

Introduction To Matthew

The New Testament opens with four narrative accounts of the good news of Jesus Christ. The purpose for these accounts was instruction to believers regarding the person of Jesus Christ. The purpose of his incarnation, death, and resurrection was explained in their writing. It is essential to believe that Jesus Christ's life and ministry, death and resurrection were real and historical fact.

The first account is Matthew. The material he put forth is a testimony of a life changed by the power and presence of Jesus. Matthew did not tell his testimony as we hear testimonies today. He told us two things about himself; he was a tax collector and Jesus called him to be His apostle. The difference may be implied, but it is obvious; a man, whose only passion was personal riches, became a man so rich with passion for God, he wanted to tell the entire world. Most especially he wanted to tell his own people (the Jews), of the abounding grace that God had to give. Matthew preached Jesus because of Jesus' effect on him. He wrote out his knowledge and understanding of the ministry of Jesus because Jesus saved his life.

Of the four accounts of the Gospel, three are written by Jews. Only two were apostles of Jesus, but of these two, only Matthew wrote specifically for Jewish eyes, ears, and hearts. Ironically, Matthew would have been most hated by the Jews he sought to evangelize, because of his vocation before Jesus called him to be an Apostle.

As with most societies, the rich and the poor were at odds and did not associate with each other. Gentiles were hated, because they weren't Jews, and the Samaritans were hated more because they were a mixed heritage of Jewish and Gentile blood. However, as intense as these hatreds were, the tax collectors were hated even more.

Tax collectors, or publicans, collected tax from their own people to give to the Roman government. They were not paid a certain fixed amount for a month's service, day wages, or a percentage of what they collected. They were paid by their own greed.

There were three basic levels in the tax collecting business. The publicani, or tax farmer, bid and paid for the rights to tax the people in a particular territory. He would divide the territory up into natural sections, such as cities. These sections were run by a chief, such as Zachaius in Jericho. Each chief was accountable to bring in a certain amount to be turned over to the publicani. Anything above that, they could keep. The chiefs in turn had subordinates below them who were responsible to acquire the tax directly from the people. These subordinates were the ones typically called tax collectors. They had the freedom to raise the amount of the tax for their own profit, and the authority to use force or imprisonment, if necessary, to collect it. Everyone who had anything to do with the tax and its exorbitant amount was hated, but the one whose hand directly took it from the hands of the people face to face was probably hated most, because he was the one they saw; he was the one who took the tax

money out of their hand. Matthew (also known as Levi) was one of these hated tax collectors.

In the eyes of the people, the tax collector had betrayed their nation, their family, and their God for the sake of money. Their own families would count them as dead for the betrayal. Perhaps this is why Matthew mentioned nothing of his own family. Actually, all Matthew said of himself is that he was a tax collector.

Mark tells of Jesus' calling of the tax collector referring to Matthew as "Levi, the son of Alphaeus." One chapter later Mark, naming the twelve, refers to another "son of Alphaeus" without mentioning any relationship. However, he does not say anything of Peter and Andrew being brothers here either.

He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Mark 3:16-19 (ESV)

Notice also, Levi is called Matthew here. (Luke also calls him Levi when Jesus calls him, but names him Matthew when listing the twelve.)

The references to father's names are generally used to differentiate between disciples with the same given name. For example:

- Simon son of John (Matthew 16:17; John 1:42); there was another Simon, the Canaanite, a.k.a. the Zealot (Matthew 10:4; Luke 6:15)
- James son of Zebedee (Mark 1:19; 3:17); there was also James, the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18).
- Judas Iscariot (son of Simon Iscariot-Mark 3:19; John 6:71); there was also Judas son of James (Luke 6:16) who was also designated as "not Iscariot" (John 14:22).

While there were more than one James, making it necessary to mention his father's name, Alphaeus; there is only one Matthew and even by his Aramaic name Levi, there is no other disciple by that name. So why did Mark mention Matthew's father's name, if not to subtly reveal a relationship that Matthew wanted to be kept secret.

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. Matthew 9:9 (ESV)

It is significant that Matthew did not call the tax collector (himself) by the name Levi as Mark and Luke do: (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). In Matthew's heart, his life changed the moment Jesus said, "Follow me." Yet, as a constant reminder, to either himself or his

readers, he holds the label of his former occupation, though not in pride but humility and testimony to the work of Jesus Christ on his life. [Mark and Luke both accounted for the name change when they listed the names of the twelve apostles: (Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15).]

Matthew was educated and intelligent. He couldn't have been a tax collector if he wasn't. He needed to be able to speak, read and write in Greek and Aramaic. (He also knew Hebrew and possibly even Latin.) His math needed to be above reproach for his own good and profit, as well as that of his employer. He also needed to be bold to confront rich and poor alike and able and willing to use the authority he possessed as a tax collector. The education he displayed would have to have begun early in his youth, before he ever thought of collecting tax. He may have been trained in the tradition of the Pharisees. This would explain why he recorded more of Jesus' rebukes and woes addressed to the Pharisees than any other Gospel writer. Whether it was irritation of the hypocrisy he felt as a Pharisee or the influence of his own greed which caused him to separate himself from the sect of the Pharisees to collect taxes, we do not know nor do we need to know. What we do know is that Jesus changed his life and gave him purpose to use the gifts God gave him for His glory, and Matthew never turned away from the course on which Jesus set him.

We don't really know whether Jesus and Matthew had talked before the calling in the middle of the street where Matthew was doing his tax business. They did live in the same city, Capernaum. We don't know all of what he saw or heard from Jesus before Jesus called him. However, Matthew was impressed enough to give up everything on the spot and follow Jesus. Except in the listing of the twelve apostles, after the feast Matthew gave Jesus, he is not mentioned again by name. However, every time Matthew mentions the twelve, we can consider him as part of that group. He heard the words, saw the healings and casting out of demons. He was of the twelve sent out and experienced preaching and doing healings and such in Jesus' name. He received the rebukes for sending children away, for thinking too highly of himself, and for not understanding a parable or not having enough faith. And in spite of his boasting that he would die for Jesus in Jesus' greatest hour of need, Matthew fled for fear of his own life.

Matthew did see Jesus alive (physically) after the resurrection. He did see Jesus bodily ascend into heaven. With ten of the other disciples, some women, Jesus' mother and brothers and some others not named (in all 120 persons), Matthew devoted himself to prayer in the upper room until the day of Pentecost.

And they [Matthew included] were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:4 (ESV)

This is the last we hear about Matthew. Though there are some things said about his life and adventures afterwards in non-biblical resources, some are contradictory and we don't know if any are true.

Matthew's Redeemed Character

Most of what we know of Matthew after the resurrection, ascension, and empowering of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is from the gospel account that bears his name. Matthew did not profess to be the closest to Jesus, nor even one of the three that Jesus gave more attention and teaching to. Though he did include himself as one of the twelve who argued about who was the greatest, he remembers the rebuke of Jesus vividly. *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Matthew 18:1-6 (ESV)*

Matthew learned humility; for his own account keeps him in the background providing little information about himself. His writing of the good news of Jesus included a testimony that gave all the glory to Jesus with a mere mention of himself. Only enough of a mention to account for the authority he had as an apostle. His own name he gives only twice; when Jesus called him (9:9) and the naming of the twelve (10:3).

Paul, in his second letter to his disciple Timothy, wrote, *You, however, have followed my **teaching**, my **conduct**, my **aim in life**, my **faith**, my **patience**, my **love**, my **steadfastness**, my **persecutions and sufferings** that happened to me . . .* This is a worthy pattern and useful for summarizing the lessons Matthew's testimony teaches us.

Matthew's teaching

Jesus is the Messiah (Christ)

The most important instruction necessary was that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied throughout Scripture as the coming Savior of the world. Writing to the Jews, he used more than forty quotations from the Jewish Scriptures, and he begins his instruction by providing a genealogy showing Jesus' human lineage back to Abraham through the line of David.

The Kingdom of God (Heaven) is at hand

As Messiah, Jesus is The King and he rules over all creation; visible and invisible with manifest authority. His kingdom is now and those who know him are obedient.

Repent and believe the good news

All are sinners. All are called to repent from their ways and believe the good news proclaimed by Jesus. Few will follow and believe and show works of God working in their lives.

Life changes

Lives are changed by Jesus. Though Matthew documented many teachings to crowds of people, he does not neglect to show some individuals Jesus ministered to, by word or deed, and the life change that developed, even instantaneous: Matthew's own life, and that of the other apostles, a leper, two demoniacs, a paralytic, a young girl, a woman healed after 12 years of suffering, 2 blind men, a mute, and the list goes for several more chapters. Though Jesus' message was given to large numbers of people, he always made time to minister to individuals; for every person was important to Jesus and his love, words, and works affected not only the body but the heart of each one he made contact with.

Matthew's conduct

We can't see much of Matthew's conduct other than that he left everything and followed Jesus. His life changed by meeting Jesus. After the resurrection and ascension we know little about Matthew except that he wrote this proclamation of the Messiah. There is enough evidence to say he lived for Jesus and taught Jesus' message to as many as he could. The conduct that he lived as a man totally given over to Jesus should be seen through the instruction and character of the person he loved to talk about.

Matthew's aim in life

Matthew's aim in life was to glorify the name of Jesus by preaching his gospel to all, his own people included.

Matthew's faith

Matthew whole-heartedly believed all he wrote. He gave up his wealth and left everything to follow when Jesus called. He did not spare his own humility when telling the truth. His lessons from Jesus were often powerful, piercing and uncompromising. There are many rebukes to hypocrites. Jesus was sharp to the sharp-tongued, but gentle to the broken-hearted. Matthew recorded many miracles, healings, exorcisms, and wonders beyond his own understanding, but he believed that Jesus had authority over all things.

Matthew's patience, love, & steadfastness

Matthew's patience, love, and steadfastness could here be put together, for they are seen in the same example. For how could we see his character best, but that he continued to preach to a people who did not want to hear, he loved a people who did not want to care, and he persevered to love a people who hated him and his Lord. He loved them by telling them the truth of the gospel, confronting them with their sin and revealing the hope in the Messiah who had already come, died, and rose from the dead in glory. He persisted so that he even wrote a book that would last longer than himself that someone would someday read and live.

Matthew's persecutions and sufferings

We do not know much of Matthew's sufferings. We know he was hated as a tax collector and then he became a follower of Jesus who was hated by the Jewish leaders. Later there came a greater division between Jews and Christians, so he would be hated by most Jews. He may have been martyred in either Egypt or Parthia. What we do know is that he gave his life for Jesus to follow Jesus wherever Jesus would lead him to proclaim the gospel, for he was an apostle and his purpose in life was to glorify Jesus to the ends of the earth for all his life and more by writing the book which later became known as THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST ACCORDING TO MATTHEW.

Summary

Matthew gave us a look at the Master so that we would follow Him. As an Apostle, Matthew's instruction is foundational, though confrontational as well. We are called to confront ourselves, each of us, and evaluate who we are and what we are to do. Matthew left all he had and knew to follow Jesus, but he used every bit of training and gifting he learned before and after meeting Jesus to proclaim the good news of reconciliation with God through Jesus, appealing to Jew and non-Jew to repent and believe and know Jesus to follow him. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a man-made-religion of works. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew, is an experience of the heart and soul in communion with God because of the work of Jesus Christ, manifested through our physical existence that all may see the goodness of our Father and give Him glory.