

In the House Of... Part 2 (Matthew)

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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(Presentation slide 1) Last week we began a series entitled, "In the Home of...", considering incidents which occurred in the homes of Jesus' disciples and friends. (Presentation slide 2) We looked at what happened in the home of Peter and saw that his mother-in-law was healed of a fever on the Sabbath day. Many others wanted to come for healing but waited until after the sun went down because of their misunderstanding of what true Sabbath keeping was about. (Presentation slide 3) We saw that it was in Peter's home that the man was lowered through the roof and found forgiveness and healing.

We'll continue our tour today of homes Jesus visited. The Word of the Lord comes to us today from the book of Matthew, chapter 9. We read, "Then as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' And he arose and followed Him." Matthew 9:9. This is an amazing story! It probably happened at Capernaum also, where Peter lived. (Presentation slide 4) Here are the remains of ancient Capernaum as they look today, (Presentation slide 5) and here is where tradition locates the remains of Peter's house.

"As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office." It's not easy for us today to comprehend what it meant to be the "tax man" back in Judea when Jesus was here. People may have unfriendly attitudes toward the IRS today, but those feelings don't come close to how tax collectors were viewed 2,000 years ago. This was during a period in which Israel was occupied and controlled by Rome, making life very onerous and distasteful for the Jews. A Roman governor occupied the seat of authority in Judea. (Presentation slide 6) Roman soldiers were seen everywhere throughout the land. They had the "right" to ask you to stop whatever you were doing and carry their duffle bag up to one mile! Imagine the surprise when Jesus said, "If a soldier asks you to carry his bag one mile, carry it two miles," giving birth to the "second mile" principle. He no doubt surprised many when He held up a coin and said, "Render to Caesar what is his, to God what is His."

(Presentation slide 7) No one likes to pay taxes, but to think that your hard earned money was going to go to support the lavish and luxuriant life-style of a foreign emperor was especially galling. But to make matters even worse, the Romans cleverly farmed out the collection of taxes to local residents, Jews. They created "franchises" which were purchased or otherwise acquired,

giving the holder the authority to collect the Roman taxes. (Presentation slide 8) The tax collector was called a “publican,” a term coming from the Latin *publicanus*, a “person who paid for the privilege of collecting the public revenues in return for a percentage.”

The tax collector, or publican, was given the right to charge each customer whatever he felt he could collect, and when he had passed on to Rome what was required, he could keep the rest. This resulted in the bank accounts of the publicans growing ever upward, while their reputation plunged ever downward. To be identified as a publican was to be equated with the most despicable class of society. It was tantamount to being called a traitor and a robber. These were people you wouldn't want to be associated with, for fear that their reputation might rub off on you.

It would have been quite a shock back then to witness Jesus calling Matthew to “follow Him.” Eyebrows were raised; tongues were wagged. You could have heard the whispers carried from ear to ear. “Did you hear who Jesus asked to be His follower? Matthew! Matthew? Yes, the tax collector!”

It would have also been a great shock to see Matthew's response. “He arose and followed Him.” I'm certain that many there would have asked themselves, “Is he really leaving his tax collection business? That's a lot of money he's walking away from.” How did it happen that one whose life had been so centered on money could just stand up and walk away from it? With his name being “Levi” Matthew, we wonder if somewhere in the background of his life there might have been some religious instruction which had been laid aside, some truth of Scripture which had been buried, the treasures of this life being attractive to him.

But then, like King Solomon of old, he grew weary of a life focused on materialism and longed for a deeper and more satisfying life than one which was just about “things.” The Holy Spirit had been pointing Matthew to a better way, a different perspective on life and when the Savior invited him to “follow Me,” instantly he heard the voice of the One Who only can give meaning and depth to our lives. Oh, that we would hear His call today and respond! Too late many will discover that there's a world of difference between making a “living,” and making money! Someday the things of this earth will lose all their value in the light of His presence!

For some people there it might have seemed like Matthew was making a great sacrifice by “leaving all” and following Christ. But was he really? Yes, there were no doubt large quantity of coins left on his desk, and the prospect of many more in the future. Job security? Matthew the publican had it! But his decision must be weighed in the light of eternity. One day you and I, by God's grace, will ride in a cloud of glory to the kingdom He's prepared. We'll approach the shimmering sea of glass beyond which glow the glistening gates of pearl. (Presentation slide 9) Beneath this unimaginable city will be twelve foundations, bearing the names of the twelve apostles. On one of those foundations will be the name “Matthew.”

I wonder how Matthew will feel when he sees his name there? Remember that this information about the apostles' names on the foundations, was given by John, the last of the twelve to remain alive, long after the others had sealed their testimony in blood. Matthew was never able to read what is says in Revelation 21 concerning the beautiful city. It will be a surprise to him when he sees his name there. It will be a surprise to him that many there will know him, having read his account of the Savior's life, the "Gospel According to Matthew."

Do you think for one instant that he will say, "You know what? I should have stayed at my tax office and padded my bank account a little more." No! He will ever be grateful that on that day by the seaside he said, "Yes" to Jesus. He will not even want to consider the results if he had said, "I'll think about it and maybe join up with you later."

What ever Roman coins were left on the table that day will seem very small in comparison with the city of gold and a life that never ends! What ever Christ asks us to leave behind will seem very small on that day!

In gratitude for the Lord's calling him, a publican, to be His follower, Matthew wanted to do something for Jesus. Gratitude should be the response of one who has received blessings from God. Matthew also wanted his friends, other publicans, to know that here was Someone Who accepted anyone and gave hope to those mired in sin. What did he do? He held a dinner. (Presentation slide 10) "And so it was, 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." Matthew 9:10.

This happens to be one of my favorite Bible verses. I am blessed by it because of one little word, the smallest of words which has great significance in this verse. First, take a look at how this incident is reported by Luke. (Presentation slides 11-13) "After these things He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' And he left all, rose up, and followed Him. Then Levi gave Him a *great feast* in *his own house*. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them." Luke 5:27-29.

What's different between these two reports? Actually two things. In Matthew's account he says, (Presentation slide 14) "And so it was, as Jesus sat at the table in the house,..." Luke makes it clear that this dinner was held where? In the house of Levi Matthew. In great humility, the writer Matthew avoids drawing attention to himself and doesn't identify the house in which this dinner was held. He just says, "Jesus sat at the table in the house." I think the word "the" is wonderful in that verse! It would be human nature to make sure everyone knew that "I" did something great for the Lord. It would be in the spirit of Nebuchadnezzar to say, "Is this not a great work that I have done."

That was not the Spirit that moved Matthew. It might have been before, but he is not the same now. The Matthew who penned the story of Jesus is not interested in the readers knowing that it was indeed in his house that this dinner took place. He's not even interested that his readers know that indeed it wasn't merely Jesus sitting "at the table," but that it was a "great feast," as Luke tells us. True modesty, in the style of John the Baptist who said, "He must increase, I must

decrease,” inspired him to put “the house” instead of “my house.” In the sharing of Jesus, let the human agent slip into the background, that the glory of Christ might shine forth preeminently! Praise God for Matthew’s using the word “the” instead of the word “my”! It’s evidence that “self” dies when we follow Christ!

(Presentation slide 15) The wise man had said, “Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.” Proverbs 27:2. Matthew did right in speaking of this dinner in “the” house, while God inspired “another man,” Doctor Luke, to tell us that the “great feast” was indeed held in the home of Levi Matthew. Don’t worry about ascribing glory to yourself. In doing something for Jesus, the “left hand” should not know what the “right hand” is doing. Follow the Lord, and He will heap honors and glory on you later.

Matthew’s purpose in holding this great feast was to give honor to his Lord and to invite his friends to meet Jesus. He was overwhelmed with the acceptance and peace he had found in Christ and wanted others to share in this blessing. But there were others who didn’t see it quite that way. (Presentation slides 16, 17) “And so it was, 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. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, ‘Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” Matthew 9:10, 11. Leave it to the devil to turn a celebration of God’s love into a scene of scorn and ridicule!

The Pharisees had completely missed the boat. They had been busy gathering iron filings when the Hope Diamond lay right in front of them! The central truth of all Revelation, from Genesis onward, is the truth of God’s love for lost mankind. The statement made, “This Man receives sinners,” might have been uttered with a sneer and in derision, but it is the essence of the message God wants made known to humanity!

Who can explain the love of God toward a world in rebellion? It shocked the devil to learn that God had devised a plan of salvation when man first sinned, a plan that would involve the Deity coming to this planet and suffering the penalty deserved by sinners. It amazed the Pharisees that Jesus, Whom they were slow to recognize as God in the flesh, would associate with those accounted as unworthy. But this is the very point of the Gospel! It will be the theme of the redeemed throughout eternity, that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” John 3:16.

Matthew had come to the realization of this truth. He saw himself as he truly was, a sinner, whose only hope was in the grace and mercy of a forgiving God. Jesus spoke of one who worshiped in the temple who expressed this every idea. He didn’t so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but smote his breast and said, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Luke 18:13. In the original, it says, “God be merciful to me the sinner.” Jesus identified this humble worshiper as being a publican. Could it have been Matthew?

(Presentation slide 18) Notice how simple and clear this message is: Levi Matthew recognized his need and responded to the Savior’s call. In gratitude he wanted to honor his Lord and share with

others this great truth, that God had accepted him, even him being a publican! That's what it means to be a Christian! It's not complicated! Have you been to Matthew's house? Have you seen yourself as you truly are, in need of grace and mercy? Have you experienced the incomparable love of God that accepts and forgives sinners?

When John Newton, the former slave trader, penned the memorable words to the song "Amazing Grace," he incorporated a phrase that today might not be acceptable to some. It might seem a little crass, a little crude. (Presentation slide 19) He spoke of God's amazing grace that "saved a wretch like me." Couldn't he have used a different word? One that isn't so harsh? One just a little kinder, softer? No, John used the right word. He used a word that Scripture uses to identify one apart from Christ.

Spoke the True Witness concerning those who thought they were pretty good, "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy and have need of nothing'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked." Revelation 3:17. By definition, one who is "wretched" is a "wretch." John Newton had every right to use that word, as distasteful as it may seem to some today, those who think themselves "okay" as they are. Actually, Newton was being kind: he used only one of the attributes in the list Jesus gave. He stopped short of the others, that you are "miserable, poor, blind and naked."

It may not seem acceptable to some to recognize the depth of their need, but it is the first step to finding salvation in Christ. Matthew the publican took that first step. It scandalized the pious of His day that Jesus would choose a publican to be a disciple, and that He would eat with them. Christ had a word of counsel for them. "When Jesus heard that (the question of why He ate with sinners), He said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 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.'" Matthew 9:12, 13.

What did He mean by this? Did He mean that the Pharisees were righteous and didn't need repentance? Certainly not! He Who looks on the heart and not the outward appearance, the One Who saw past the luxurious robes into the thoughts and intents knew well the spiritual condition of these religious pretenders. They were "whited sepulchers," filled with dead men's bones. But they didn't know it. They were unconscious to it. They failed to properly calculate their need. They saw themselves as being worthy by their own deeds, and looked down on all others. The Pharisees were the ones who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." Luke 18:9. It is terrible when a person contracts cancer; it is worse when the tumor is not recognized or denied. Jesus was making the point that those who realize their need of Him are the ones who receive His help. Do you recognize your need of Jesus today? You are the one He came to save! For the ones who fail to see that they need help, Christ is unable to do much.

At one point in his experience, Paul thought of himself in this way. He said, "concerning the righteousness which is in the law, (I was) blameless." Philippians 3:6. But he went from the attitude of the "Pharisee" to the attitude of the "Publican" and confessed himself to be the "chief

of sinners.” On the Damascus road when he met Jesus things changed. (Presentation slides 22-24) He said, “What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for Whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.” Philippians 3:7-9. That could have been Matthew’s testimony. He “counted all things as loss” and followed Christ.

The only qualification that we can present to receive help is our need. (Presentation slide 25) We echo the sentiments of Augustus Toplady, who wrote the well known hymn “Rock of Ages” which contains the lyric, “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to The cross I cling.” But it is when we come to Jesus, claiming nothing but our helplessness that He is willing and able to help.

Oh that we would see our true condition, our true need! Oh that having recognized our true condition of sinfulness and helplessness, yes, wretchedness, we would know that there is a Savior Who will receive us and grant to us forgiveness and salvation! Oh that we would walk in the same path as did Matthew in leaving all to follow Jesus! Having accepted the call to become His disciple, he wrote an account that has been read by many. You and I are called to become His disciples. You and I have a story to be told, a “Gospel According to You” that will bless others.