

July 3, 2016

## MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE

Matthew 9:9-13

In these five verses, I see four scenes. Scene One is the Call of Matthew and his automatic following of Christ. Scene Two is The Banquet. Scene Three is The Dialogue between some Pharisees and the Disciples. And then, Scene Four is the Dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees. It is unknown what might have transpired between Scene One and Two, or, how much time may have elapsed, but it is obvious that the setting has changed from the Tax Booth to the home of Matthew. (We can assume it is the home of Matthew, because it was the home of Levi in the parallel passage in Luke where Levi gave a "Great Banquet" (Luke 5:29) after his call to follow.) It is not so obvious that the setting has changed when Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, but it would have been quite obvious that the Pharisees would not have dined with the tax collectors. They may have noticed who went in and out of Matthew's home along with Jesus, but, they would not have joined company with the tax collectors. So the setting for the two dialogues may very well have been outside the house of Matthew. The Banquet was inside Matthew's house, or, at least, in Matthew's courtyard.

SCENE ONE – The Tax Booth – Tax collectors were often Jews in the service of the Roman government and were regarded by their fellow Jews as traitors. The Pharisees wanted to follow the Letter of the Law, hoping that doing so would return God's blessing to Israel...very much like the desire of many conservative Christians to see us, in the USA, return to the Christian roots that were active in the establishment of our nation. The Pharisees felt, however that perfect obedience in the land was required by Levitical Law, but it could never truly happen as long as the pagan Roman presence continued. Tax collectors, on the other hand, had co-opted their heritage for the wealth they could gain, and, were both validating and assisting the system that would keep the Roman government there

In Barclay's commentary, (p.64), we are told that the taxation system left itself open to abuse. The Roman custom had been to farm out the taxes. They assessed a district at a certain figure and then sold the right to collect that figure to the highest bidder. So long as the buyer handed over the assessed figure at the end of the year, the tax collector was entitled to retain whatever else he could extract from the people; and since there were no newspapers, radio, or, television, and no way of making public announcements that would reach everyone, the common people had no real idea what they had to pay. So tax collectors assessed individuals amounts that not only assured them that they would collect enough to satisfy the Roman government, but to line their pockets very nicely.

This particular system led to such gross abuses by New Testament times that it had been discontinued in most lands. There were, however, still taxes to be paid, still quisling tax collectors working for the Romans, and still abuses and exploitations. There were two types of taxes. First, there were stated taxes. There was a poll tax which all men from 14 on up, and all women from 12 to 65, had to pay simply for the privilege of existing. There was a ground tax which consisted of one-tenth of all grain grown, and one fifth of all wine and oil produced. This could be paid in kind or commuted into money. There was also an income tax, at one percent. In all these taxes there was not much room for extortion.

But there were all kinds of duties. A tax was payable for using the main roads, the harbors, and the markets. A tax was payable on a cart, on each wheel of the cart, and on the animal which drew it. There was a sales tax on certain articles, and there were import and export duties. A tax collector could bid a man stop on the road and unpack his bundles and charge him well-nigh what he liked. If a man could not pay, sometimes the tax collector would offer to lend him money at an exorbitant rate of interest and so get him further into his clutches.

Robbers, murderers and tax collectors were classed together. A tax collector was barred from the synagogue. Obviously they were looked upon with great disdain by the rest of the Jewish population.

In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the tax-collector is named Levi. In Mark, the tax booth is beside the sea, and Levi is the first disciple called by Jesus. Most scholars assume that Matthew is Levi, though the names are not really interchangeable. ..Since he was a tax-collector, though, it is assumed that he was probably wealthy, and this is evidenced by the fact that in Mark and Luke, Levi gave a *great* banquet! So, when Jesus calls Matthew to follow Him, He is calling a social outcast. And I want to imagine that since He told Peter he would go from catching fish to catching people, I can picture Jesus telling Matthew that he would go from gaining earthly riches to gaining the riches of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever hook Jesus used to catch Levi, in Luke's story, -- and remember he was quite wealthy -- Levi "*left everything*" (Luke 5:28) and followed Jesus. He left his job... for good. So often we assume that the disciples of the inner circle of Jesus -- the Apostles -- still did what they had always done before because Peter and six others went fishing again in the Gospel of John (21:1-3) after the Resurrection had happened. The reality, in that story, is that they probably tried to return to what had been familiar when they didn't know what to do. The truth is that their primary vocation became the faith, the Church, and spreading the Gospel, making disciples. They left their businesses. They left their homes. They left their families. And though they probably still had their homes to some degree, most scholars believe their families either went with them, or, disowned them. But at least, we know that Matthew literally left everything.

SCENE TWO -- The Banquet -- All we know from Mark and Luke is that Levi gave a banquet in his own home and that there was a large crowd of tax collectors and *others*. It is obvious that Levi must have had a spacious house and at least a few servants if not several. And when it is described as a banquet, a *great* banquet, and not just a feast, we can assume that it was not only lavish but that it was quite lavish, with musicians and the best of everything. You can't help but wonder who Levi/Matthew was trying to impress. But this is a party for the new-moneyed "fortune five-hundred" of Israel. (The Pharisees were the old-moneyed wealth in Israel.) Maybe the only tax collector that wasn't there was Zacchaeus!

Here's what I think was happening... It could be a model for evangelism. Between Scene One and Scene Two -- The Call of Matthew and The Banquet -- Matthew is a changed man. He becomes a believer. Jesus has convinced him that the best part of life is eternity. It is spiritual. Jesus has convinced him that it's not about treasures on earth but treasures in heaven. Jesus has convinced him that true happiness is not known in the accumulation of great wealth but in discovering God's forgiveness and saving grace. And now Matthew wants to use his sphere of influence to do two things. 1) He wants to introduce others like himself to Jesus, and, 2) He wants to convince them that living for the Kingdom is the answer.

Consider the revolutionary systemic change that might occur should all those wealthy tax collectors have a change of heart. We don't know that that ever happened, but wouldn't it have been wonderful if each one of them had the same change of heart that Zacchaeus did, for example? -- "*Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much!*" (Luke 19:8) Not only that, but there were others that had come to Matthew's Banquet! We don't know who those others were or what they actually did, but the Pharisees describe them as sinners. I don't believe there would have been the usual dancing girls that you might see at a great banquet, because I think Matthew had already become a changed man and this would have been out of place in his life anymore, and, with Jesus there.... My guess is that those others were wealthy Romans and maybe other foreigners who lived in the land and made fortunes from the taxation of the people. And that leads to Scene Three!

SCENE THREE – The Disciples and the Pharisees – The question of the Pharisees’ is asked directly to the disciples – who are, so far, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. (Matthew 4:18-22) I picture the scene happening outside the house of Matthew. I imagine the Pharisees waiting until the banquet is over, because, as I said, it is very doubtful that they would have joined in fellowship with tax collectors. Perhaps Jesus has not yet left the house, but the disciples have. Jesus is still saying god-bye to Matthew and the last few partiers, perhaps still answering questions that His teaching may have raised. The Pharisees are complaining. In fact, their complaining is going to last for quite a few more chapters! But they say to the Disciples, “*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*” In Luke, this question is put first to the disciples only.

Implied in Luke’s story, in the question of the Pharisees, is the fact that the Disciples of Jesus were not just spectators in this scene. Peter, Andrew, James, and John, as merchants – businessmen of their day – fish merchants – had probably paid quite a bit of taxes to these tax collectors, and may very well have previously held them in contempt. But, I believe that their presence at Matthew’s Banquet affirms the gap of time between scenes one and two – the Call of Matthew, and, The Banquet – the change in Matthew, and their acceptance of Matthew as one of them. So they were not uncomfortable being at the Banquet.

ASIDE – Let’s stop for a moment here, and ask ourselves if it is ever appropriate to read into the Scriptures what I am suggesting as the gap between verse 9 and verse 10, between Scene One and Scene Two. The first answer is ‘No.’ Kingery may be completely wrong here. The animosity of Peter, Andrew, James, and John toward Matthew may have remained very deep even long after the Banquet had occurred. But I just don’t think so. That’s why the second answer is ‘yes.’ Somewhere along the line, Matthew was changed. Greed no longer motivated his actions, and a devotion to Christ would have bound him to the other disciples in a spirit of love and grace that would have made it possible for these closest disciples to have been very able to see beyond one another’s sinful character to the blessing that each one could be. And, if Jesus could heal a paralytic from his physical condition, cleanse a leper of his disease, cure illness, and cast out demons, surely He would have been able to affect the spiritual change I believe had come to Matthew, as immediate as it seems to have been. But this may have been the hardest healing of all. I just believe that it helps us in understanding the story, the nature of Christ, and the power of faith. So, it is not wrong to read into the Scriptures what may be very reasonable and justifiable notions pertaining to the story. Sometimes it is very difficult to fill in the gaps that seem to exist. But here, it seems to make sense. What I hope to do is pull back the curtain and try to see a larger picture. Suffice it to say that what you are hearing is what *Kingery* sees!

SCENE FOUR – Jesus and the Pharisees – Here, I picture the scene still in the street outside Matthew’s house, after Jesus has left and has now caught up to Peter, Andrew, James, and John. It is not unlikely that it is dark outside, now, due to the fact that such a banquet may have been held after working hours at the end of the day. In fact, it could even be after midnight. And the late timing could also account for the arrival of all the tax collectors and others from the various taxing districts who may have had to travel for part of the day just to get to the Banquet. (Remember, people rarely traveled after dark in those days!) This could also be part of what happened in *the gap*. In fact, quite some time may have passed between verse 9 and verse 10. Somehow, now, they could see one another to recognize and speak with each other, so assume that there may have been torches, or, lamps in the hands of a few people.

So Jesus hears about the questions of the Pharisees and He responds. I don’t think many of the other banquet-attenders would have been there to hear what Jesus said, because I just don’t think Jesus would really want to say all this in front of them. He admits they are sinners and they might have been offended by that. On the other hand, they may have already heard what Jesus was going to tell the

Pharisees, so, some could have been there. I just don't think so because at this moment these confrontational words are meant more for the Pharisees than for the tax collectors and others.

What Jesus says is at one and the same time both affirming of the tax collectors and others and jabbing at the Pharisees. I can almost picture Jesus gesturing at the Pharisees and speaking with a tone of sarcasm when He says, "*Those who are well have no need of a physician...*" And then gesturing over his shoulder (intending the tax collectors and others) as he says with compassion... "*but those who are sick...*"

And if Jesus had gestured again toward them, perhaps even pointing a sharp finger, it was when He said, "*Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice!'*" And indicating the tax collectors and others when He said, "*For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners...*" And if those who had shared the Banquet with Christ had experienced changed hearts and became spiritually right with God and Christ, the words of Christ would have jabbed the Pharisees even deeper.

This message fits more obviously exactly what it implies. Either way, those who are self-righteous, who think they need no change of heart, are actually the ones who need it most. The outcasts already know they need something: Reconciliation. Jesus has already brought it to them, and they may already have found it through His having offered it unconditionally and graciously at the Banquet. Jesus is a doctor for the sickness of sin. And when people don't think they need a doctor, the doctor can't help them. Meanwhile, the doctor can often see symptoms the patient may deny or gloss over.

What is the message for us? 1) Don't be self-righteous. Know you are a sinner in need of the Great Physician. 2) Invite people in your sphere of influence to come to the Great Banquet. And let them see you as a changed person. And 3) Be sure Christ is there and can affect the same change in them. And, above all, be gracious enough to see people not as the sinners they are, but as the redeemed souls they can be. See them not with the background of the dot, but with the background of the line. Not with the world as the setting, but with God's Kingdom as the setting! Amen? Amen!