

Dinner with the Taxman

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[0 : 00] Morning, everybody. Morning. There was a rabbit and a toad.

! They were very good friends. They would hang around together on most days. One particular day, they were hopping across a field, chatting away, but failed to notice a rather deep hole.

Unfortunately, they fell down the hole and were both rendered unconscious for a few hours. When they awoke, it was pitch black, and they couldn't remember anything, including who they were.

So one of them suggested it would be a good idea to feel each other, and that might help to work out who they were. Well, you seem to be soft, have furry skin, long ears, and quite a cute tail.

I think you must be a rabbit. Well, you seem to be cold and slimy and quite disgusting. You must work for the tax office. Apologies for those of you that work or have worked for the tax office or in land revenue or customs.

[1 : 26] And please feel free to substitute whatever other role you'd like in that joke. It works equally well with many other roles. In fact, I'd like you to do a thought experiment, just in your head, not out loud.

Imagine the type of person who disgusts you the most. Who would you really wish to have nothing to do with whatsoever? Who would be your toad, if you like, in that example?

It might be someone you know. It might be someone you have deep moral or social or political or religious dislike for. Just hold in your head that for a moment.

If you've got someone, hold that mental picture, but just park it for the moment. We may well come back to that. I use tax office in the joke, as you may have gathered, on purpose.

As today we're thinking about Matthew, who was a tax collector and obviously not very well liked. Today is also the first day in our series about meals with Jesus.

[2 : 26] So my advice is also don't skip breakfast for the next few Sundays. We wouldn't want your stomach rumbling when we're talking about the various meals. The one today is in Matthew chapter 9 that we've just read, and it's just five verses.

Jesus found Matthew. He said to Matthew, follow me, just two words, and Matthew did just that. He then invited his friends back to his pad for a rather nice meal along with Jesus.

It caused quite an upset with some of the Pharisees. And Jesus then put them in their place with some clever words and a bit of Old Testament quoting, which was, I guess, kind of par for the course, really, if you look through Jesus in the Gospels.

Most of the series that we're going to be doing would be in Luke. However, I chose to do it from Matthew with permission from the boss. It's also in Mark.

So this meal is captured in three out of the four Gospel accounts. So I guess it must be important if we've got three records of it. So why did I choose to read it from Matthew?

[3 : 34] Well, here, Matthew is writing about himself, and more of that in a moment. So I thought this morning we'd cover five things.

First of all, Matthew, the character. Then think about his calling. The meal, which forms the central part of this story. The question that was posed, and then the response.

The meal actually only gets a very brief mention. But a lot of things can happen when people eat together, which I'm sure we'll be exploring over the next few weeks. So first of all, who is this Matthew that we're reading about?

Now, I don't know about you, but when I read a book, I like to read the biography. If you turn to the back page in the bit where it's got the picture of the author, and then a few words there, I always like to read that.

And then when I am reading the book, at some point in the book, I'll often go back and have a look at the bio again, perhaps because of something they've written, and I want to kind of think, oh, why

did they say that?

[4 : 38] What have they done, or what are their views on things? That gives me a clue about what they've written in the book. So I thought, before we look through these verses, it would be a good idea to build up a bit of a picture, kind of about the author of Matthew, that you might find if it was written in the back page.

Now, just, I guess, a few bits of clarification and the small print. The Bible is not a biography of Jesus or Matthew, or even an autobiography of Matthew, and nor is it history.

It's a gospel, which means it's a book of good news. However, it does contain some important bits of biography and some history. We believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and each bit is written for a reason.

There is also a bit of debate about who wrote it, but I don't want to get bogged down in that, and don't let that mess with your head as we kind of step through what's written down, because it's all important.

So we're going to consider a few things that are written in Matthew before Matthew chapter 9, so please be prepared to flick or swipe, depending on what you've got your Bible on, and hopefully that will help us understand this passage a bit more.

[5 : 54] So first of all, what do we know about tax collectors? Well, they're not liked much today, I guess, hence why the joke, and I guess it's always been so.

Even when tax officials work for a government that's elected, we still have this view about them, which is wrong. We all like to discuss how our taxes are spent, don't we? But someone has clearly got to collect them.

But Matthew here, he worked for a foreign invader. He worked for the Romans. So if you like, he was a double-toed in that sense. He caused financial hardship, and he was a turncoat.

He collaborated with the enemy. Now, it seems in the Bible that the Romans let the tax collectors just get on with it. They didn't really care how much Matthew took, as long as the Romans got what they wanted, which was the money from the tax.

It's quite a clever idea, really, of the Romans, wasn't it? It meant that some of the Jewish hatred for the Romans was actually turned internally on the people on their own kind. And if we look at verse 10 in the passage that we read, it was clear that there were many tax collectors.

[7 : 01] Probably Matthew didn't work alone. So when he left his booth to go and follow Jesus, it probably didn't mean that there was a pile of cash left unattended. And the rest of them, we see, were gathered at Matthew's house later for the meal.

Now, I mentioned before that it's in three accounts. Mark tells us when he tells this story that the booth that Matthew worked in was by the lake or by the Sea of Galilee.

So it's likely that boats came in with their cargoes and were ready to be taxed, as well as the people that were on land. Now, verse 10 that we just read tells us that the tax collectors, like Matthew, were part of this group that were called sinners.

Now, this group, we're told here, contained people such as prostitutes and thieves that were put in this specific bad category that were described as sinners. So they were the worst of the worst, if you like.

Now, we know that Jesus had, a number of his disciples were fishermen, and they were certainly not high up the social scale, but fishermen weren't by default morally and religiously suspect in the same category as Matthew, who is with the thieves and the prostitutes.

[8 : 19] So what did that mean in terms of being in this category? Well, it perhaps meant that Matthew would have been banned from going to the synagogue, so going to the Jewish equivalent of church.

Probably couldn't have been a judge or a witness in court. So they really were social outcasts, the people that were in this group, albeit quite rich ones.

So Matthew, as we read, he becomes a believer and decides to follow Jesus. And then he assembles lots of material about Jesus and what he did and what he said in his book, in Matthew. And that was being helpful to convince Jewish people later. Matthew had a real connection with the Old Testament and with Jews. Now, and it's the start of the school year, so people will be getting homework.

If you would like a little bit of homework, what you could do is read Matthew 1 through to 9 and have a look about all the times that Matthew references the Old Testament.

[9 : 24] There were loads. I won't get you to flick back now, but just to give you a little taster, I suppose, Matthew chapter 1, there's a big long list of all the people who came before Jesus.

And Matthew used that to prove that Jesus was Jewish. There's a very famous verse in Matthew chapter 1 that says, quotes from Isaiah, about Jesus' name being called Emmanuel. If you look in Matthew chapter 2, when it's the wise men come to visit Jesus, there's quotes from Samuel and Micah.

When they escaped to Egypt, he quotes Hosea and Jeremiah. And then in Matthew chapter 4, the temptation of Jesus. You just can't move for Old Testament quotes in that bit of the passage. And when Jesus begins to preach, there's again mention of Isaiah. So Matthew was really steeped in the Old Testament and that he was Jewish. And that helped when people then read Matthew, that connection back to Judaism.

So let's just read verse 9 again. As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him.

[10 : 32] And Matthew got up and followed him. So this is the calling. Isn't it amazing that Jesus bothered with someone who was so universally despised and hated, or a toad?

And he did it in public. So he did it in front of Matthew's colleagues and he did it simply and with clarity. Just two words, follow me. So imagine the scene.

A carpenter who leads a gang of fishermen walks up to a rich and well-known corrupt businessman and says, follow me. I wonder what the kind of modern equivalent of that would be.

Well, I guess it would be a carpenter who has a gang of fishermen walks up to a well-known and corrupt businessman and says, follow me. It was unusual. It must have been unusual then. It sounds simple, doesn't it?

But was Jesus completely unknown to Matthew? Why did Matthew suddenly drop everything and follow Jesus? Well, there are a couple of clues, I think, to that in Matthew chapter 4.

[11 : 42] There's no need to turn to them. But in Matthew chapter 4, in verse 13, it says that Jesus moved and lived in Capernaum, which was near the lake.

And have a guess who else lived in that area. Yeah. It was Matthew. And just because this is what Matthew likes to do, he also slips in an Old Testament reference in there to prove that what Jesus is going to do.

So Jesus was living in the area. Later in Matthew chapter 4, so Matthew tells us in verses 23 to 25, it says that Jesus preached in the area and that people in that area and way beyond that had heard about him.

So it's quite likely that Matthew had heard about Jesus, about what he was saying, and what he was doing. But I wonder what specifically might Matthew have heard about Jesus and what he was saying and doing.

And again, Matthew has laden the first few chapters with some clues. Now, I am going to do a little bit of flicking back now, if that's all right. I'm not going to cover all the clues, but have a look back at Matthew chapter 5.

[12 : 48] So Matthew chapter 5, and there's a section, oops, probably on the page, near the end of Matthew chapter 5, which says, love for your enemies, verses 43 to the end of the chapter.

And then specifically, have a look at verse 46, which says, if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

So Jesus is talking about tax collectors in a critical way, and Matthew, in a context of loving enemies, and Matthew must have heard that and wrote it down in his book.

So clearly Matthew wants other people to have a look at that. So Jesus was criticizing tax collectors. Then just flip over the page to Matthew chapter 6, and have a look at the section from verses 19 to 24.

So verse 19, do not store up for yourself treasures on earth where moths and vermin destroy. Some translations have rust there. And where thieves break in and steal.

[14 : 00] But store up for yourself treasures in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

And then skip down to verse 24. No one can serve two masters, either you will hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and money. So the exact opposite of Matthew as a tax collector. He loved his money, was storing up treasure on earth, and here Jesus was saying, actually, you need to be storing up treasure in heaven, not on earth.

And importantly, you can't serve both God and money. So I wonder what Matthew would have made of that if you'd have heard Jesus saying that. It would have been a challenge to him. Then just skip over the page to Matthew chapter 8.

We're getting to a crescendo. We're nearly at chapter 9 where Matthew's called. Look at verses 20, verse 18. So this is in a section called The Cost of Following Jesus, 18 to 22.

[15:07] I just want to have a look at verses 21 and 22. So it's about the cost of following Jesus. Verse 21. Another disciple said to him, Lord, first let me go and bury my father.

But Jesus told him, follow me and let the dead bury their own dead. So I guess we suppose that this particular disciple didn't follow Jesus by that question we're not told.

But I wonder what Matthew would have made about leaving everything and following straight away. He clearly recorded something here, didn't he? this story in his book. And then after that story, Jesus calms a storm.

He restores to dear and possessed men at the end of chapter 8. He then forgives and heals a paralyzed man. And then finally we get to this section where Jesus meets Matthew and says, follow me.

So Matthew, I think it's reasonable to say, what did he know about Jesus? Well, he's recorded that he wanted people to love their enemies, didn't really think much about tax collectors.

[16:13] He criticized them in public. He wanted people to store treasure in heaven, not on earth. You can't serve God and money. He told people not to worry about where their next meal was coming from.

He also described that Jesus was going through a narrow way rather than a wide way. He healed all sorts of people. Jesus valued faith and he was calling the rich and the poor, in fact, those of any status.

So perhaps it wasn't quite as sudden and as cold as we might think if Carpenter calls businessmen to follow him and he does. But the businessman, I think in this case, had heard about what it really meant to follow Jesus.

So Matthew, I think, made a decision based on some knowledge of what following Jesus would mean. So maybe this morning if you're wanting to know a bit more about who this fellow Jesus is, I would encourage you like Matthew to investigate.

Have a read properly of Matthew. It won't take you long to read that rather than the quick skimming I've just made you do. If you read one chapter a day, you could do it in February, which is the shortest month, only 28 chapters.

[17:21] Perhaps don't wait until February to do it as if it's September, but you could easily do it in a month. Or an evening's read, read through Matthew, or even if you just read the first nine chapters from the viewpoint of I wonder how Matthew is why is he recording this to come to Matthew when Jesus called him.

So Jesus came to Matthew and said, follow me. And Matthew did that, didn't he? He followed Jesus. But then also notice what happened was that Jesus then followed Matthew back to his house.

So Matthew invited Jesus to a really important place. Matthew let Jesus into all his life. Nothing was hidden. And we know that Matthew probably had quite a lot to hide given his life.

Matthew was open and Matthew was brave. The invite was there and Jesus went. So the Son of God gets invited to a house and Jesus goes.

Jesus was really interested, is really interested in the individual. spiritual. And I think that's a real challenge to let Jesus into all aspects of our lives.

[18:31] And Matthew did that very publicly. And Jesus didn't bat an eyelid. Jesus was there. There was no judgment from Jesus. In fact, the judgment from Jesus was reserved for other people, the Pharisees, who we're going to consider in a moment.

So that's Matthew's calling. Let's have a think about the meal. Well, it's called a meal, but I wonder actually whether we should perhaps think of this as a feast.

This was some party, I think. This wasn't nibbles. This would have been a banquet. This would have been top entertainment. Luke, in his account, describes the people at this meal reclining at tables.

So I imagine the kind of scenes where people are sort of holding grapes and things. This would have been some party to go to. I guess it was likely Matthew had a large house suitable for entertaining.

So I really wonder what kind of party it would have been. We know that at the party there would have been the sinners, tax collectors and sinners, as it says. One commentator I read said that the party was for the rich and the raunchy, which was an interesting way of describing it.

[19 : 46] But this was a bunch of outcasts who were Matthew's friends. No one else would have associated with him, so it would have been his friends that he'd had elsewhere. And I think as I was reading this, there's a risk that sometimes we might sanitise what this party was like.

We might see it through a middle-class lens of, you know, middle-class geese going to a sort of middle-class evening supper, or maybe imagine an afternoon tea with cucumber sandwiches. We have to be careful because there isn't much description. However, we know that some people remained outside. The Pharisees, and maybe on one level for good reason if they knew what was going on at this party.

But if we sort of sanitise that party and view it through our middle-class or my middle-class lens, I think that lessens the shock factor of where Jesus went. So Jesus was right in the middle of it all with these sinners in Matthew's house.

And Jesus was totally relaxed to be with these outcasts. Perhaps also we have this idea of outcasts being poor or diseased. But here, the outcast was someone who was rich, who was wealthy, such as Matthew.

[20 : 56] So I just wanted to pause just for a moment as we think about that. I wonder, and I question myself, how do we feel about outcasts from our society?

How do we picture outcasts? Do we think of them as just the poor? But what about the rich? Are we potentially guilty of being sort of spiritual snobbery in either way?

Discipleship is not just for the comfortable and the respectable, but for all those who conventional society might keep at arm's length, whatever their circumstances. Matthew's calling is important, and the meal is the focal point of this story.

Why is the meal at the focal point? Well, Jesus uses this gathering to continue to reveal his new heavenly perspective, the new values of the kingdom of heaven.

He uses it to challenge other people's thinking, and the meal provides that context. Matthew is an illustration, but actually it's an example of something much bigger that Jesus is referring to.

[22 : 00] So Jesus is causing conflict. He's upsetting the status quo. He's chosen to go and associate with these sinners at Matthew's house, and this provokes the Pharisees.

And the Pharisees clearly don't like what is going on, and they pose a question which we find in verse 11. So when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

Now, have a guess what? Matthew left loads of clues in his book about Pharisees and righteousness and law and food. I'm not going to go through them now, but, for your second piece of homework, if you read through Matthew 5, 6, 7, 8, and think about what Jesus says about the Pharisees, righteousness and law and food, you find loads of clues that Matthew has left us that really help us with this story.

But, to sort of summarise what Matthew tells us about Pharisees, he says the Pharisees, they loved to judge people. They were fantastic at judging. They liked to hate people. They were hypocrites. They loved to see tiny little errors in others, but not in themselves. I always imagine the Pharisees saying, there's someone who needs to change in this relationship and it's not me. They were that kind of people.

[23 : 19] They thought that they were right, that they were right with God or righteous because of what they did, because of the rules they kept and because of the people that they didn't mix with. And, when they did do good things, so the Pharisees, they did do some good things, but they liked to do it in public.

They loved to give to the poor and to pray and to fast and they wanted to be seen. They thought they were really special, set apart, and other people just didn't matter. So, given that's what they were like, they felt quite upset about what Jesus was doing and scandalised, annoyed about the company Jesus was keeping.

And they were particularly annoyed because Jesus didn't just associate with these people as sinners, but he calls Matthew to follow him. He goes to his house, which is a sign of a deep connection.

To share a meal with someone is a signal of relationship, a commitment to someone whom the Pharisees decided they wanted to reject. A shared meal is a sign of identification.

It's a really important event, which is why, you know, this series we're going to look at, Meals with Jesus, we'll see how the meals are really centred to what Jesus did. So, you may ask, why did the Pharisees collar the disciples rather than Jesus?

[24 : 36] We don't know. Perhaps they were afraid of what Jesus might say to them. If you read before in Matthew, we already know that Jesus was ready to give some pretty juicy answers to questions that the Pharisees might ask, so perhaps they were afraid of asking me directly.

Maybe they didn't want to go into this house with all these sinners, or perhaps they want to have a dig at the disciples because they say, what is your teacher?

I guess there's a sense of kind of sarcasm in that bit. Or maybe it was just a really noisy party and the Pharisees kind of pulled the disciple onto the street. But the question does get to Jesus.

Is someone going to say, hey Jesus, get a load of this outside the Pharisees and they're having a go. So what does Jesus do in response? Well, as usual with Jesus, he has a really great response to the Pharisees when they ask him a question.

So Jesus, in his response, he turns things on their head. He really challenges people to think. He reframes the issue. He talks about doctors and the sick, about mercy and sacrifice, and the righteous and sinners, which, good old Matthew, has teed us up nicely by what he's written in the previous chapters.

[25 : 56] But a question about eating was answered with Jesus making statements about the kingdom of heaven. So just thinking briefly about those, the three elements to Jesus' answer.

So doctors need to get their hands dirty and to be with the sick. That's what Jesus was saying. But again, I wonder whether there's a slight risk of how we imagine this phrase through the eyes of Western medicine.

We perhaps think of doctors being in shiny, clean, aseptic buildings, but that's not the point. The imagery here is of the doctor coming to spend time with the sick.

Hospitals are a relatively recent invention. Often doctors would go and see the sick. It was more of a sort of home visiting service. And Jesus here is in the house of the sick.

He's going to see the sick. He's sharing their food. And I think that was the point that Jesus was making. And then in the wider sense, Jesus as a doctor came from heaven to earth.

[26 : 58] Jesus came to get his hands dirty to live with humans. So that's a bit about the healthy who need a doctor. Now Jesus also quotes Hazea in a reference to Micah.

It's a good job Matthew was at hand. He gets the Old Testament references and records them for us. So the Pharisees were then, Jesus said to them, go and learn. If you look at verse 13, but go and learn what this means.

So he didn't fully unpack the statement. He, I guess, challenged them. Perhaps as Matthew had been doing previously, to go and have a think. He asked them to think about what Jesus had been saying and doing all this time.

And then Jesus places mercy above sacrifice in verse 13. Jesus doesn't rule out sacrifice altogether. He just says the Pharisees had a preoccupation with sacrifice to such an extent that it meant they didn't recognize God's mercy.

Jesus was telling the Pharisees, you know, you may be great at sacrifice and doing the right thing in inverted commas, but you're devoid of mercy. Their pride was a real problem. The third part of his response, not calling the righteous for sinners, was another way of framing who he'd come for.

[28 : 12] Jesus had come for the sick and not the healthy, those who are sinners not right with God. The Pharisees, they thought themselves were righteous, but Jesus was calling the sinners.

So Jesus placed the Pharisees in the same category as the Pharisees had placed the tax collectors, the prostitutes and the thieves and by implication, us.

He said, everyone's in need of a doctor. What was important here for the Pharisees was the order of things. So Jesus was saying that as sinners, everyone needs mercy and then desire righteousness, which again, Matthew describes in his gospel through God's grace.

What it wasn't doing is the way the Pharisees were going about it. It was attempting to be right with God under their own strength because that was just never going to happen. Jesus was saying that the divine mercy that he offered came from God and he welcomed Matthew, the example, and that mercy is available when they repent and follow Jesus and the same offer was for the Pharisees. If we look at verse 13, it says that he'd come to call not the righteous but sinners. So it was an offer for all sinners, not just Matthew, the offer for the Pharisees as well.

[29 : 29] So where the Pharisees were seeing failure and past judgment, Jesus, on the other hand, he sees the need and offers mercy. One commentator I read said that the kingdom is a one-class society for sinners only, which I thought was a really interesting phrase.

The kingdom is a one-class society for sinners only and that was what Jesus was saying here. He put all the sinners in one category but offered mercy. So here we have Matthew.

He wrote an account that includes his own calling and important events and sayings about Jesus and the good news and he's laid it out for us all to read.

Jesus doesn't ask for completely blind faith without any reason. I would encourage you, check out the evidence, have a read or come and ask us about it but please don't ignore the call.

Jesus was also really clear. He offered this mercy to all. Jesus as the doctor came from heaven to meet the sick which is all of us. Matthew also was really clear about what following Jesus meant.

[30 : 38] Matthew sets it out and then Matthew left one lifestyle for another and he invited Jesus home. So it's really clear that Jesus welcomes people whatever their lifestyle or whatever their past.

We can never shock Jesus with what we have done even if it might shock the person that's sitting next to us this morning or make them blush. And Jesus was building his team as well.

So Jesus had got enough fishermen. He needed other people. He needed someone who could write. And Matthew, he put him on the team with the gifts that he had. And Jesus is still wanting to build his team today.

And he's wanting people from all sorts of backgrounds whether rich or poor, whether gifts or not, whatever we have or haven't got. So finally, all the flicking I've been asking you to do has gone backwards into Matthew.

But I'd just like to do one final flick if we'd like to finish and that's to turn right to the very end of what Matthew wrote. Chapter 28.

[31 : 40] It's not quite the last verse. So Matthew chapter 8 and verse 19. So Matthew has written this account right at the end of the account that Matthew writes.

This is Jesus speaking and he says in verse 19, Therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So Matthew at the end of his book he extends that call to all. So I was wondering, remember that person I got you to think of at the beginning? The slimy toad whoever that was?

So it's quite clear that Jesus says the gospel is for everyone. Jesus wants to dine with even the worst people that we can imagine. And we should never despair of anyone's salvation or that anyone is too worldly or too wicked or too hardened.

There's a verse in Luke 15 that says that there's rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents. So that made me think that whilst Jesus was at Matthew's house having a feast because Matthew had repented, at the same time there was a party going on in heaven because a sinner had repented.

[33 : 01] So there was a feast on earth and a feast in heaven because of Matthew. The gospel is much more radically inclusive and diverse than any HR program which is all the rage at the moment.

And we need to be careful I think that God only wants certain types. He's really clear God wants everybody even the worst sinners we can imagine. And we shouldn't be Christian Pharisees. It's really important that we don't judge people.

And Matthew here doesn't waste any time does he? When Jesus says follow me he starts his witness straight away and invites Jesus back to his house to meet his friends. Which I guess makes me think how am I or how are we engaged in seeing other people giving them the good news that Matthew shared.

What a challenge that is thinking about what Matthew did. is fascinating Thank you.