided by others. The only company Matthew would’ve kept would likely have been other tax collectors, as well as others shunned by society for their sins. If you could’ve polled those in Capernaum about those most likely to be a devout follower of the Messiah, Matthew probably would’ve finished near the bottom of the list.

There’s one man, though, who knew differently, who knew better. And that man just happened to be the Messiah Himself, Jesus. Thus we read, “As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’” Jesus, who knows the hearts and minds of all men, passes by this tax booth, perhaps having done so many times before, and calls out to the tax collector sitting there: “Follow me.”

This was an incredible thing, scandalous, even, for some. Jesus is an up-and-coming Rabbi, a powerful preacher, a worker of great miracles. And this is still early on in His ministry when He’s rather popular. Why on earth then would Jesus call this guy? Doesn’t He know how hated Matthew is by the rest of the city, by the rest of the people? Won’t it interfere with Jesus’ ministry to associate with such people? This is obviously where the Pharisees come down. To hang around tax collectors and sinners, to eat with them, it just isn’t done!

But Jesus knows better. Jesus knows Matthew. And what Jesus knows might make the Pharisees detest Matthew even more! Why do I say that? Jesus knows the heart. He can see into the soul. He knows the true extent of Matthew's sin, his spiritual sickness. He knows not only Matthew's outward words and deeds, but even the thoughts of his heart.

He knows what went through Matthew's head when he overheard his fellow Jews say terrible things about him. And He knows Matthew's thoughts as well when Matthew overcharged those fellow Jews to get even. Jesus knows the extent of Matthew's sin, and still, He calls him, for as He said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

As equally amazing as Jesus calling Matthew is the change that the Holy Spirit worked in Matthew's heart upon hearing that call. After hearing those words, two little words, Matthew gets up and follows Jesus. Why does he do this? What goes through his head at this point?

Jesus' words aren't a magic spell; He doesn't hypnotize Matthew here. Nor does Jesus seem to offer anything in the way of worldly benefits – there's no mention of a starting salary or Jesus offering a competitive benefits package.

No, it's purely the words of Jesus, which provoke thought, repentance, and even faith in Matthew, leading him following Christ. As a tax collector, Matthew would've been good at counting costs. He would've known what it would cost him to walk away from his tax booth, his career. Here Matthew is staking everything on Jesus, as his boss isn't going to take him back, nor will any other tax collecting group. And all the Jews will still see him as a traitor getting his just punishment. If following Jesus doesn't work out, Matthew's got no plan B.

Yet by the Holy Spirit's working in the words of Jesus, Matthew has also realized that he is sick, and with a disease that no earthly physician could heal. Matthew comes to understand that there are problems that his tax collection money can't solve. What are these?

Matthew would realize that love is something that can't be purchased with money. Being on the receiving end of his countrymen's hatred, and likely feeling hatred for them in turn, Matthew would see that the things of this world can't restore that bond between men, or give true or lasting love. He would feel that pit in his soul, a hole he may have tried to fill with all sorts of things – money, pleasure, possessions – but that could never be filled.

Matthew also would realize that he could have all the tax money in the world but that still couldn't keep him from dying. Death was much more a part of daily life in the first century A.D., and Matthew would've realized that one day it would be him being put in a tomb, rotting away into bones, while his soul went to Sheol to face judgment for all that he had done. The Spirit led Matthew to realize that he was sick in both body and soul, and that he needed a physician who could cure both.

The Spirit then led him to believe that that physician was Jesus. As a resident of Capernaum, Matthew almost certainly would've heard of Jesus' many miracles: restoring bodies suffering with all manner of disease, driving demons out of the afflicted by a mere word, calming storms by his command.

And perhaps Matthew had heard some of Jesus' preaching, his words calling for people to repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, or his teaching from the mountain on who is truly blessed, or the comforting words that the God of heaven cares for even the birds and the flowers, much more so those made in His image.

He may have even heard that Jesus forgave a man's sins – something only God had the power to do – before healing the man of paralysis – also through the power of God. Matthew was sick and sinful, but Jesus was there to heal and to make righteous.

And so, when Jesus tells him, "Follow me," Matthew gets up from his tax booth and follows. Did all these thoughts rush through his head in that moment? Had he been stewing on them for a while? The Bible doesn't say. It says simply that Matthew followed Jesus.

Matthew certainly couldn't have imagined where Jesus would lead him, though Jesus, looking at the man in the tax booth, already knew. Matthew would be an incredible example of what the power of God does in transforming repentant sinners into those bearing the righteousness of God.

This former tax collector would go on to be one of the Twelve Apostles, those men through whom Jesus would work to spread the faith once He ascended into heaven. Matthew would also go on to write one of the four gospels, the Holy Spirit guiding his thoughts and reflections so that the end product was divine, not human. Matthew's gospel is also noteworthy in that it seems to be written toward a primarily Jewish audience, with its many mentions of fulfilled prophecy, its concerns with who is the Son of Abraham, the Son of David. The man who had taken the people's money, being despised by them and likely despising them in return, now in love gives to them the words of eternal life, that they might be led to repent of their sins and receive the healing that Jesus delights to give to them.

According to tradition, Matthew spent time preaching to his countrymen in Judea before heading to Ethiopia, where he was martyred. He had followed his Lord in proclaiming His word and finally receiving from Him the glorious crown of life in heaven.

So how does the account of Saint Matthew connect to us today? Like Matthew, each of us are called by the Lord, who speaks through His word, saying, "Follow me." At some point in our lives, perhaps at our Baptism, perhaps through reading or hearing the word, Jesus says, "Follow me." He knows that we are sinful, sick people, better than we know ourselves. And He calls us all the same.

In that call, He convicts us of our sins, shows us that we are sinners, not righteous, that we are sick, not healthy. And at the same time, He leads us to trust in Him, that He is the one to make us whole, to wipe away our sins through His blood.

Throughout our lives, Christ continues to call to us, "Follow me," for the Christian life is just that, a life. It isn't a decision or moment in time, but a path in which one walks, following the Savior. Day by day, our Lord calls us to walk in His footsteps, to put away our idols, to repent of our sins, to seek the treasures of heaven, not earth. As He calls, He also strengthens us to do it.

Like Matthew, we don't know where our Lord will lead us. We don't know how long our path is on this earth before He calls us to heaven. We don't know how He will use us to bring about His good and gracious will. Maybe you'll be used to reach thousands of people. Maybe your example of faithfulness in just a small circle of friends will bear eternal fruit. You don't know. I don't know. But Jesus, the God who calls you to follow Him, knows.

Confess your sins to Him, and let Him give you His righteousness. Acknowledge the sickness of your soul, and let the Great Physician heal it as only He can. For you, like Saint Matthew, have been called by Him.

In the name of Jesus, amen.