



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for The Feast of St. Matthew
September 21, 2025

From Extortioner to Evangelist

Matthew 9:9–13

⁹ *As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” So he arose and followed Him.*

¹⁰ *Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*

¹² *When Jesus heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”*

The Apostle Matthew was a cheater and a thief. For him, getting people to part with their cold hard cash was like stealing candy from a baby. Matthew was an extortioner! He worked for the Roman government at a toll booth. His contract stated that he was to collect money from the people and then remit a certain amount of that to the government. Anything he collected over and above what was owed was his to keep. That’s how tax collectors got to be so rich. They were shysters! Tricky, greasy, fast-talkers. They unfairly taxed people and changed the rules as they went along. One day the toll would be 2 denarii and maybe the next day it would be 10. No rhyme or reason. No logic. And no explanation. They would sit in their filthy rich houses, wearing their filthy rich clothes, eating their filthy rich food with their filthy rich tax-collector buddies, laughing with them all the way to the bank. Matthew was no different than the rest of them. Filthy. Just filthy.

As you can imagine, Matthew and his colleagues were hated! Despised. Loathed, if you could afford a fancy word like that. The Pharisees hated them so much they barred them from the synagogue. Think about it: they weren’t allowed to go to church! They were also not permitted to testify in a Jewish court of law – because they were known liars! The pharisees were forbidden even to talk to them. A good Pharisee would tell his friends, “Stay away from them! Don’t trust them! You can’t believe a word they say. They’ll strip you of your last penny, if give them half a chance! They’re nothing but filthy, stinking troublemakers.”

You can think of people like Matthew today, can’t you? People who get rich under false pretenses and dishonest gain. Insurance companies come to mind, with executives who get fat off the profit margin. Corporate big-wigs who work half as hard as you do and



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get paid five times as much. Remember when the President of the New York Stock exchange had to resign because someone discovered that, despite record market losses, he was taking home \$140 million a year? Doesn't make sense does it?

Oh yes, there are plenty of Matthews today. Politicians who are only in it for themselves, used car salesmen who don't tell you everything they know about the car you want to buy, drug dealers, human traffickers. And don't get me started on gamblers and alcoholics. Or what about people who sit around watching those disgusting reality shows? And that guy at work who always has a new dirty joke to tell you. And what about those gossips who share other peoples' stories and cut them down with hurtful words? Or that lady who's always angry and resentful. That mother who can't seem to control her children in church. What a lousy world we live in, you say. I know, because I've said it myself. All those people, they're sick, aren't they! They cheat on their taxes, they lie to their spouses, it's appalling the things they're willing to do. They need some kind of doctor, don't they! Am I hitting a little too close to home?

Repent, beloved. Look in the mirror and repent. You are Matthew! I am Matthew! We're sick. Greedy. Self-righteous. Sinners through and through. Oh, maybe we're not extortioners, but we have plenty of other sins to make up for that.

And yet, our Lord Jesus called Matthew to be His apostle. And He calls you and me to be His disciples. That doesn't make any sense to us, either. But we're not the ones who matter most. Jesus is. And He gets to decide our worth.

Matthew reports his call to discipleship ever so starkly. He simply says, "As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax booth. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' So he arose and followed Him."

Follow Me! 'Ακολουθεῖ μοι. Two simple words that changed Matthew for eternity! Matthew the extortioner became Matthew the Apostle and Evangelist. What was in those words, you ask? "The power of God unto salvation!" In the beginning the same God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. He spoke to nothing and out of nothing came something . . . everything! – light, earth, water, wind, trees, animals, Adam and Eve, and all that there is. Now, that's power! And the same power is present in these two words, "Follow Me!" Those words instantly created saving faith in Matthew.

Jesus calls you today, beloved, just like He called Matthew. "Follow me," He says. He called you by name in Holy Baptism. "I baptize you in the NAME of the FATHER and of the SON + and of the HOLY SPIRIT. You are mine . . . for keeps. My adopted child."

But you know how it goes. You like to go back to your old way of life. So did Matthew. So did the rest of them. What did Peter say after Jesus' crucifixion? "I'm going fishing." It was comfortable, familiar. So must Matthew's former lifestyle have been to him. That's our nature, isn't it. Our Old Adam still lives in us – the old Adam and Eve who love to listen to the voice of the tempter, that liar Satan.



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His ways are oh, so tempting, his voice so beautiful and alluring. The fruit looks so delicious. We want it! “One little bite won’t hurt, will it?” He whispers into our ear. “One little sniff, one little drink, one turn of the card, one tug on the one-armed bandit, couldn’t possibly hurt, could it?” “It’ll only be a one night stand! Your spouse will never find out.” “Don’t worry about the anger or the hatred or the unkind word or thought – those people deserve it any way” he tells you. “Listen man,” he says, “You’re better than them – you’re good, oh so good! You’re a better worker, a better parent, a better everything. Just do whatever you have to to get ahead – forget the other guy! He’s a loser anyway.” “And don’t listen to that preacher up there; pay no attention to what he’s saying at the moment. You don’t need him or that church. You’re not really as sick as he says. You probably could have said it better, anyway. Look at those people sitting there. This whole place is so out of date. The hymns are boring. That liturgy is irrelevant. What a museum! Come with me; I’ll show you a good time – I’ll take you to a place that’s absolutely ablaze!”

And so many times we listen. We listen and we fall! We believe Satan’s lies and we crash and burn. As Paul says, “The good that I want to do I never do and the evil I don’t want to do is what I keep on doing. Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

But you see, Paul knows the answer and so does Matthew! Do you? Let me tell you... Christ Jesus our Lord is the answer! He’s the only answer. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life! He is the Great Physician of body and soul. He heals you. He forgives you. He comes to rescue you from your sin and death. And He does it in the most unusual way. He took all of your sin into His own body. He carried it to the cross and was crucified for you. Your sins and mine nailed Him there. He bore them willingly. The Good Shepherd dies for the lambs. The death and hell you deserve He suffered in your stead. He buried your sins, defeated your greatest enemy, and has risen triumphantly from the grave, giving you all that is His. You inherit all that is His. He exchanges your sin with His perfect righteousness. He washes your sin-sick body with His own blood – and makes you pure and undefiled, so that you might stand before the Father’s throne, justified.

The Good news, beloved, is that Doctor Jesus still makes house calls. He comes to this house today, and, like a good surgeon, He finds the root of the problem and removes it, using the scalpel of the Law, and then applies the medicine of immortality – His Means of Grace. This medicine is the balm that saves you from death’s cold grip. That medicine is poured out again this day – it was applied to you at the very beginning of the service as you confessed your sin-sickness. It will be applied again in His body and blood. No other medicine can boast of giving eternal life. Only Jesus’ grace and mercy do that. So come to Him. Believe in Him. Trust in Him. Receive Him and be healed. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen