



**Sunday School Lesson**  
**Matt. 9:9-13**  
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**God Calls Matthew**



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With this study on the theme of divine calling, we shift to the New Testament in order to examine some key individuals at the beginning of the Christian era. The first of these comes from one of the original Twelve Apostles and is named in the Hebrew Levi, but in Aramaic Matthew. Additionally, since [Matt. 9:9-13](#) is a triple tradition passage, meaning that the same event is described in all three synoptic gospels (=Mk. [2:13-17](#); Lk. [5:27-32](#)), we will bring into the discussion insights from the Marcan and Lukan accounts in order to supplement our study of Matthew's narrative.

**I. Context**

As always this investigation is the starting point for legitimate scripture interpretation. Both the historical and the literary setting of our passage is important.

**a. Historical**

The **external history** of the first gospel document has been previously examined in these Bible study series (see on [Matt. 14:22-23](#) for the most recent study), so we will not go into as much detail. In summary, the more dominant view in modern times sees this gospel being written in the late 60s to late 70s of the first Christian century primarily to Jewish Christian communities somewhere in the Roman province of Syria -- either Antioch or Damascus. In the struggles or aftermath of the first Jewish war against the Romans mainly from 66 to 70 AD, Jewish people everywhere felt a strong sense of nationalism that was combined with religious fervor. To be a true Jew one needed to adopt the strict observances and traditions of the synagogue. This meant abandonment of any religious modification of traditional Judaism.

And Christianity represented a severe departure from these roots. Thus most New Testament scholars are persuaded that the first gospel was written to convince these Jewish Christians that they represented the God ordained fulfillment of what had begun in the Old Testament beginning with Abraham. Thus as Christians, they were true Jews and were being faithful to God's will. This in contrast to the synagogue, which stood in disobedience, since it had missed the significance of Jesus and had clung to the traditions





of men that were contradictory to the will of God. These are our working assumptions regarding the external history of the first gospel.

The **internal history** is a new matter that requires our attention for this lesson. The scene is a **tax office** located in or near **Capernaum**. **This town** was located on the Sea of Galilee on its northwestern coast in the Roman province of Galilee. It served as the base of operations for Jesus during his lengthy ministry in Galilee. Its prosperity came from both the commerce generated from the Sea of Galilee and also because it was located “on the great highway from Damascus to Acco and Tyre” ([Eastons Bible Dictionary](#)).

The issue of taxation by the Romans on conquered peoples during the period is somewhat complex, but Richard Spencer’s article on “Tax” in the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* has a helpful summation:

During the early period of the Roman Republic the rent of public lands brought in governmental revenues. From the 2nd century B.C.E., however, Rome’s wealth was increased enormously by the conquest of foreign peoples and the confiscation of their resources. Later, a system of taxes was introduced. Paul advised his readers to pay the Romans both direct and indirect taxes (Rom. 13:6–7). The direct tax, known as the “tribute” (Gk. *phóros*; Lat. *tributum*), was a tax on land (*tributum soli*) or a personal tax on everyone of taxable age (*tributum capitis*), used to support the Roman military presence, to foster building programs, and for general maintenance of the empire. It was collected by Roman procurators. When natural disasters occurred, emperors often lifted the burden of this tax from the affected town or province. The indirect taxes (Gk. *télos*; Lat. *vectigal*) were taxes levied in self-governing townships. They included taxes on imports and exports (*portorium*), a 5 percent inheritance tax (*vicesima hereditarium*), a 5 percent emancipation tax (*vicesima libertatis*), a 1 percent tax on public auctions (which went to the military pension fund), a 4 percent tax on the sale of slaves (to support the local police), and other local taxes such as tolls at bridges and ferries and taxes on houses and builders.

For collecting some of these taxes, a system of “tax farming” was used by the Romans, whereby the government auctioned off contracts to publicans (wealthy tax collectors) who would pay the Romans out of their own pockets and then collect from the public as much as they wanted to recover their investment. These greedy and cruel profiteers made their profit by collecting much more than they spent for their contracts (cf. Luke 19:2–8). The system allowed constant abuses of the public. We have evidence from Egypt that occasionally the publicans were accompanied by the military or police to extort money from the public.

Matthew was a Jewish tax collector working for the Romans at this point in his life. As such he would have incurred the anger and resentment of his fellow countrymen as a traitor who had forsaken his Jewish roots for the sake of making money. The exact location of his tax office is not clear. Most likely it was on the edge of town and probably by the lake as a composite from the three gospel sources would suggest: “As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office” (Mt. 9:9, RSV); “And as he passed on, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office” (Mk. 2:14, RSV); “After this he went on, and saw a tax collector, named Levi, sitting at the tax office” (Lk. 5:27).

The time frame for this event is early on in the Galilean ministry of Jesus, as the excerpt from my [Life of Christ outline](#) below illustrates:

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
III. Galilean ministry	4:12-18:35	1:14-9:50	4:14-9:56	4:46-7:9
	(51%)	(53%)	(24%)	(15%)
A. Phase One: To the Choosing of the Twelve	4:12-12:21	1:15-3:19a	4:14-7:50	4:46-5:47.

From a comparison of the three gospel accounts it becomes clear that Matthew has followed the more detailed Marcan account as well as did Luke. Matthew reproduces the Marcan narrative, however, in ab-

breviated fashion. This helps explain why Matthew lists his narrative much deeper into his gospel account than does either Mark or Luke, as we will explore below under Literary setting. Although Matthew’s extensive use of Mark to describe an event that happened directly to him seems strange to moderns, patterns of ancient literary style certainly don’t preclude such approaches. But they have occasioned numerous questionings of the traditional early church view of Matthew as the author of this document. I suspect our uncertainty is more occasioned by patterns we follow than by patterns found in the ancient world. Copying someone else’s work was viewed much more positively than in our world. For whatever the reason, Matthew does follow the Marcan narrative closely. But he does relocate it sequentially much deeper into his gospel story for literary objectives rather than for historical purposes.



**b. Literary**

The literary setting for Mt. 9:9-13 is focused in the larger section of chapters eight and nine of Matthew’s gospel, which hang together as a literary unit largely around the narration of ten miracle stories that stress Jesus as an action person following the emphasis on Jesus as a teacher in the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five through seven. Eugene Boring in the Matthew volume of the *New Interpreter’s Bible* (iPreach) has a helpful summation of these issues:

Matthew has previously given a summary statement of Jesus’ healing and exorcisms (4:23-24), but here are the first miracle stories in the Gospel. Matthew has gathered them from his sources and arranged them to communicate his theological message. The miracle stories in 8:1–9:34 should not be interpreted in isolation, but each should be interpreted in the context of the section as a whole, since it has been constructed by Matthew as a single integrated unit presenting Jesus as “Messiah in deed” (cf. 11:2), corresponding to 5:1–7:29 as “Messiah in word” (cf. 7:28 and Introduction). The picture of Jesus speaking and acting with “authority” (ejxousi/a exousia) binds together the two subsections (implicit throughout (cf. 7:29; 8:9; 9:6-8)....

From his sources (Mark and Q), Matthew has chosen stories of Jesus’ “works” that picture God’s saving power present in Jesus to deliver people victimized by circumstances and powers from which they cannot save themselves: leprosy, paralysis, sickness, earthquake and storm, demon possession, sin, speech and hearing disability, blindness, and death. Each story is a gospel in miniature that points to the meaning of the Christ-event as a whole. Several cases present people marginalized by Jewish society: the leprous man, the Gentile, the demonized person, the women, especially the woman with the hemorrhage (Matthew, like the other Gospels, presents no stories of Jesus healing a priest, a Pharisee, a scribe, an elder, or a Sadducee). Matthew has also made his selection correspond to the Scripture’s description of eschatological salvation (Isa 35:5-6), which he will later quote, pointing back to this section (11:4-5).

Once again, Matthew’s outline is triadic, with three sets of three miracle stories. Since one story has another inserted into it (9:18-26), there are actually ten miracles, another reflection of the Moses typology that shimmers through Matthew’s compositional strategy. Just as Moses worked ten acts of power in delivering the people of God, so does Jesus as well. But Jesus’ mighty deeds are all acts of mercy and deliverance—even for a Roman—rather than a judgment on the oppressor. As Matthew has transformed the violent, conquering “Son of David” into the healing King who does not retaliate but withdraws (see 12:9-21), he has replaced the violent acts of deliverance with acts of compassion.

The section is not composed exclusively of miracle stories, but includes elements that illustrate the meaning of discipleship, faith, and the conflict initiated by the incursion of the kingdom of God (8:18-22; 9:9-17). The discipleship material is not extraneous, but is integrated into the literary structure, which underscores the Matthean conviction that christology and discipleship (ecclesiology) are inseparably related. These considerations suggest the outline in Figure 5 as Matthew’s own structure for this section.

The distinctive Matthean sequencing of these narratives can be seen clearly from a comparison of the sequence of narratives, taken from my [Detailed Outline of the Life of Christ](#):

<b>Matthew 8-9 Pericope List</b>	<b>Mark’s Pericopes</b>	<b>Luke’s Pericopes</b>
48. Leper cleansed 8:1-4	6. Sabbath exorcism at Capernaum 1:21-28	23. Sabbath exorcism at Capernaum 4:31-37
49. Centurion’s servant healed 8:5-13	7. Peter’s mother-in-law and others healed 1:29-34	24. Peter’s mother-in-law and others healed 4:38-41
50. Peter’s mother-in-law healed 8:14-17		

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|--|--|---|
| 51. Conversation with would-be follower 8:18-22        | 8. Preaching and healing tour in Galilee 1:35-39 | 25. Preaching tour in Galilee 4:42-44     |
| 52. Calming the storm 8:23-27                          | 9. Leper cleansed 1:40-45                        | 26. Four fishermen called 5:1-11          |
| 53. Gadarene demoniacs healed 8:28-34                  | 10. Paralytic healed and forgiven 2:1-12         | 27. Leper cleansed 5:12-16                |
| 54. Paralytic healed and forgiven 9:1-8                | <b>11. Calling of Levi 2:13-17</b>               | 28. Paralytic healed and forgiven 5:17-26 |
| <b>55. Calling of Matthew 9:9-13</b>                   | 12. Question about fasting 2:18-22               | <b>29. Calling of Levi 5:27-32</b>        |
| 56. Question about fasting 9:14-17                     | 13. Plucking grain on the Sabbath 2:23-28        | 30. Question about fasting 5:33-39        |
| 57. Ruler's daughter and a woman healed 9:18-26        | 14. Man with withered hand healed 3:1-6          | 31. Plucking grain on the Sabbath 6:1-5   |
| 58. Two blind men healed 9:27-31                       | 15. Withdrawal and more healings 3:7-12          | 32. Man with withered hand healed 6:6-11  |
| 59. Mute demoniac healed 9:32-34                       |  |   |
| 60. Tour of Galilee with compassion for people 9:35-38 |  |   |

Although some of the Marcan pericopes are used in chapters eight and nine by Matthew, a lot of distinctive material is added to the Marcan structure, as becomes clear from the numbering of the pericopes and the headings of each. Matthew does follow the Marcan sequence with pericopes 54, 55 and 56, but deviates both before and following. Luke is the one who follows his Marcan source more closely sequentially. The rationale for its inclusion here is addressed by Prof. Boring quite helpfully:

The theme of God's acceptance of sinners continues in the account of the call of Matthew and the disputes at the dinner party at his house. The pattern of the previous story is replicated here: forgiveness/objection/Jesus' concluding pronouncement. Jesus' authoritative word, which calms the storm (8:26) and pronounces forgiveness (9:2), also compels human response. As in 4:18-22, on which the story is modeled, Jesus' powerful word creates discipleship.

## II. Message

The passage divides itself quite naturally into two subsections: (1) Matthew's Call, v. 9, and (2) Dispute at Dinner, vv. 10-13. We will follow that structure in our study. Also, in order to bring more details onto the table for our consideration, we will lay out the three representative types of translations (vertically: form oriented, mixed approach, content oriented, Greek text) of each of the gospel texts with Mark and Luke supplementing the Matthean text. The horizontal listing will follow the traditional sequence of the gospel accounts: Matthew, Mark, Luke.

### a. Matthew's Call, v. 9

#### Matthew 9:9 NASB

9 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.

#### NRSV

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sit-

#### Mark 2:13-14 NASB

13 And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. 14 As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

#### NRSV

13 Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd

#### Luke 5:27-28 NASB

27 After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me." 28 And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.

#### NRSV

27 After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi,

ting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

#### NLT

9 As Jesus was going down the road, he saw Matthew sitting at his tax-collection booth. "Come, be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

#### The Greek New Testament

<9:9> Καὶ παράγων ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐκεῖθεν εἶδεν ἄνθρωπον καθήμενον ἐπὶ τὸ τελώνιον, Ματθαῖον λεγόμενον, καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Ἀκολούθει μοι. καὶ ἀναστὰς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ.

gathered around him, and he taught them. 14 As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

#### NLT

13 Then Jesus went out to the lakeshore again and taught the crowds that gathered around him. 14 As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at his tax-collection booth. "Come, be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Levi got up and followed him.

#### The Greek New Testament

<2:13> Καὶ ἐξῆλθεν πάλιν παρὰ τὴν θάλασσαν· καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἦρχετο πρὸς αὐτόν, καὶ ἐδίδασκεν αὐτούς. <2:14> καὶ παράγων εἶδεν Λευὶν τὸν τοῦ Ἀλφαίου καθήμενον ἐπὶ τὸ τελώνιον, καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Ἀκολούθει μοι. καὶ ἀναστὰς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ.

sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." 28 And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

#### NLT

27 Later, as Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax-collection booth. "Come, be my disciple!" Jesus said to him. 28 So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.

#### The Greek New Testament

5:27 Καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐξῆλθεν καὶ ἐθεάσατο τελώνην ὀνόματι Λευὶν καθήμενον ἐπὶ τὸ τελώνιον, καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ἀκολούθει μοι. 5:28 καὶ καταλιπὼν πάντα ἀναστὰς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ.

#### Comments:

Quite interestingly, the disciple named here is called Matthew in the first gospel but Levi in Mark and Luke. Matthew comes from Aramaic with the meaning "gift of God," while Levi is a shortened form of Leviticus and goes back to the third son of Jacob in [Genesis 29:34](#). Scholars speculate as to why the switch from Levi to Matthew in the first gospel. The name Matthew is used in [five places](#) in the New Testament, while Levi shows up some [four times](#) in reference to a disciple of Jesus, twice each in the Marcan and Lukan call narratives. Quite unlikely is the tendency of modern scholars to assert that the first gospel writer deceptively inserted the name Matthew instead of the Marcan source Levi in order to highlight the disciple who was a focal point of the first gospel.

The vocation of Matthew / Levi was that of a tax collector. As the summary of Roman taxation policies emphasized above, such a vocation would have pushed Matthew to the fringe of Jewish society in the first century world. Joe Luncford in "Matthew" in the *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible* has a helpful observation at this point:

Before he became a disciple Matthew was a tax collector in the area of Capernaum. His position would have been a very lucrative one, as he would have had opportunity to collect not only from local farmers and craftsmen as they brought their products to market, but also from caravans which often passed through the area carrying goods between Egypt and the Orient. The detail found only in Luke that he "left everything" (Luke 5:28) to follow Jesus is probably a hint as to this lucrative position.

The decisive point in this single sentence depiction of Matthew's call is Ἀκολούθει μοι. (Follow me). Jesus came by his place of business and issued a dramatic demand to Matthew: Follow me. Earlier in the Matthean narrative (4:18-22) Jesus had uttered similar words ("Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.") to Peter and Andrew, and then to James and John. Later these same words would be uttered to some disciple want-to-bes in 8:18-22 ("Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead"; v. 22 NRSV). This assertion of Jesus to "Follow me" is quite prominent in the gospels, occurring [some thirty four times](#).

Discipleship means to follow Jesus. Important to recognize here is that central is to follow the person Jesus, not a set of rules, not a religious tradition, not a pastor or preacher. The biblical image of the Greek

expression Ἀκολουθεῖ μοι is much like the childhood game called Follow The Leader. As disciples we are simply to go where Jesus goes and do what Jesus does. This was Matthew's calling, and it remains our calling as well. Luke adds the insightful detail "and he left everything" (Lk. 5:28). To follow Jesus is to lift him to the highest priority in our lives. Following Jesus will take on different tones and consequences for each person, just as it did for the disciples who initially followed him. But common and central to everyone's experience is the demand of Jesus to make him the leader of one's life.

For Matthew this "calling" to follow Jesus meant a radical change in career as well as in his life. It can mean the same thing to us today. But it can mean only a change in life-style and religious orientation, as it did for most of those early followers of Jesus.

### **b. Dispute at Dinner, vv. 10-13**

#### **Matt. 9:10-13**

##### **NASB**

10 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. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. 13 "But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

##### **NRSV**

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

##### **NLT**

10 That night Matthew invited

#### **Mk. 2:15-17**

##### **NASB**

15 And it happened that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. 16 When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, "Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?" 17 And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

##### **NRSV**

15 And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. 16 When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 17 When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

##### **NLT**

15 That night Levi invited Jesus

#### **Luke 5:29-32**

##### **NASB**

29 And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them. 30 The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?" 31 And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. 32 "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

##### **NRSV**

29 Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. 30 The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" 31 Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; 32 I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

##### **NLT**

29 Soon Levi held a banquet in his

Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. 11 The Pharisees were indignant. "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" they asked his disciples. 12 When he heard this, Jesus replied, "Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do." 13 Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices.' For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough."

#### The Greek New Testament

<9:10> Καὶ ἐγένετο αὐτοῦ ἀνακειμένου ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, καὶ ἰδοὺ πολλοὶ τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἐλθόντες συνανέκειντο τῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ. <9:11> καὶ ἰδόντες οἱ Φαρισαῖοι ἔλεγον τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, Διὰ τί μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν ἐσθίει ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν; <9:12> ὁ δὲ ἀκούσας εἶπεν, Οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχουσιν οἱ ἰσχύοντες ἰατροῦ ἀλλ' οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες. <9:13> πορευθέντες δὲ μάθετε τί ἐστίν, Ἔλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν· οὐ γὰρ ἤλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλοὺς.

and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. (There were many people of this kind among the crowds that followed Jesus.) 16 But when some of the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him eating with people like that, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with such scum?" 17 When Jesus heard this, he told them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do. I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough."

#### The Greek New Testament

<2:15> Καὶ γίνεται κατακεῖσθαι αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ, καὶ πολλοὶ τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ συνανέκειντο τῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ· ἦσαν γὰρ πολλοὶ καὶ ἠκολούθουν αὐτῷ. <2:16> καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς τῶν Φαρισαίων ἰδόντες ὅτι ἐσθίει μετὰ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν καὶ τελωνῶν ἔλεγον τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, Ὅτι μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν ἐσθίει; <2:17> καὶ ἀκούσας ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει αὐτοῖς [ὅτι] Οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχουσιν οἱ ἰσχύοντες ἰατροῦ ἀλλ' οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες· οὐκ ἤλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλοὺς.

home with Jesus as the guest of honor. Many of Levi's fellow tax collectors and other guests were there. 30 But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with such scum?" 31 Jesus answered them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do. 32 I have come to call sinners to turn from their sins, not to spend my time with those who think they are already good enough."

#### The Greek New Testament

5:29 Καὶ ἐποίησεν δοχὴν μεγάλην Λευὶς αὐτῷ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἦν ὄχλος πολὺς τελωνῶν καὶ ἄλλων οἱ ἦσαν μετ' αὐτῶν κατακεῖμενοι. 5:30 καὶ ἐγόγγυζον οἱ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς αὐτῶν πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγοντες, Διὰ τί μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν ἐσθίετε καὶ πίνετε; 5:31 καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς, Οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχουσιν οἱ ὑγιαίνοντες ἰατροῦ ἀλλὰ οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες· 5:32 οὐκ ἐλήλυθα καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλοὺς εἰς μετάνοιαν.

#### Comments:

The second section of our passage describes a dinner given in honor of Jesus by Matthew as an expression of appreciation for what had happened in the calling of Matthew by Jesus. How long this was after the encounter at the tax office is unclear from the text, but the indication is that not too much time passed between the two events.

Ancient Jewish dinners or banquets were quite different in many respects from a similar event in our American culture. Dennis Smith in the article "Meals" in the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* has a very helpful summation:

Meals are often mentioned in the Bible in secular as well as religious contexts. Meal customs depicted in both the OT and the NT should be interpreted in relation to their respective cultural contexts, the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. In addition, there are customs specific to Jewish tradition, such as the dietary laws.

An early account of meal customs is the story of Abraham entertaining strangers at Mamre (Gen. 18:1–8; cf. 19:1–3). The story illustrates the ancient notion of hospitality, whereby one was expected to provide basic amenities for worthy strangers, including especially a meal. Here Abraham invited his guests to "stretch out" under a tree (i.e., recline) while he brought water for them to wash their feet, a custom regularly connected with meal etiquette

wherever reclining was practiced. He then became both host and servant at the meal, while Sarah remained in the tent, following the widespread custom whereby a respectable woman was not to join men at the table, especially one at which guests from outside the family were present.

The Abraham story provides a snapshot of meal customs in an early period of Jewish history. Reclining can be traced as early as the 7th century B.C.E., as depicted on a relief showing the Assyrian king Assurbanipal reclining at a feast in a garden with his wife (who sits rather than reclines, indicating her station in life), eating and drinking while servants play music nearby.

The same customs are described in Amos 6:4–6. The reclining banquet is pictured here as a luxurious occasion which includes ceremonial drinking of wine, anointing with oil, and musical entertainment. Amos presents it in a negative light, as characteristic of the wealthy reprobates of Samaria, but the customs he represents were widespread in his world.

By the time of Ben Sira in the Second Temple period, the meal of luxury is something to be dealt with as part of the life of the sage. The rules of the banquet described in Sir. 31:12–32:13 present numerous parallels to the Greco-Roman banquet and illustrate the extent to which Jewish meal customs had now become intertwined with Greco-Roman meal customs, including such features as how to preside at the table (32:1–2), rules for speaking (31:31; 32:3–4, 7–9), the place of music (32:4–6), as well as injunctions to practice moderation in eating and drinking (31:12–18, 25–30).

These features are widely represented in Greco-Roman meal customs as evidenced, e.g., in Plato's *Symposium* (4th century) or in the *Table Talk* of Plutarch (1st century C.E.). They are also echoed in NT meal descriptions. For example, whenever the posture at meals of Jesus is indicated, it is always reclining (e.g., Mark 2:15; 8:6; 14:18 par.). The various Greek terms which literally mean "recline" are often translated "sit at table" in modern English versions. Diners who reclined were arranged according to standard patterns, a common one being the *triclinium* arrangement, whereby a minimum of nine diners would be arranged on three couches placed in a U-shaped configuration around a table, three diners to a couch. They reclined on their left elbows, arranged at an oblique angle on the couch and roughly parallel to each other. Diners would also be arranged by rank, proceeding around the table from left to right. Thus in John 13:23, when the Beloved Disciple is described as "reclining next to Jesus" (NRSV; Gk. "reclining on his bosom"), he is therefore represented in a position of honor, just to the right of the Lord himself. Similarly, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), the position of Lazarus in the afterlife "in the bosom" of Abraham (v. 23) is best understood as a position of honor at the messianic banquet or the banquet of the afterlife (on "eating bread in the kingdom of God," cf. 14:15).

To position guests by rank was the mark of a good host, but it could lead to tension, as in Luke 14:7–11 (cf. Plutarch *Table Talk* 1.2). Such social tension may underlie the conflict at the Lord's Supper in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:17–34), where the divisions at the table are characterized as "show(ing) contempt for the church of God and humiliat(ing) those who have nothing" (v. 22). Women and slaves were marginalized even further by not being allowed to recline, if they were present at the table at all. However, this tradition was undergoing change in the 1st century, as respectable women were beginning to appear at banquets with more frequency. In the Gospels women are often present at Jesus' meals, but these stories vary in how they depict the placement of women at the table, whether in a traditionally acceptable subservient role at the feet of Jesus (Luke 7:36–50; 10:38–42) or as possibly reclining along with men (Matt. 14:19–21; 15:35–38). By contrast, when Paul refers to women being present at the worship services in Corinth as prophets (1 Cor. 11:5), one must conclude that they were present at the table (mentioned next in Paul's argument, vv. 17–34) and presumably were reclining along with the men.

According to ancient customs, when someone hosted a meal at his home, as Levi/Matthew does for Jesus (Mark 2:15 par.), invitations were normally extended to the guests (cf. Plato *Symp.* 174E). Jesus refers to this custom in a symbolic sense when he speaks of "inviting" ("calling") not the righteous but sinners to the table, i.e., the kingdom (Mark 2:17; cf. the reference to invitations at Luke 14:10, 12, 16). Upon their arrival at the meal, guests would have their feet washed by a household servant before they took their positions upon the couches (*Symp.* 175A). This custom is referred to in Luke 7:34, where Jesus' Pharisaic host is criticized for not providing this basic act of hospitality for Jesus, and in John 13:1–16, where Jesus takes the role of servant to wash the feet of the disciples, a practice continued in some circles in the early Church (1 Tim. 5:10). Washing the hands at the table before the meal was a common practice of pagans as well as Jews (Athenaeus *Deip.* 14.641d; *m. \$ ag.* 2:5), but it had been given special religious significance in Pharisaic Judaism. Jesus, as part of his critique of the Pharisees, ignored this custom (Mark 7:1–8 par.). Guests were also routinely anointed on the head with perfumes (Josephus *Ant.* 19.238), a practice which is given symbolic significance in the Jesus tradition (Mark 14:3–9).

The ancient banquet had two primary courses, the eating course, or *deīpnon* ("dinner"), followed by the drinking course, or *sympósiōn* (symposium). Each course began with a benediction or libation over the food and wine, a custom adapted in different ways by Greeks, Romans, and Jews (*Symp.* 176A; *m. Ber.* 6), and which is

reflected in Jesus' benedictions at various meals (e.g., Mark 8:6). The Last Supper traditions refer to the two courses of the meal by indicating separate benedictions over the bread and wine (Mark 14:22–25 par.). In the Pauline and Lukan versions, these benedictions are explicitly separated by the phrase "after supper" ("after the *deīpnon*"; 1 Cor. 11:23–25; Luke 22:19–20).

The symposium course was intended to last long into the evening and was expected to include entertainment. While some Greeks and Romans tended toward prurient entertainment, philosophical Greeks and Romans often offered enlightened conversation on a philosophical topic as their symposium entertainment (e.g., *Symp.* 176E). Similarly, Jewish tradition preferred discourse on the law at the table (as in Sir. 9:15–16) and Jesus often taught at the table (e.g., Luke 14). In the early Church, it is quite likely that the worship service which began with the communal meal (or Lord's Supper) continued at the table, since "coming together as a church" (1 Cor. 11:18) included both "coming together to eat" (v. 20) and "coming together [in which] each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation" (14:26a).

Meals also functioned as boundary markers, helping to define who was in the community and who was not. Jewish dietary laws especially functioned to define boundaries, for those who strictly followed these laws usually could not dine at a gentile table (Dan. 1:8; Tob. 1:10). This created a problem in the early Church as its gentile membership began to grow more prominent. The issue came to a head in Antioch, in an incident described by Paul in Galatians, where Jewish Christians refused to eat at the same table with Gentile Christians (Gal. 2:11–14). Paul argued vociferously that the Church can no more have two tables than it can have two paths to salvation, for in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek" (Gal. 3:28). The tension over dietary laws was resolved differently according to another tradition represented in Acts 15, where Gentile Christians were enjoined to follow a modified form of Jewish dietary laws ("abstain . . . from blood and from what is strangled," v. 29), thus allowing Gentile and Jewish Christians to eat at the same table. But Mark, like Paul, envisioned no compromise on this issue, reporting that Jesus "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). The table of Jesus, as related by the Gospels, was one in which inclusion of the marginalized was the rule, symbolized by his preference for eating with such impure outcasts as "tax collectors and sinners" (Mark 2:15–17 par.).

The central point in the gospel texts in the meal is the criticism leveled at Jesus by the Pharisees for dining with such "unfit" people as tax collectors and sinners (that is, individuals who did not follow the legalistic system of Torah obedience laid out by the Pharisees). In their theology, a "righteous" person would never associate with "unrighteous" individuals, especially at meal time. The custom of eating from common dishes with one's hands created in their thinking the likelihood of being polluted by "unclean" people eating from the same table. This was serious business for them, since to become religiously "unclean" meant an extensive set of cleansing rituals before one could worship in the temple in Jerusalem, and before one could legitimately participate in sabbath worship in the synagogue. Their criticism was not superficial or frivolous.

Jesus' answer with a parabolic proverb, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick," recast the issue on people rather than on rules. At this point Matthew adds the declaration "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'" quoting from [Hosea 6:6](#). This had the tone of questioning their comprehension of the teaching of scripture. Then Matthew picks up the Marcan climatic declaration, "For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Does this imply that some don't need the salvation of Jesus? Absolutely not. Instead, it strongly suggests that realization of spiritual sickness must precede spiritual healing. This the Pharisees did not have. Thus they could not see the healing being offered by Jesus.

A couple of connections to us flow out of this passage. First is the principle described above. "Woe is me, the sinner" always precedes divine forgiveness. Although not popular in our day, this is basic scriptural principle in both testaments.

Secondly, the challenge of Jesus' association with the outcasts of society has always bothered Christians. How to love the sinner and hate his sin is a real challenge. The easy way out is isolation from the sinner. But Jesus won't let us get away with that. We have to find a way to get involved and stay in contact with those who desperately need the forgiveness of Almighty God.

Thirdly, concrete actions showing our gratitude to God for His redemptive work are always appropriate. Matthew set an example of gratitude for believers of all times to follow. For him the best way to say "Thank You," was by introducing his friends to the Lord. We would do well to learn from his example.