

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Sundays @ 10:00 a.m. Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: April 5, 2009

Nursing the Broken Back to Health

by Dan Trygg

“And as He passed by, He saw Levi the *son* of Alphaeus sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, ‘Follow Me!’ And he rose and followed Him. ¹⁵ And it came about that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax-gatherers and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. ¹⁶ And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers, they began saying to His disciples, ‘Why is He eating and drinking with tax-gatherers 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.’”
Mark 2:14-17

This story illustrates a crucial difference between Jesus’ ministry and that of most other religious groups of His day. This distinction remains a watchword to the church throughout history, although we have so often lost sight of Jesus’ heart and have taken the part of the Pharisees. **The heart of the Good Shepherd draws Him to seek those people others might not be interested in (I Cor. 1:26-29), and nurse them to health. Others may *only* want the strong and healthy sheep, but Jesus loves *every* person who hears His voice, ...and He recognizes that the hurting ones require special care.** He goes out of His way for them, while others would disregard, or even disdain, them.

The heart of *religion* is in the *performance of duty and ritual*, ...while the heart of *Jesus* is toward *people*.

The paragraph begins with an “and”, indicating that it was meant to be understood as part of the previous story line. After healing the paralytic, Jesus left the house for a walk, and the crowds followed Him. **As He walked by the sea, He saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth. What was a tax booth doing by the sea?** There was a major caravan route called “the way of the sea” which passed through Capernaum from Damascus on the north (cf. Isa. 9:1,2; Matt. 4:15,16). **The “tax booth” which Levi was occupying was probably collecting custom taxes or tolls** from people passing into Galilee from the north, and those coming across the Sea of Galilee from the east.

To be a tax collector was a very disreputable and despised occupation for a Jewish man in the time of Christ. Because their land was occupied by Romans, who backed up the abusive power of Herod Antipas, the current ruler of Galilee, and himself an Idumean outsider, **tax collectors were considered to be collaborators with the enemy** by other Jews. **Many tax collectors were also unjust**, demanding more than what was the legal requirement, and “skimming” the extra for themselves. As a result, **they were *hated by the populace, and were held in *disdain****. They were classed as “sinners” by the Pharisees, and were considered to be among *the lowest* of the lowlife. **They were so despised that to become a tax collector was to *lose your civil rights among the Jews*. They were *not permitted to serve as witnesses in a court of law* (since, obviously, they were unscrupulous liars), **nor to ever serve as a judge** (since to be a tax collector generally meant you were guilty of graft and extortion). Furthermore, to become a tax collector meant that **you were summarily kicked out of the synagogue, and shunned by the religious community. Not only were you disgraced, but so was your entire family.** Tax collectors were as distasteful and unclean in the eyes of a righteous Jew as pagans and prostitutes.**

If the name, Levi, was an indication that this man was indeed from the *tribe* of Levi, his choice to become a tax collector was *especially* offensive. As a Levite, he was to be especially devoted to God, and would have been trained to serve in the temple courts, or as a scribe or even a judge. **By becoming a tax-collector, He would have betrayed the family heritage of being devoted to God as a judge and teacher of the Law, or maybe even a priest, ...all for the sake of money.** In order to sell out his nation, his heritage, his family, his reputation and all respectable relationships, **Levi must have been a very disillusioned, cynical and bitter man.** Initially, he must have been more concerned for wealth, and the power and sensuality it could bring, than any of these *intangible* things.

We have no record of any previous interchange with Jesus and Levi, but it could be that (like the other disciples called in Mark 1:16f. Cf. Jn. 1-4.) he may have talked with Jesus before. **Certainly, sitting in his tax booth, he would have been able to see the crowds following Jesus, and may have heard Him preach.** Interestingly, however, there was another disciple of Jesus, Jacob (translated as “James”), also referred to as “the one of Alphaeus”, who may have been Levi’s brother (compare Mk. 2:14; 3:18). If that were true, **Levi may have had extensive opportunity to observe the impact of Jesus on his own brother’s life, and to hear of His activities and teachings. Whatever exposure he may have had, when Jesus passed by and called upon him to follow Him, Levi immediately got up and left everything behind to follow Him (Lk. 5:28).** Whatever his reasons may have been for becoming a tax collector, *he heard and saw something radically different in Jesus, ...something that gave him a new hope and purpose*

in life. This new vision for life was so valuable in his mind and heart that *he threw aside his income and job security* to follow this Teacher from Nazareth. For him, this was not a mere decision to take in a religious meeting or two. He was making a complete life change. **He transferred his allegiance and focus in life from earthly power, wealth, sensual living and security to align himself with One who had no political or military might, no great store of wealth, and not even a place of His own to lay His head** (Matt. 8:20). The hope and fervor that was awakened in his soul was so much more valuable than all else (Mk. 8:35,36). **Levi was never the same from that day onward.**

Introduced as “Levi” by both Mark and Luke (Mk. 2:14; Lk. 5:27), we would not know that **he also went by the name “Matthew”**, if not for the gospel of Matthew. Although “Matthew” is in the listing of apostles (Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15; cf. Acts 1:13), *there is no explanation that the same man went by these two names*. We can *only* draw this conclusion from Matthew’s parallel account (Matt. 9:9f.). Levi was probably his given Jewish name. We don’t know if Matthew (meaning “gift of Yahweh”) was simply a second name, or if the name change was indicative of His change of life. At any rate, **after his encounter with Jesus, this man is always referred to as Matthew in the remainder of the NT.**

Note the significance of Jesus’ choice here. He *purposely chose* one of the most defiled, discredited and despised of men to become one of His closest associates, and appointed him who had no legal recognition or credibility among the Jews to be one of the star witnesses of His lordship and resurrection *to the Jewish nation*. He also *redeemed* the education that Levi had prostituted for money, sex and power to once again serve God, by using him to write one of the four accounts of His life recorded in the NT, the gospel according to Matthew.

In celebration of what he had found, Matthew gave a reception in honor of Jesus, inviting all his friends. There was a great crowd of tax collectors and “others” (called “sinners” by the Pharisees – 2:16) who came, and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. Apparently, Matthew’s house was large enough to have an open court or garden where these festivities were held. This was visible to those in the street. **The Pharisees and their scribes saw that Jesus was reclining at the table with these “undesirables” and were outraged.** They commented to His disciples (not to *Jesus* directly, but loud enough for Him to *overhear*), **“Why is He eating with tax collectors and sinners?”**

Jesus’ actions went *directly against* everything *they* stood for. They advocated separating themselves from sinful people and sinful places. In fact, **the name, Pharisee, meant “separated one”**. **To them, devotion to God was evidenced by separating oneself from what was unclean or unholy.** Their devotion was seen by the meticulous attention they gave to religious rituals and rules to keep themselves pure. **Unfortunately, their attention to holiness had made them proud and self-righteous. In their focus on being “separated from” all that was unclean, they had lost sight of what God had intended them to be “separated for”**. They had lost sight of justice, mercy and compassion for others in their quest for purity (Matt. 23:23). In their focus on outward religious behaviors, they had devised a schizophrenic approach to their spirituality such that they kept the *outward forms* of the law, while still allowing themselves to be *self-indulgent*, hypocritical, lawless and even hurtful toward others (Matt. 23:25,28).

What was Jesus’ response? “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.” In this figure, Jesus presents Himself as a doctor or healer who would, most reasonably, be working with those in need of His services, not those who are not. The original language adds some nuances which do not come through in English very well. In Matthew and Mark’s account, Jesus used a word for “healthy” which means “strong” or “robust”, while Luke uses the more medical term which means “whole, sound, healthy, or cured”. Interestingly, however, **all three record that Jesus used the same descriptive phrase for those “who are sick”**. **It would be accurately translated as “the ones having suffered harm” or “the ones having injury” or “having been mistreated”**. This is *not* the normal terminology used to describe the “sick” in the NT. It is a broader term than just physical sickness or disease. **This term encompasses any area of hurt, affliction, distress or brokenness, whether emotional, physical or spiritual.** In this application, it is clear that **Jesus viewed the people He was dining with as ones who have been damaged, broken, wounded or distressed by the events of their lives, or as a consequence of their choices.** **The emphasis of the Pharisees’ term, “sinners”, was that the problems these people had were all their own fault.** *They* are to blame for their circumstances, and their brokenness is primarily the consequences of *their* actions. **Jesus’ word picture, by contrast, does not address who is at fault. It looks only at the current condition.** It allows for any number of scenarios as to how a person might have come to be in that situation, but **the focus is on the fact that they are in need. They have “suffered harm”, and are in need of healing.** It is right and proper for a healer to be with those who need healing. **People will be won to Jesus more by love, compassion and caring that reaches out to them, rather than by exemplary moral or religious lives lived at a distance.** The broken need care and healing, *not* lecturing. Jesus is the consummate example of this, “For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”