

Matthew

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[0 : 00] We have an expression in English we use to describe someone who is absolutely full of themselves. We say that they are God's gift. That's how we describe them. Perhaps that's how they think of themselves as God's gift. He's a person who draws attention to himself.

He doesn't mind doing it by making fun of others. He's someone perhaps who has a very charismatic personality. He has looks to match. He's a high achiever. He's better than the rest of us at everything he does. He is so full of himself and we say of him, who does this man think he is?

God's gift? Now the name Matthew probably means God's gift. But far from being full of himself, Matthew was full of another. As a follower of Jesus, one of Jesus' minor disciples, he does not live to draw attention to himself, but to his Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. In fact, his name, Matthew, perhaps given to him after he became a Christian, reflected that it was Jesus who was God's gift, not him. His name and his life pointed to the grace of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to the beauty of the gospel as we've sung this morning, and the need of every human being lost in sin and death to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation.

We all want our lives to mean something and for our significance to be celebrated. Could there be any greater meaning to our lives and any more noble thing for which to be remembered than that we are full of Jesus and his gospel, that our lives, both by word and by works, pointed to him and to his grace? We know very little about Matthew, but that's fine. We know enough to want to imitate him and to live not for ourselves, but for Jesus. To spend our lives not gathering possessions for ourselves, but gathering people for Jesus. That is, after all, what Matthew must be remembered for. If Thomas was the dramatist, Bartholomew the looker, so Matthew is the gatherer.

You will know that it wasn't always this way for him. From the little we know about Matthew, we want to say a few things about him and pardon the poor alliteration this morning.

[3 : 15] First, he gathered sacks of cash. Second, he gathered sinners to Christ. Third, he gathered stories for Jesus. He gathered sinners to Christ. And lastly, he gathered stories to keep.

Perhaps the greatest gift God can give us as human beings is to be like Matthew, who, rather than pointing to himself, points us to Jesus as our Savior and our Lord. First of all, then, Matthew gathered sacks of cash. Sacks of cash. As I said, Matthew was not always quite so interested in Jesus Christ. We first meet him in Luke chapter 5 and verse 27, or in Matthew 9 and verse 9.

Having healed a paralyzed man, Jesus goes out and he sees a tax collector sitting at his tax booth. His Hebrew name was Levi. His Hebrew name was Levi. But since his bosses were Gentile Romans and Galilee was a very ethnically mixed region, he also had a Greek name, the name Matthew, that name by which he was increasingly called after he became a Christian. Now, tax collectors were a singularly hated breed in the Israel of Jesus' day. They were basically state-sanctioned thieves, charging not just the taxes of the Romans and Jewish authorities, but also skimming off some profit for themselves. They were collaborators.

They were traitors. Nobody liked a tax collector. They were unclean because of their dealings with the Gentiles, and they were corrupt thieves, often growing fantastically rich at the expense of the poor.

They colluded in Israel's pyramid system of keeping the poor in poverty and making the rich richer. Now, Matthew wasn't a chief tax collector like Zacchaeus. Rather, he lived and worked in the Galilean backwater of Capernaum. He had no friends among the righteous and upright people of the town, but had for his friends those of questionable vocations and characters, outcasts, those hated by everyone else.

[5 : 55] All the while, the pockets of the poor people of Capernaum were being emptied of money. He was filling sacks full of cash, and there was nothing they could do about it, because he probably had with him hired bodyguards to make sure there was 100% compliance.

Yes, that's what Matthew lived for. Cash. They said of Robin Hood that he robbed from the rich to give to the poor. They said of Matthew that he robbed from the poor to give to the rich.

He is everything we think of when we think of an anti-hero. Far from being a welcome addition to Capernaum's Rotary Club, he was an outcast, a friend to nobody but the nobodies.

But all the time, he was getting rich. So perhaps that was a price he was willing to pay. And yet it strikes me at least that if he really was so satisfied with living in this way, he would not so quickly have left everything behind to follow Jesus.

Perhaps Matthew had come to realize that sacks of cash are more of a burden than he first thought they would be. The great billionaire Howard Hughes was once asked the question, how much money is enough?

[7 : 27] To which he answered in an instant, just a little more. Just a little more. There's never enough cash in the sack.

It has gone to the point where Matthew is no longer possessing more money, but that his money is possessing more of him.

That he's not just the owner of shiny coins, but that he's owned by them. Just a little more.

Poor, pathetic Gollum thought that the ring he wore on his finger was precious. He spent days and weeks and years and centuries looking at it.

And finally, according to the Lord of the Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien, the ring owned him, not the other way around. The ring cast him into water and fire.

[8 : 32] The ring caused him to torture himself and finally to kill himself. How dangerous these sacks of cash we devote our lives to filling.

How dangerous a thing it is to live for just a little more. We think we shall be satisfied if we have just a little more money.

Just a little more love from someone of the opposite gender. Just a little more respect from our families.

Just a little more fitness. Just a little more recognition and advancement in our careers. Just a few more qualifications. Just a little more pleasure.

Just a few more friends. Whatever these sacks of cash we contain. But in our heart of hearts, we know that the pursuit of these things is no longer under our control.

[9 : 40] Rather, our relentless pursuit of these things has put us under their control. We're no better and worse than a filthy golem, driven mad by his ring, or the sheriff of Nottingham, growing rich at the expense of the poor, Howard Hughes, for whom enough was never enough.

But in our heart of hearts, though we love these sacks of cash, we long to be free because we're enslaved by them in crueler ways than any jailer could chase.

And then Jesus comes into our lives and he says, follow me. We hear the gospel message of freedom and forgiveness in his death and resurrection for the first time, and we see a way out of our addiction.

For when it comes to him, there is no, just a little more. A little of the gospel is enough for us all.

Long to be free and Jesus comes with the keys of death and hell. He unlocks our chains unlike a bird being released from a hunter's snare. We're set free.

[11 : 00] Now let me apply this message to those of us who are Christians but who are still trying to fill our sacks with cash, whatever that cash may be.

You think that somehow you can find meaning and satisfaction and forgiveness in life outside of Jesus? You still think this? Think again.

these things have stopped being your servant. They've become your master. The search for career advancement, the pursuit of human love are so possessing you that enough is never enough.

Be free from it and go back to the basics of the gospel. Hear the voice of Jesus speaking directly to you. Follow me. Forget this accent.

of cash. Follow me. Invest your life in Jesus and you won't regret leaving those sacks behind. If you doubt me, just ask Matthew.

[12 : 15] Secondly, Matthew gathered sinners in Christ. Matthew gathered sinners in Christ. From Luke's account, we learn that Matthew left everything behind to follow Jesus.

Matthew was no longer gathering sacks of cash. Rather, the gatherer has been gathered by Jesus and is now Jesus' disciple. But we learn that Matthew held a great banquet for Jesus at his house and a crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with him.

The gatherer, sorry, the gathered became a gatherer. The new follower of Jesus invited others to follow him also. The disciple of Jesus became a disciple maker for Jesus.

Now Matthew, because he was an outcast by virtue of his profession as a tax collector, could only have these kind of people as friends.

But what friends he had, he gathered to meet with Jesus. It so happened that his friends were not the desirable elite of Capernaum, not the chief officials of the synagogue or the religious authorities, but he did have friends and he did bring them to Jesus.

[13 : 45] This is actually a fairly consistent pattern among all the early disciples. Andrew brought his brother Peter to Jesus, Philip brought Nathaniel to Jesus and Matthew brought his friends to Jesus.

For them all, their newfound faith in Christ was not a private matter to be kept to oneself. Rather, coming to faith in Jesus was so life-changing that it couldn't be kept to yourself.

It had to be shared. You know, we love to tell each other jokes, especially in our Scottish culture. Whenever we meet one another, telling each other jokes is a way to break down the barriers between us and establish friendships.

We speak them to one another. We text them to one another. We share links to them with one another. Isn't it amazing how easy we find sharing jokes with one another but how hard it is to share the gospel with one another?

You know, we could spend all evening telling each other one joke after another and laughing until it hurts. But when it comes to Jesus, speaking one to another is far higher.

- [15 : 10] Now, perhaps that's because we've forgotten how precious the gospel really is and the great privilege that we have of having been gathered by Jesus. The reason that we're more ready to share a joke than to share the gospel is because perhaps we've lost our fascination with the good news of Jesus and how lovingly powerful his gospel really is.
- we cringe at the thought of gathering our friends together to meet Jesus like Matthew did. But Matthew, because perhaps he had so recently come to realize himself how much more satisfying it was to know Jesus than to accumulate wealth for himself, he had no problems with inviting his friends to meet Jesus.
- He had nothing to lose because he had already left everything behind to follow Jesus. It's also highly significant that Matthew chose a meal as the venue for introducing people to Jesus.
- He may not have called it something formal like dinner with Jesus, but that's what it was. In the ancient Middle East and still today, hospitality is the glue that holds society together.
- It's not really so different in our own society where hopefully after the lockdown has eased, dinner parties where we invite friends together will resume.
- [16 : 35] We'll all get dressed up and we'll have lovely food and we'll renew our friendships. Perhaps today you're wondering, how can I gather my friends to Jesus?
- Jesus, I don't think they would come to church even if there was a special meeting to which I could invite them. I don't think they'd come to my house if I told them that I'd arranged a Christian speaker to come.
- Let me suggest they will come if you offer them hospitality hospitality and then over dinner open up on the subject of how you became a Christian, how Jesus gathered you to himself.
- From little acorns, great oak trees grow. Who knows what a small conversation at a dinner party might one day lead. That's just one idea because it's repeatedly used in the New Testament as gathering people together to meet with Jesus.
- You know, it's a wonderful thing that in our own congregation we offer hospitality to one another. However, perhaps, even just once or twice a year, we could go outside our comfort zone and invite our non-Christian friends over dinner, over to dinner, and introduce them to Jesus.
- [18 : 01] Perhaps we work with them. Perhaps we play a five a side with them. Perhaps we go to the same club they do. Or perhaps we just catch the same train in the morning to work as they do.
- But whatever it is, you haven't yet been able to tell them about Jesus. But you can gather them over a dinner. Even the very act of saying, well, look, we're Christians, and so before every meal we say grace, we give God thanks for our food.
- even that can be a witness to them. But this brings us back to the primary problem with this. Namely, it is not that we lack opportunity to gather people to Jesus.
- Rather, most often we lack the motivation. What is then the motivation for gathering our friends to Jesus?
- Is it not the very same gospel by which we were gathered to Jesus in the first place?
- [19 : 08] That good news of how Jesus gives freedom and forgiveness gathered us to him. It provides us all the motive we need to gather others to him.
- If it are friends, we'll want them to meet with Jesus. If Jesus is really so important to us, we'll want others to meet with him also. So invest yourself in the gospel.

Declutter your Christianity. Get back to the centrality of the cross and resurrection. Go back to the beginning of our sermon. The best way to be remembered and for our lives to be truly celebrated is not that we were full of ourselves, but that we were full of Jesus.

That we were not God's gift to the human race, so we had no intention of pretending that we were, but Jesus is. Gospel is not just the message of evangelism.

It's the motive also. When I was a student, through a mutual friend, I met an old man who for his whole life had been an active member of the Christian Police Association.

[20 : 23] A very broad-spoken Aberdonian, one evening, he told me that for every year of his life, he had brought one of his friends to Jesus.

By that stage of his life, he was 88 years old. Use me as a 19 year old listening to this. He had gathered 88 people to Jesus.

whether he was right or whether he was wrong. What a way to be remembered and for a life to be celebrated. How will your life be remembered?

For gathering sacks of cash or gathering sinners to Christ? lastly this morning, Matthew gathered stories to keep.

Matthew gathered stories to keep. That's about it when it comes to Matthew. We know next to nothing about him other than the events of him becoming a Christian and gathering his friends to meet with Jesus.

[21 : 29] But that's okay. It's not important that we know about Matthew. God knows about Matthew and that's enough. Chances are that in 2,000 years time, none who then live will know anything about who we were.

But that's okay because God knows everything about all of us. What we do know is that around the mid 60s AD, Matthew wrote a book about Jesus Christ so he could record the stories of his life, death and resurrection and have them close at hand.

And this book of course is not surprisingly called Gospel According to Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. Christian scholars have studied it for over 2,000 years.

More important, ordinary Christians like us owe our lives to it. It's here in the Gospel of Matthew we have Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, the supreme declaration of God as our Father.

God. It's here in this Gospel we see into the mind and the heart of Jesus, the Son of Man. It's here we follow him through his sufferings and death and it's here we learn of his resurrection.

[22 : 48] It's here we see Jesus standing on the hills of Galilee with his disciples gathered all around and we hear him saying, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.

Now go and make disciples of all nations. It's here the church receives its missionary mandate to proclaim Jesus as Lord and King through the preaching of the Gospel.

It's here we receive what is perhaps the greatest promise of Scripture when with his very last words Matthew's Gospel concludes with the words of Jesus to his people.

And behold I am with you always at the very end of the age. Over the last few years, since 2013, we have been working our way through Matthew's book on a Lord's Day morning and through these studies I trust we have all come to appreciate the Gospel more deeply and worship Christ more highly.

Some of us have even come to know Jesus through these studies and been gathered to him. Others have heard God calling them into deeper service for him.

[24 : 05] Matthew spent his life pointing to Jesus and his legacy forever will be those first 28 chapters at the beginning of the New Testament where Jesus and his Gospel are proclaimed to a world lost in sin, death and darkness and together we hear the Lord's command.

the kingdom of heaven is near, repent and believe the Gospel. Now there may be some here who have been in church since you were a child.

You can't wait until the age when you can tell your parents that you've had enough and you don't want to come back anymore because cool kids don't do church.

can I ask you to do me one favor, one favor before you take such a dramatic life-changing step as to turn your back on Christianity.

I ask you to begin Matthew 1.1 and slowly read your way through Matthew's Gospel. Always asking yourself the question, what does this story tell me about Jesus and about me?

[25 : 18] before you close your heart to Jesus, open your Bible to Matthew and read. The name Matthew means God's gift.

Matthew spent his life pointing to Jesus Christ as God's gift to a lost humanity who through his death and resurrection has won our freedom from slavery and our forgiveness from sin.

God's gift but there's a sense in which Matthew was God's gift to us because he left us this wonderful story of how having lived for sacks of cash, he now lived for Christ and for Christ alone.

He left us the example of the Gospel as both the message and the motive for evangelism and he left us these 28 chapters where we are transported into a new world of grace, peace and faith.

For believing in Jesus is as natural to us as breathing and living for Jesus is unspeakable, full of joy. Who then wants to be like Matthew among us?

[26 : 33] You know, perhaps no one will ever remember your name. That's fine. Just as long as God knows you, and by faith your name is written in the Lamb's book of life.

Are you for rising to the challenge of being Matthew? Let's pray. Father, we think of those who are most significant in this world, those whose names are remembered.

Lord, there's certain aspects of all of us which want our names to be remembered. For people to speak our names in a thousand years' time and look back with respect.

It's more important, O Lord, is that you know our names, that by faith in Jesus Christ, we have come to know you as our Father. Father, we ask that you would give us the gospel both as the message of evangelism, but also its motive.

we ask, God, that you would give us grace, reach out beyond our own comfort zones, and reach out to those who do not yet know Christ. So that as that old man in Aberdeen could say that for every year of his life he had brought one person to Christ, we too could say by the end of our lives, many have come to faith in Christ through our witness to them.

[28 : 00] Not to our glory, not to our reputation, but to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.