

Matthew 9:9-13

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Jesus calls Matthew, a despised tax collector, to follow Him. Matthew does. Later Jesus is reclining at a table in Matthew's home with other tax collectors and sinners, when the Pharisees ask Jesus's disciples why their master associates with vile people. Jesus responds to them with a parable about how physicians spend their time with those who are sick rather than those who are healthy. He challenges them by quoting Hosea 6.

The parallel accounts of this event are found in Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-32.

After *His* spectacular healing of the paralytic and *His* victorious confrontation with the unbelieving scribes, *Matthew* tells us that *Jesus went on from there. As He did, He saw a man called Matthew. Matthew* is the writer of this gospel narrative. *He* was part of Jesus's inner group of "twelve disciples." In this passage *Matthew* shares the moment *he* began to follow Jesus.

Matthew was sitting in the tax collector's booth, as Jesus walked by. Judea, as a Roman province, was under the protection of Rome and enjoyed privileges such as economic trade and relatively safe passage throughout Rome's vast empire. It was even granted access to Roman luxuries and goods. But the privileges of the "Pax Romana" (peace of Rome) came with a price. The Jews had to endure the humiliation of being ruled by despised Gentiles. They had to tolerate their offensive pagan worship and practices which threatened to undermine the Jewish way of life. The Jews also had to submit to Roman laws and customs. This included paying taxes to Rome, a practice that was particularly unpopular.

Rome would hire locals to collect taxes for its Imperial budget. It had the potential to be a lucrative office for the one who held it. *Tax collectors* had the power to determine what people owed the empire, and there were no fair courts to appeal any discrepancies. *Tax collectors* were expected to over-collect and retain a commission to serve as their pay. However, they were notorious for overcharging beyond what was expected. They taxed their neighbors at unbelievably high rates, keeping the excess for themselves. The story in Luke 19 where Jesus engaged the tax collector Zacchaeus infers all these elements.

Zacchaeus was "rich" from his tax collecting (Luke 19:2). Zacchaeus stated to Jesus that he would "pay back four times" anyone who he had defrauded. For their abuse, tax collectors were despised throughout the empire. But in Judea, tax collectors were even more hated because they were seen as traitors to God, the nation, and to their fellow countrymen.

Matthew was one of the despised *tax* collectors. He belonged to this ilk of those considered to be sinners and traitors. But *when Jesus saw Matthew, sitting at the tax collector's booth* (an evil seat in the eyes of other Jews) *Jesus* called out to him, "Follow Me!" This was similar to what *Jesus* told Andrew and Peter when *He* called them to be *His* disciples (Matthew 4:19). *Matthew* then got up and followed Jesus.

This probably means that all the events up to this point in Matthew's account were assembled by Matthew from others, rather than being accounts from Matthew as an eye witness. However, over a three year period it is likely that Jesus would have voiced the same teachings many times, so Matthew probably heard His sayings sufficiently to have had first-hand knowledge. Perhaps the accounting skill that made Matthew an able tax collector gave him the aptitude to record Jesus' ministry. Matthew might have gained insight from the events prior to chapter 9 to get "caught up" with the rest of the disciples.

After being called, it appears Matthew threw a party celebrating his new career of following *Jesus*. He invited his tax collector friends to this party. As a *tax collector* for the Romans, *Matthew* presumably had a poor reputation among Jews. Matthew's friends would naturally have been other *tax collectors*, as well as whatever sinful company they kept. *Jesus was reclining at the table in the house* (most likely Matthew's house) with these people. Dining tables in wealthy houses were surrounded by cushions and pillows and elevated surfaces just off the floor. This allowed for those gathering around *the table* to rest and recline *as* they enjoyed their meal and conversation.

As Jesus was reclining at the table, *Matthew* tells us that *many other tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples*. *Tax collectors* would be presumed *sinners* by the religious establishment. *This* was too scandalous for *the Pharisees*, who were highly respected leaders, defenders of the Jewish faith, and teachers of the local synagogues.

When the Pharisees saw this, they expressed their disapproval *to His disciples*. *Matthew* does not tell us why *they said* what they did *to the disciples* instead of directly *to Jesus*. Perhaps they wanted to avoid a similar embarrassment that the unbelieving scribes had recently received. Or maybe they thought it more effective to undermine *Jesus* by sowing doubt and projecting shame among *His disciples* instead of confronting *Him* outright. *The disciples* might have been having second thoughts about the effect on their own reputation from letting a *tax collector* join their ranks.

Or *Jesus* was simply inside with the *tax collectors* while *the disciples* remained outside. *The Pharisees* asked *the disciples*, *Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?* The unmistakable implication was, "If *your Teacher* were holy and righteous, He would not be publicly associating with such vile people." And if we stretch this implication a bit further, *the Pharisees* might have added, "*Your Teacher* should associate with us."

When Jesus heard what *the Pharisees* were saying *to His disciples* about *Him*, He responded with a short parable. *It is not those who are healthy who need a physician*, He said, *but those who are sick*. Physicians offer treatment for the purpose of bodily healing. In most cases it is *those who are sick* who seek the help of medical doctors. *Those who are healthy* do not need a *physician* or medicine.

The parable has multiple levels of interpretation and meaning.

On its most basic level, *Jesus* is like a spiritual *physician* who heals wicked hearts, corrupt minds, and lives ravaged by the disease of sin. *Those who are sick* are the spiritually unhealthy

tax collectors and sinners. Their sin is plain to see. They are *those with* whom *Jesus was reclining at Matthew's table.* They are *those who* are clearly in need of Jesus's spiritual help.

The Pharisees would believe they *are healthy.* So Jesus' argument is quite logical—"I am with people you acknowledge need spiritual healing because I am a spiritual *physician.*" The *tax collectors* might recognize their need, or they might just be enjoying a meal at their friend Matthew's expense. But *Jesus is found eating with the tax collectors and sinners* because He has a deliberate mission of spiritual healing.

On another level, however, everyone is sick, including the self-righteous *Pharisees.* The *Pharisees* keep the law externally, but internally they violate the law. They are sinners too. They are sick too. It's just that their sickness is not as apparent. Jesus will reveal the *Pharisees's* sins later in Matthew, particularly in chapter 23, when He makes their motives publicly known:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence."
(Matthew 23:25)

The Bible includes all of us in the same boat, needing spiritual healing. One verse from Romans makes this clear:

"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."
(Romans 3:23)

Further, the book of James shows that even living almost perfectly is insufficient. One sin makes us guilty of all sins:

"If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all."
(James 2:8-10)

The Pharisees would believe they are among *those who are healthy* because they are the teachers of God's Law and guardians of the traditions surrounding it. They believe they are *healthy* because they know the Law and follow it (externally). In reality, the Pharisees were masking their sickness, and playing the hypocrite. Jesus will call the *Pharisees* to recognize and confess their sickness. He, as the spiritual *physician,* will call them to receive the same spiritual healing as *the tax collectors and (other) sinners.*

With this brief parable, *Jesus* gives a mild rebuke to *the Pharisees* who know the scripture (Matthew 23:1-3). Given their biblical knowledge, they should also be physicians who are available to help the spiritually sick. They should be the ones who have *compassion* rather than condemnation for needy *sinners.*

Jesus follows up *His* parable with a homework assignment for *the Pharisees* that provides a challenge, and likely a greater rebuke. *He* tells them, *But go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice.'* This is a line from Hosea 6. When *Jesus* quotes the verse, *He* would have expected the biblically literate *Pharisees* to recognize both the verse as well as its full context. Hosea 6 is a chapter that begins with a call to “return to the Lord” (Hosea 6:1). It employs a metaphor of spiritual healing similar to the parable *Jesus* just shared about *the sick* being the ones *who need a physician* (Hosea 6:1-2). But it is the entire nation that needs healing. Hosea 6 speaks of Judah’s disloyalty and unfaithfulness (Hosea 6:4, 7, 8, 10), and makes particular note of the unrighteous behavior of those in the religious class (the priests, Hosea 6:9).

Hosea 6:1-11 tells of God’s judgment for their unfaithfulness with statements such as, “I have slain them by the word” (Hosea 6:5). And it ends with a promise that God will judge and restore His people (Hosea 6:11). In the middle of this chapter is the line *Jesus* quoted to *the Pharisees* “For I delight in loyalty (*compassion*) rather than *sacrifice*, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Any Pharisee who understood *Jesus*’s Hosea 6 reference would see that *He* is criticizing them. They are like Hosea’s unrighteous priests who follow the religious rules yet are distant from God. *Jesus* is rebuking and inviting each (very religious) Pharisee to repent and come to Him for spiritual healing.

Jesus ends His response to the Pharisees’ challenge with His conclusion: *for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.* *Jesus* did not come to socialize among *those who* think they are *righteous.* *Jesus* was not seeking to advance His earthly social status. Rather, *Jesus* was in the business of showing *compassion* and offering help to *sinners* in need of spiritual healing. That includes the Pharisees, but they are unable to see their need.

This episode is consistent with the Beatitude on being poor in spirit: “Makarios (blessed, fulfilled) are the poor in spirit [those who rightly see themselves], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). The Pharisees are the religious leaders, but they are in spiritual darkness.

Biblical Text

9:9-13 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. 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. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” But when *Jesus* heard this, *He* said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”