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Preacher: Gordon Frame

[0 : 00] This morning we looked at quite a broad passage from Matthew. We looked at three incidents. But this evening I just want to look at the one. So we're homing in on just a few verses.

And those are the verses that I read for you a little bit earlier from Matthew chapter 9. And what we have here is a little piece of autobiography.

You'll notice obviously that we're reading the Gospel of Matthew. And the person involved or one of the people involved in this passage is somebody called Matthew.

And Matthew is writing about himself. He even, perhaps very humbly, or perhaps because he's rather ashamed of what he was before, he just writes in the third person.

He doesn't say, this happened to me. He just terms himself Matthew. And it's a famous passage. It's a passage that has interested a lot of people over the years.

[1 : 02] There's actually been a lot of paintings of this passage of Jesus meeting with Matthew in his tax booth. One of the most famous by Caravaggio painted a wonderful, well-known painting about this scene.

But I think it should be a passage of great encouragement for us all as we look tonight at this changed life of this man Matthew.

So let me just give you a little bit of the background, what we know of Matthew, also known as Levi. He lived in Capernaum. And amongst, I would guess, many people in that city, he would have been just about the most unpopular and reviled person.

He would not have been well-liked by the majority of people. And that was principally because of his job. Now we might all begin to think today of people who get a little bit of stick because of their jobs.

I remember a little while ago, a lady coming to our church as a visitor. And I went over and spoke to her and welcomed her and so on. We got talking. And she must have known by then, somehow or the other, that I was a teacher.

[2 : 26] And I was asking her what job she did. And she says, I'm a little bit frightened to tell you. And I said, oh, why is that? She says, I'm an Ofsted inspector. And I suppose, you know, perhaps for quite a number of teachers, that might be a barrier to get over.

And I suppose, again, in recent years, the last two or three years, you know, bankers and politicians have got a very, very bad press, haven't they?

And for some of those people, it's very understandable and right that they've had a very bad press. But I do feel very sorry sometimes, you know, for honest bankers and honest politicians because they very easily, and there are some of them, because they can very easily get tarred with the same brush.

But it's very understandable why Matthew was disliked because he was a tax collector. And it was because of how things operated in Israel.

I'm sure many of you know this already, that at the time Jesus was about, Israel was an occupied territory. It was part of the Roman Empire.

[3 : 42] And so Matthew, being a tax collector, he had chosen to work for the Romans, to work for the Roman Empire, and to collect taxes on their behalf from the Jewish people.

And many of the Jewish people absolutely resented having to pay taxes at all to the Romans.

So, just because of that, by the very fact that he took that job on, he would have been fanatically hated by some people. But there was a bit more than that, because many tax collectors, Zacchaeus was another example, and I'm sure it wasn't all of them, but many of them, saw it as a great opportunity to become very, very wealthy.

They were renowned for being corrupt and for fleecing people. They were just trying to get as much money out of the job as they could.

They would buy it almost as a franchise from the Romans. They would have a certain amount they would pay over to the Roman Empire, but the more they could take, well, the better it was for them.

[5 : 04] So, you can imagine, if they were doing this as well, if Matthew had been doing this as well, and we certainly know that Zacchaeus did, because he gave money back from those he had overcharged, you can see that they were seen as being anti-nationalistic people, almost like quizlings, you know, working for the occupying forces.

They were seen as being anti-religious people, and many of them were barred from the synagogue, and were not allowed, actually, to be witnesses in a Jewish court.

You know, that is the reputation that tax collectors had. And the particular word that's used for Matthew here, for being a tax collector, was a particular type of one, one called Amochess, I can't be absolutely sure of the Hebrew pronunciation, but it was a category who were particularly despised.

They were people who didn't just take one tax, but they would take taxes on things like boats, on your fish, on the nets that you cast in, and that's why his tax booth was down there by the lakeside.

Basically, anything that moved, and quite a few things that didn't, the Mochesh would tax. And the rabbis of the time, the Jewish leaders, used to say, for a little Mochesh, repentance is well nigh impossible.

[6 : 43] That's how the Jewish leaders saw people who were working like that. You might think of them as the way people might think of a politician who has used his position to feather his own nest and has little or no moral conscience.

And I guess they would be pretty despised. So what sort of a man was he likely to be, to be in this job? Well, he was very possibly very wealthy because of it.

As I say, we certainly know that Zacchaeus was, the person who did the similar job in Jericho. He would probably have to be pretty hard-nosed and thick-skinned, you know, to withstand the way in which other people looked at him.

Some years ago, I think it's still the case to a certain extent, but the Millwall football supporters were always known as being some of, you know, the worst troublemakers, the worst hooligans.

And some of them thought that, you know, their reputation wasn't as deserved as it should have been. But they came out with a chant because they got so fed up with this, everybody hates us and we don't care.

[8 : 01] You know, they got to the stage of, okay, everybody thinks that of us, well, we don't care. And I suspect, you know, Matthew would have had something of that attitude to be able to carry on.

He would have been a religious outcast, but he wasn't friendless. Don't think of him as just a loner with no friends at all, because there were many others like him, the tax collectors and what were called the sinners.

The ones who didn't keep to the religious law, who weren't found in the synagogue week by week. So he was a religious outcast and that would have cut him off from a lot of people, but don't think of him as a friendless man.

He had his own group, his own circle of friends, as we'll see later. So that's a little bit of background to this man, Matthew. But then wonderfully, in this passage, we see his conversion.

We see him turning to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is to such a man that Jesus says, follow me.

[9 : 24] Come and follow me. And you know, that very simple thing where we need to recognise, isn't it, that Jesus does come for rotten people.

He cares about the sinners. He is interested in them. He is, as we'll see a little bit later, a spiritual doctor for people who know that they are sick.

I got to know a little while ago, not very well, but I got to know and talk to a man who was, he was a minister in Leeds, but he was also the chaplain to Leeds United.

And it was at the time when there was a player there called Vinnie Jones, who some of you might know him from, he's now been in films like Lock, Stock and Two Barrels, but he was renowned for being a pretty fierce player on the pitch.

Rarely got through three or four weeks without at least a yellow card and maybe a red card. And I remember talking to this guy who's the chaplain at Leeds United and he says, you know, the one thing I never had any problem in persuading Vinnie Jones about was that he was a sinner.

[10 : 37] He said he didn't have any problems with that, he could accept that. He said it was a bit harder to get him past that stage, but he was one I didn't have any problems with. But it's interesting, Jesus looks at Matthew, a lot of people saw only a tax collector and they loathed him because of that.

But we read that as Jesus went from there, he saw a man named Matthew. Yes, he was a tax collector, but he was a man, he was a human being.

Yes, a human being who was marred by sin, a human being who had rebelled against God and against his laws, but still a human being made in God's image and capable of having relationship with God.

And he called him as he has called many of us here. and I wonder if we still remember and thank God for the pit he took us from and how he has brought us onto the rock.

Do we still remember and give thanks to God for what he took us from? And again, perhaps tonight there is somebody who through through these poor words tonight God may call you.

[12 : 14] How will you respond to him? Well, it's instant, isn't it? Follow me, he told him. And Matthew got up and followed him.

he got up out of that tax booth and he followed the Lord Jesus. Now it's perfectly possible that this was the first time he'd ever met Jesus and this was just instantaneous that he immediately recognised something in this man and it was an instantaneous work of the Holy Spirit.

That's perfectly possible. we're not told. But I think it's more likely that he being a resident of Capernaum would have heard of this man before.

Capernaum tended to be the base that Jesus used in his ministry around Galilee. And I suspect that Matthew had heard of Jesus had perhaps seen him perhaps had even heard of this recent event of him healing the paralytic man.

And the Holy Spirit had worked in his life and he saw here is a man who is different to any other. What kind of man is this? As we thought this morning.

[13 : 40] And he also recognised him as a man who wouldn't just stand in judgement on him but would be willing to forgive him.

The Holy Spirit has certainly been working in his conscience whether it was instant or whether it had been happening over a length of time. And again let me ask that question bluntly of you tonight.

What about you? Is that that case for somebody here tonight? That perhaps you've been coming along to church for a while your conscience has sometimes pricked but you managed to shove it behind you and forget about that.

Or maybe you've never even thought about it before. But perhaps tonight God would speak to you through Matthew.

And what did he do? He got up and he followed the Lord Jesus Christ. He left his licence to print money. You know that's what that job was really almost a licence to print money.

[14 : 46] But he was prepared to get up and to give that up. He saw there was something better in following Jesus. Just as the two sets of brothers James and John and Peter and Andrew got up and left their boating industry burnt their boats not perhaps literally but in reality and they followed the Lord Jesus Christ.

And let me be honest with you. Following Jesus will lead to leaving some things behind. No doubt about that.

Obviously if you're involved in some very clearly anti-godly behaviour anti-Christian activity it will mean leaving that behind.

there is a cost in following him. And it may be actually leaving behind some things that are not wrong in themselves but Jesus gives us different priorities and things that become more important and so we may leave some things behind which are not bad in themselves but which are in danger of taking the place the first place of God but what I can promise you and many people here would testify to that is this that we will never be worse off there was a point when Peter came to Jesus and he said to Jesus we have left all we had to follow you and Jesus said I tell you the truth no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life it says even in this age even in your life now

I will give you far more than you give up and even beyond that you will have for eternity eternal life with me so Matthew got up and followed him so we've seen something of Matthew's background we've seen something of his conversion now let's see something of his witness as I said a little bit earlier he might have been a religious outcast he might not have been welcomed in the synagogue but that doesn't mean he was friendless he had plenty of other people his fellow tax collectors and his fellow sinners in inverted commas and I said before what that meant was people who generally took no notice of the religious law turned their back on it and just got on with their lives without that he had plenty of these friends in Capernaum and what does he do having followed Jesus he immediately rounds these people up and says come for a meal in my house and come and meet this man this person who has changed my life who has turned it upside down so we see there while Jesus was having dinner at

[18:12] Matthew's house many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples can I say something to you in the church here when somebody comes to know the Lord becomes a Christian make sure that their life in the church isn't made so busy that they can't have time to still spend with their non-Christian friends how can we bring people to the Lord if we don't know people who aren't already Christians we had a thrilling experience a couple of years ago in York there was a lady who had just been recently converted from really a total non-church background and we usually have a harvest supper but we haven't got our own building in

York as a church so we sometimes borrowed a building we borrowed the Spurrier Gate Centre and so on but this year we decided instead of having one big harvest supper in a building it was partly because we couldn't book it we said well let's have three or four of them in different people's homes and this one woman who had just been converted and she's quite a character in many ways she and her husband ran a taxi firm she's got tattoos all down both arms and various other places and she says can I have one of them in our house we said yeah fine and it was great we went along there unfortunately I wasn't there but Mark our pastor was preaching there he said it's probably the most non-Christians I've had the opportunity to speak to in one meeting in all the time I've been here in York because she was recently converted she had lots of non-Christian friends she wasn't embarrassed in asking them to come along and hear this we had the guy from the tattoo studio there we had lots of other people of her friends unchurched people but there's the opportunity there to share with them so please when people are converted there are going to be some areas obviously of life where we cannot carry on which are specifically anti-Christian and it may be because of that that sadly there are some friends who we just cannot carry on with but there may be many others who we can still do wholesome healthy things with and keep that friendship and keep that relationship and be able to bring them along to hear what is so exciting to you and what has changed your life so that's what he does so there's

Jesus in the midst of all these irreligious people sharing the good news fabulous great everybody's going to be absolutely thrilled with that aren't they well not everybody thought so here we have next we read very sadly about a group of Pharisees these were the real religious guys these were the ones who kept the law of God meticulously and they kept the religious life of the community going under the Romans which was no easy task but they come with a bitter question it's interesting they don't go to Jesus himself they go to his disciples perhaps trying to almost form a wedge between them and they say calls himself a holy man calls himself a man from God if he really was he would know what these sort of people are like why is he eating with these irreligious people these tax collectors these sinners and they were absolutely disgusted with him for that they despised

Matthew and everybody like him and they despised Jesus for not despising Matthew and in doing so they despised the generosity of God let's see how Jesus deals with them well he turns their own logic against them he says you think that these people are spiritually sick well he says so do I I think they are as well so surely they are the people who need the spiritual doctor they need me I have come he says not for the healthy but for the sick it would be a strange thing wouldn't it if we went to our local GPs and we had a big notice up there and says you know if you're sick if you're not feeling well you know please go home disappear I don't want to see you however if you're feeling perfectly healthy and very well do come in be rather odd wouldn't it that's what

Jesus says to them you think these people are far away from God they're spiritually sick so do I and that is why I am glad to go to them and share the good news and then he challenges these Pharisees about their understanding of the scriptures now I tell you that would have really got underneath their skin because these were the guys who knew the Old Testament inside out a bit like listening to a concert pianist and suggesting that he learns how to read music you know he's really getting at them where it might hurt them he actually uses this phrase with them go and learn what this means and what's interesting about that is that was one of their favourite lines it was one of the teachers of the law favourite lines they would say to people go and learn what this means and

[24 : 48] Jesus turns it back on them and he says it to them and he quotes to them from the Old Testament from that little piece that I read for you a little bit earlier from Hosea and Hosea had said to a rebellious Israel I desire mercy not sacrifice you can go through the outward the external acts of religion Hosea said you can bring all your bulls and all your goats for sacrifices he says but if your heart is hard if there's no mercy in your heart and love towards God and love towards people your sacrifices stink put it as strongly as that religion stinks in God's nostrils if it's all on the outside and doesn't have a love for

God and for other people at the heart of it it's no wonder you know that later the Pharisees really turned against Jesus and sort of put him to death he hit them sometimes where it really hurt he recognized their hypocrisy now maybe that some of you might be sitting here tonight and saying well yeah that's all very interesting but you know that doesn't really have an awful lot to say to me I'm not like Matthew I'm not in a job that people hate people wouldn't think of me as a tax collector and as a sinner does Jesus only come if you like for immoral non-respectable people far from it if you look through the gospels you'll see you will see some Pharisees coming to know the

Lord Jesus Nicodemus would be an example who first of all came to Jesus at night and still was a bit unsure of him but later stood up for Jesus in the middle of the council when everybody else wanted him killed and later would pay for all of the spices with which his body was embalmed after the crucifixion there was also another member of the council of Joseph of Arimathea who became a believer and in whose tomb Jesus was buried and we don't only see Jesus at having meals with the tax collectors and sinners we also read of him going and having meals at the home of Pharisees Jesus wasn't bigoted in that way but the barrier that many of them had and the barrier that people can still have some people can still have today is actually thinking that we're good enough for

God and that we are superior over other people and that is the greatest barrier if we're in denial over the cancer of sin in our own hearts we won't go to the doctor for our souls so I hope that's not the case with anybody here tonight if anybody thinks you're too bad for God to ever accept you I would say look at Matthew and look how he was changed but if you think you're too good that you don't need God's salvation frankly that's a bigger problem and you really need to ask God to show your heart for what it really is a man called Julius Schnuin says this that what we need is to accept the death sentence that our words actions and thoughts deserve the death sentence from

God and then the acquittal of God the wonderful acquittal of God that Jesus has died for those sins that would deservedly have kept us separated from God forever but Jesus has paid the penalty for that accept the death sentence accept that we're not worthy of God's acceptance but then turn to him and receive his acquittal or may God help us all to respond to his word may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our father who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and word

[30 : 12] Amen Amen