

ANOTHER DAY ANOTHER DINNER

Matthew 9:9–13

The call of Matthew follows the incident we looked at two weeks ago when four friends of a paralysed man carried him on a mat to Jesus. They couldn't get near because of the crowds and so they lowered him down through the roof. Jesus amazed the crowds by healing the man's body but he did something far more significant. He forgave his sins, much to the distress of the Pharisees, because they couldn't fit this in with their neat, watertight theology.

That's the context for verse 9. 'As Jesus went on from there...' The criticism didn't make him stop. If anything it spurred him on. He had a mission to fulfil and he got on with it. Do you remember the three things to do with criticism? Examine it. If it's valid act on it. And then, forget about it. Move on. That's what Jesus did. Don't get into a spiral of self-pity. Keep going.

As Jesus moved on he moved from a home to an office. The very next place he visited was a place of work. Tomorrow that's where Jesus is going to be. He's going to be at your place of work, your office, your school, your college, your factory, your hospital. He's not just listening to the words we say today. He'll be listening to what we say tomorrow. He's not just taking note of the promises we make today. He'll be observing how far we fulfil them tomorrow.

'As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.'

Matthew was a tax collector. In Jesus' day the people were subject to ground tax, income tax and poll tax. Some things never change. In addition everything that was imported was taxed. Every caravan that used the main roads, every ship that came into harbour, they were all taxed. Tax collectors were not popular because the taxes they collected were for the occupying forces and what made matters worse was that they were not honest. They were on the fiddle. They took advantage of their position to cream off some of the money for themselves.

They were unpopular with the ordinary people and in addition they were condemned by the Pharisees. That was because their business brought them into contact with Gentiles and with pagan currency and therefore they were ceremonially unclean.

Tax collectors did have friends but not many, and their friends were a small group of people like themselves. Jesus said, 'If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?' His point was that tax collectors didn't actually have many friends. They belonged to a very small circle.

When Jesus arrived at Matthew's office he found him at his work, sitting at the desk. Jesus said, 'Follow me,' and Matthew got up and followed him.

We're not told the background to his call. I wonder if it all began with the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke tells us that 'Tax collectors also came to be baptised.

"Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them' (Luke 3:12, 13). I wonder if Matthew was one of those tax collectors. Often people come to Jesus gradually. It takes time for his message to penetrate.

It's possible that Matthew had been part of the huge crowd in that house when Jesus forgave the paralysed man and made him well again. At all events, when Jesus said, 'Follow me,' he got up and followed him. Sometimes when Jesus comes into a person's life he leaves them where they are. Sometimes his call is to leave where they are and what they're doing and take an adventure of faith.

I think there's a little clue in the way Matthew records his response to Jesus. He 'got up' and followed him. There are some occupations that get you down. Work is such a big part of our lives and if you're unhappy at work that's a great burden to bear. When Adam was told the terms of the curse in the Garden of Eden part of that curse was 'painful toil'.

Some occupations can get you down. Some occupations can bring you down. There are places where a Christian would find it hard to work because of the nature of the business. We do need to be aware of the wider picture. When Jesus called Matthew to follow him, Matthew got up. He rose.

Ambition in work is not a bad thing but when you get the opportunity to advance ask yourself whether it really is a step up. It may mean more money. It may mean more responsibility. It may mean more recognition. But is it a step up? Can it in any sense be seen as a response to the call of Jesus?

The next thing we read about Matthew is that he's giving a dinner. It's a very different occasion to the one we looked at last week, when Jesus attended a function in the home of Simon the Pharisee. At that dinner the guests were all very respectable. Matthew's guest list was just the opposite. It contained 'many tax collectors and sinners'. It was the sort of occasion that gave Jesus his bad reputation and it wasn't long before the Pharisees had something to say about it.

Before we look at the reaction of the Pharisees just notice Matthew's reaction to the call of Jesus. He left his job but he didn't abandon his friends. His new status as a follower of Jesus did not make him high and mighty. He didn't look down on the people who had shared his old lifestyle. He loved them all the more and wanted them to know Jesus too. That was so different from the Pharisees.

Verse 11: 'When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"' There's an element of cowardice there. Did you spot it? 'They asked his disciples...' However the reply they got was from Jesus himself. Verses 12, 13: 'On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

In these words of Jesus there are three contrasts: the healthy and the sick, mercy and sacrifice, the righteous and sinners. The first and the last go together: the healthy and the sick, the righteous and sinners.

Can you imagine going to the doctor. Perhaps you've got a rash on your skin and when you get to the door there's a security guard there saying, 'What's wrong with you?' You tell him and he says, 'Sorry, you can't come in. This is a health centre. We can't have you spreading your rash in here.' It's ridiculous, isn't it.

Jesus was saying two things. He was saying, 'Sin is like sickness. It needs to be dealt with.' But he was also saying, 'I'm the doctor. I won't turn anyone away. I want to be available. It's sick people that are my business.'

That was the whole point of the incident with the paralysed man. Jesus was able to heal him physically but there was a far deeper need, the need to be healed spiritually, to be forgiven, to have his sins dealt with.

When Jesus talked about those who were healthy and those who were sick he wasn't saying that the Pharisees were all right. They thought they were, but Jesus had something more to say to them. He used an expression that was a common rabbinic formula. 'Go and learn what this means.' When he said that, he was speaking their language. He was addressing them as a superior teacher, using the kind of formula that they would use when putting someone right about a point of law. The specific

point of law in this case was an Old Testament text, Hosea chapter 6 verse 6, in which God is speaking: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

That didn't mean that sacrifice was wrong. What God was saying was that mercy was more important than sacrifice. Jesus' love to those who were sinners was an act of mercy. It was more pleasing to God than the demand of the Pharisees for ceremonial correctness. They had failed to grasp that truth.

Jesus' quotation of this Old Testament text works at more than one level. In its original context it was addressed to Israelites who had gone away from God. God was speaking in judgment. 'Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears,' he said. The formalities of temple worship were being observed but they were not being matched by a godly lifestyle.

When Jesus used this particular quotation he was identifying the Pharisees with those disobedient Israelites of Hosea's day. He was saying, in effect, 'You're just like they were.' You think you're the cream of God's people but the cream has gone sour. You belong to the category of those who have gone astray.

We're not told what the outcome of Matthew's dinner party was. There's no record of mass conversions. What there is is a record of mass compassion, unbounded love, wonderful mercy.

Matthew found Jesus at his work and then he made Jesus welcome in his home. The Pharisees were theologically correct but they had lost sight of God's compassion and love. Jesus demonstrated that love in full measure.