

2-7-2021 – Farmington NM

Matthew – The Public Servant Who Became a Bible Writer

This sermon was prepared with the upcoming Presidents' Day in mind. This Friday Abraham Lincoln will be 215 years old. On Monday two weeks from now George Washington will be 292 years old. By the way, when I checked on Google, I learned that Presidents' Day is sometimes understood as a day to honor the lives of all U.S. presidents.

Mark 2:13-17

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

These words of the Declaration of Independence cause the chests of patriotic Americans to swell with pride. Did you ever stop to think that these words conflict with God's Word? God doesn't give to people "the right" "to alter or abolish" the government over them and to "institute a new" one more to their liking.

"We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America."

Did it ever occur to you that, according to Scripture, this preamble to the Constitution is also suspect. Government is not just a human arrangement "of the people, by the people and for the people." Government is a divine institution, established by God for the well-being of his creatures, with its duties and powers set by God.

Our sermon today focuses on another government, imposed by military might on the Jewish nation. It was a government which the people had not chosen and did not want to be over them. But Jesus applied the same principles we just discussed. Jesus said that his first followers were to respect and obey the Roman government over them. Jesus went even a step further and called a government official to become one of this chosen 12 disciples. Today we meet **MATTHEW-THE PUBLIC SERVANT WHO BECAME A BIBLE WRITER**. In the Bible, by the way, Matthew is also known as Levi.

As far as we know, all but one of Jesus' original disciples had been fishermen. Fishing was man's work, for men with hard muscles, callused hands, and love of the sea. All the original disciples were such men's men — except one. Jesus chose one who represented a kind of life much more like our own. Jesus chose Matthew, a businessman, a man who went to the office each day and spent most of his time sitting there behind a desk. Matthew's business was collecting taxes on the goods being transported on the major international trade road that went from Damascus through Capernaum to the Mediterranean Coast and on to Egypt. You knew him if you lived in Capernaum; and if you were Jewish, you despised him! Matthew was a publican — a public servant. He was despised because he collected taxes for the hated Roman conquerors. Such tax collectors were regarded as outcasts by self-respecting Jewish society, not only because they worked for the enemy, but also because they had the reputation of demanding unreasonable payments so they could increase their profits. There may have been some honest tax collectors, but everyone assumed they were all crooks. It was good business, however, if you could handle the public stigma and scorn. "They hate you for it," Matthew and his fellow tax collectors would say to themselves, "but it certainly pays well." The publicans may have been rich, lived in the best houses in town, eaten the best food, worn the finest clothing, but they were still the scum of the earth as far as their countrymen were concerned.

To Matthew the tax collector Jesus came, while he was sitting at his desk in the customs office, and said, "Follow me." So Jesus gained another disciple. "He rose," the Bible says, "and followed Jesus."

You remember, I hope, how Andrew, after he met Jesus, went and got Peter. He had to share the Good News that he had found the promised Savior. "Come and see," he said. Well, Matthew did that too, but on a much larger scale. Matthew invited Jesus into his home for a great dinner party. And he filled the place with the only people who would set foot in his house, his fellow tax collectors and "sinners." Sinners was the term pious Jews used for a specific group of people. It referred to all those who did not follow the requirements of the Jewish religious law. Both taxcollectors and sinners were outside of the church. The sinners label included notoriously evil people as well as those who refused or lacked the time to follow the Old Testament religious laws. If we asked Matthew what he had in mind with this banquet, he might explain: "I had three things in mind. I meant it to be celebration (1). I was so happy about entering a whole new way of life. It was a "good-by party" (2) to serve as a formal announcement to my friends that I was no longer in business. Most of all, though, (3) I wanted my friends to meet Jesus, sit down with him for a long talk and become his disciples too."

Some Pharisees saw the party going on and came to check things out. They probably remained outside the house, not wanting to contaminate themselves. The Pharisees were the deeply religious among the Jews, who were certain they were going to earn their way into Heaven by observing all the Old Testament laws. Phariseeism taught that God's grace was extended only to those who kept God's laws. They stood off at a distance, watching everything for a while. Then they muttered their accusation to the nearest disciples. "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" They were insinuating that Jesus was a low, disreputable person who felt

comfortable in the company of others like himself. It was like sneering, "Birds of a feather flock together."

Jesus heard their question, and he knew exactly what they meant. Jesus replies: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners (to repentance)." Jesus draws a practical lesson for us from the field of medicine. A doctor is trained and dedicated to helping and curing the sick. The healthy don't need such a doctor. In fact, it is a waste of the doctor's time to treat those who don't need treatment. A doctor can't help those who consider themselves healthy either. Such people don't think they need help and so won't follow his advice anyway. A doctor might have a perfect cure for a sickness, but, if a person doesn't consider himself sick, he won't give the doctor a chance to prescribe it.

Jesus says that such is the case here. The Pharisees need spiritual help, for they, like all of us, are sinful. But they don't think so, and so Jesus' words were wasted on them. The Pharisees had closed their ears to the real message of God's law. That's a mistake. For God's Law speaks to each of us. Some people have totally misguided hope. They look at the good in their lives and feel that they have done enough to earn Heaven. It shows in remarks like: "I've led a pretty good life. There are a lot worse people than I am." But God says: Be perfect, and all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. God shows us our sins, so we turn to the Great Physician for the forgiveness and spiritual healing he gives. And he gives it all by grace — that means God forgives us because of his love which we don't deserve to get. That means we do nothing to earn it or to get it. G -R-A-C-E – that's God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Grace is illustrated clearly every time a baby is baptized. The little baby just lies there. In fact, the baby may cry and make it clear he doesn't want to be there at all. The baby can't do anything to prove that it is deserving of being baptized. It doesn't even understand what is happening. But God does. Through baptism God comes to the baby, washes away his sins, and puts saving faith in his heart — all because God wants to do it. That's grace. It was such grace that called Matthew to follow Jesus. It was such grace that makes Jesus eager to call sinners to himself. It is that grace that has saved us.

I better clear up a possible misunderstanding- The tax collectors, the public servants, of Jesus' day were regarded as disreputable because they were serving a hated enemy and because the system lent itself to graft and gouging. But Jesus and the Bible never say that such tax collectors were doing wrong by being tax collectors. In fact, the opposite is true. When pressed on another occasion about paying taxes, Jesus responded: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Mat 22:21). In other words, we are to use our money to support our government (pay our taxes) and to support God's Work (make offerings to church). At his trial standing before the Roman governor of Judea — a man who held his position only by means of the conquering Roman army — Jesus acknowledges Pilate's God-given authority when he says: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above [by God]" (John 19:11).

The government that exists over us — whether it is one of our choosing or not, whether it is of our liking or not — is ordained by God, and we are to regard it as God's representative placed over us by God for our good. Therefore, those who serve in government are serving God. John

the Baptist once gave clear guidance for government service: "Tax collectors came to be baptized, 'Teacher,' they asked, 'what should we do?' 'Don't collect any more than you are required to,' John told them. Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely — be content with your pay' (Lk 3:12-14). John did not advocate leaving government service, but rather encouraged public servants to use their authority in an honest way for the people's good.

Sure we have reason to be frustrated with our government. There are bound to be problems for the people in government are sinful. But the problems in government emphasize the need for Christians to be involved — serving God by serving their community. The Bible says: "Be ready to do whatever is good." The controversy swirling around our U.S. government these days also calls to the fore these words of instruction from the Bible: "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim 2: 12). President Biden may not call and ask your advice, but you can influence his decisions by your prayers asking God to show the President the right way.

The problems in society also show the importance of Christian homes and the efforts of the church to reach children. As Luther wrote in his Large Catechism: "If we want able and qualified persons as civil and spiritual leaders, then we really must spare no toil, trouble, or cost in teaching and educating our children to serve God and humanity."

John the Baptist said it, and certainly Jesus agreed: it is possible to be an honest tax collector and a soldier or police officer who uses his power in a way that serves for the common good. From there we can broaden the application a bit further. God calls upon his people, as fruits of faith, to be honest in their business whatever it may be. We can make Christ our business partner and take him along into the conferences and team meetings at work. We can let him shine through all our relationships with employees and employers, coworkers and customers. The Scripture encourages us to serve the Lord at our workplace with this promise: "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does... (Eph 6:7-8).

Matthew left government service to follow Jesus. His greatest legacy to all of us is the inspired Gospel that bears his name and begins the New Testament.

Of the original 12 disciples, Matthew very likely was the best educated. To carry out his job, he had to be knowledgeable in mathematics and accounting — as well as to be versed in several languages since he had to be able to read the communiqués that came from Rome in Greek and Latin as well as speak to the merchants from many nations who traveled the caravan route. That education helped equip him for writing his gospel.

And we see clear evidence that Jesus' words had stuck: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Matthew was given a loving and concerned heart, similar to Jesus. We see

evidence of that in the fact that Matthew did not hold a grudge against Jewish society that had labeled him "scum" and treated him as a total social outcast. For Matthew wrote his gospel to the Jewish people. That's the reason he quotes the Old Testament 50 times in his gospel, more than the other three gospels combined. Matthew wanted his countrymen to believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior, and so he laid before the people the Old Testament prophecies which they accepted and then showed how, detail for detail, Jesus fulfilled all those prophecies.

We are in debt to Matthew for his gospel is the only one to record for us the parable of the man who found a treasure hidden in a field. He sold all he had to purchase that field and gain that treasure for his own. As he recorded that illustration of Jesus, Matthew must have thought of his personal experience, for that is what he had done. He, too, had forsaken his profitable public service career and followed Jesus. We too have found treasure — not buried in a field, but buried in the pages of this book, the Holy Bible. We have found forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus Christ who came to save sinners. Through the Bible we have found the Great Physician who has brought healing for our souls. That treasure is ours whenever we open the covers of the Bible, read it, and believe what it says.