

Inspired by a sermon by Dr. Buscher

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We all want our lives to be written down or at least remembered by our loved ones. Countless pages and ink are spilled to recount the lives of famous men. Presidents and kings, notable figures, all with books upon books written down to be remembered. And yet St. Matthew recounts the whole of his conversion from a tax collector to follower of Jesus in a single verse. As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office and he said to him, follow me. And he rose and followed him. This verse is remarkable for its utter simplicity, remarkable for what it does not say. Matthew offers no personal biography, no description of his upbringing, no dramatic portrayal of his own heart, no hint of psychological struggle or social discontentment or spiritual unfulfillment.

Perhaps the most significant moment in his entire life St. Matthew boils down to a simple change in posture and geography. Once, he was sitting on the chair of a tax collector, and after our Lord's call, he arose and followed him. And yet, as with many texts in Matthew's Gospel, there is perhaps more here than meets the eye. Matthew describes himself as sitting on a tax collector's chair. Throughout his gospel, Matthew shows an interest in chairs and those who sit on them. Matthew recounts Jesus' words that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. He tells us that Pilate was sitting on the seat of judgment when his wife warned him concerning Jesus. And when the high priest demands that Jesus give answer concerning his identity as the Son of God, Jesus affirms it and then promises that they will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power.

For Matthew, a chair is the sign of power and authority. A chair defines the one who sits upon it. It makes demands on him. It confines his actions. It shapes his destiny. And so before Jesus came, Matthew was sitting on the chair of a tax collector. This fact is more than historical description, more than arbitrary circumstance. It is Matthew's own self-identification. He is Matthew, who sits on a tax-collecting chair. This chair defines him. He is an instrument of its power and authority. He bears its

burden. He does what he must to fulfill its obligations. And so when Jesus comes, there is a certain clash of power and authority.

Indeed, at this point in Matthew's Gospel, the question of Jesus' authority is becoming a significant issue. From the beginning of the gospel, the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has demonstrated remarkable authority, including authority over wind and waves, the power to cast out demons, the ability to cleanse lepers, and the authority to teach the law. Indeed, immediately before our text, Jesus even claims the authority to forgive sins and then proves his authority by raising the paralytic from his bed.

Indeed, for St. Matthew, Jesus' life demonstrates more than mere authority. You see, authority typically has its limits. Slaves, servants, ambassadors, and emissaries all can wield a certain authority by the command of their lords and masters. Yet such authority is typically confined, confined to a certain place and time, confined to a chair, limited in scope and application. One servant might have authority to collect taxes, another to fight wars, another to negotiate with foreign powers. But Jesus' authority appears to have no chair, no limit, no boundaries.

The breadth and extent of Jesus' authority has become such an issue that his opponents are now desperate to find a way to limit, to confine his authority. The Pharisees tried to regulate his power by means of the law, the Sabbath, and its traditions. They even proposed the outlandish claim that Beelzebul, the prince of demons, is the seat of Jesus' authority over the demons. The chief priests, for their part, seek to bring Jesus into submission to the temple by demanding that he pay the temple tax. Satan himself also seeks to establish a boundary for Jesus' authority. First he offers him authority in the wilderness to turn stones into bread. Then he offers him power in the holy city to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple. And when Jesus refuses these, Satan finally takes him to the height of the mountains and offers him authority over all the nations of the earth. And even this chair of earthly authority, Jesus counts as too small in comparison with the kingdom of the Father in heaven.

For Saint Matthew, Jesus demonstrates more than mere authority. He embodies freedom. Indeed, in his gospel, Matthew portrays Jesus as free to go wherever he wishes to go. Jesus' freedom cannot be confined to a chair. It cannot be limited by space and time or any earthly power. Jesus is therefore free to escape to Egypt, to dwell in Nazareth, to minister in Galilee. He is free to enter the wilderness without bread, free to teach in synagogues, free to enter the house of the sick and sail in the middle of a storm, free to encounter demons among the tombs. Jesus even has the freedom to enter into the realm of the dead itself.

As St. Matthew describes Jesus' mission, the people sitting in darkness have seen a great light, and to those sitting in the region and the shadow of death, a light has dawned. For Matthew, Jesus does not bear the limited authority of a slave or a servant or even an emissary. He bears the freedom of a son. The sons are free, Jesus says. And as the son, our Lord is free to establish his throne wherever he wishes.

And yet even more significant than this freedom for St. Matthew is where it is that Jesus chooses to establish his throne. He who bears the freedom of the son chooses now to approach the chair of a tax collector, to recline with sinners, to join the hungry, to identify himself with the naked and the prisoner, to bind himself to the least of these, his brethren. Jesus forgoes a seat of power on the mountain. He bypasses a chair at the pinnacle of the temple. or even authority to rule in a wilderness.

Instead, he takes his seat with Saint Matthew, with tax collectors and sinners, with the sick, the poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry, the oppressed. Go and learn what this means, Jesus says. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. The difference between mercy and sacrifice is the difference between those confined to a chair and those who are free. Sacrifice is always demanded, always coerced from those under authority, required by law, judged by those who sit on Moses' seat.

But mercy is free. It is invited by love, extended to those who have nothing to offer, to the least and to the last of all. It is mercy that St. Matthew experiences while sitting on the tax collector's chair. And dear friends, it is mercy that now sets us all free as we find our place at this table. Here, along

with St. Matthew, we too are free to now arise, free to follow, free to go wherever Christ goes, free to be a son, and to find our chair with Christ in the glory of the Father.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.