

Sermon for Saint Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist September 21, 2025 jj
Rev'd Mark B. Stirdivant, Christ our Savior Ev. Lutheran Church, St. Augustine, Florida

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You have only two choices. You are either one or the other. Life in this world makes that demand of us constantly. Are you white, or minority? Rich, or poor? Democrat or Republican? And you can find this in the church, too: traditional, confessional Lutheran, or progressive, contemporary Church Growth? You can't escape being forced into two options. And if you don't land on the right side, then you lose. All your advantages are gone, and you are out of luck. You could even be in danger for your own life. The hammer of guilt, whether it's real guilt or just a heavy guilty feeling, that hammer crashes down on you, and the damage has already been done. There are only two choices, you have to decide, and you don't want the wrong one. Two kinds of people, and God help you if you are the wrong kind.

Matthew was the wrong kind of person. That's what the Pharisees would say. Even though he was a Jew and lived in the region of Galilee, Matthew made some sort of business arrangement with the Roman government, or perhaps the local ruler named Herod, to gather taxes from his own people, keep a certain percentage for himself, then forward the rest to the despised Gentile overlords. He sold out! Matthew made himself an outcast. He was rich, and some had a problem just with that, but he was rich because he was known (whether the rumor was accurate or not, doesn't matter) he was known to take advantage of his role in the conqueror's government, and that made him absolutely no friends from among his own native people. The Pharisees grouped Matthew and all other tax collectors together with others who would not follow their strict requirements of earning spiritual credits for oneself. Those were the sinners, those who were unworthy of the presence of a righteous Pharisee, and much less deserving of a shared meal together with an esteemed teacher.

Then Jesus came on the scene, and He rocked the Pharisees' world of either/or, this or that. The Lord saw Matthew sitting at his station in the Galilean toll booth, and simply said, "Follow me." There was no condition offered first, like, if you prove yourself worthy by what you do in order to please me, then I will let you follow me. Jesus didn't play those Pharisee games. The minute He spoke, then Matthew's heart was changed, and he believed. Matthew would later on in life be chosen as one of the four human authors who would write what the Holy Spirit told them to write about the life and teachings of our Lord. As one of the four Evangelists, his written words of Jesus would have the same Divine power to convert sinful man's heart as the words Jesus had spoken to him that first day of his disciple career, which was also the last day that Matthew was just a tax collector.

Today, we joyfully thank God for Saint Matthew because Jesus Christ issued that same call to you. Not the call to write another Gospel book, but it was the call that says, "Follow Me." It was a call to faith. You may not be extorting tax money from your countrymen, but you are, just like Matthew, a real sinner. You are on the wrong side of the Law's either/or. The Pharisees called people sinners because they could not follow their many additional laws. The perfect moral Law of God calls you a sinner because you have not followed the Ten Commandments with all your heart, mind, and strength. You may try to think that just because of who you associate with, and whom you avoid, that you can elude the cold reality that stares you in the face.

And because we are sometimes tempted to think like Pharisees, Matthew was inspired to include Jesus' words that put our sin problem in terms that we can better understand. If you catch

yourself thinking, I haven't done enough bad things to consider myself a sinner, then listen to this: God's Word says you are sick! You need a physician to heal you with forgiveness. Nothing you can do or stop doing will ever get you any closer to the Lord who deserves to judge and condemn you. The Law says that very clearly, and it applies to everybody. Yet, since you are a sinner, you're in luck! Because Jesus is the physician, sent to heal you! That's the Gospel, simple enough.

Matthew learned what it meant to realize fully, "I can't stop fooling myself anymore." I've tried to turn my own life around, and I know I cannot do it. I will just keep on with my favorite sins, until I move on and try some other, worse sins. And if I construct a make-believe world in which I am the only good one in it, and everyone else is one of those other, despised people, then I have become no better than a Pharisee, a whitewashed tombstone—pretty looking, lots of good works to look at, but on the inside, full of dead, rotten bones. The temptation is real, and you have fallen for it. Show God all the sacrifices you made for Him, but without His mercy for you, none of what you do will matter. Matthew recorded the words of Jesus: "I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners." That means that the ones who think they should deserve My favor because of what they do, they aren't going to get it; those who know and admit that they have no chance whatsoever of earning a heavenly reward, those are the ones who will inherit eternal life. They have the privilege of eating with Jesus.

Why should those Pharisees care whom Jesus eats with? Perhaps they wanted to damage His reputation somehow, or possibly ruin His credibility. Here are these marvelously accomplished students of Scripture, and what does Jesus tell them? Go and learn what the Bible really means for a change! Stop looking at Scripture as a way to assert yourself as belonging to the "right group," as opposed to the "wrong group," and instead see what God

wrote through human authors to reveal His absolute love for you, miserable sinner though you are. The Pharisees were still thinking either/or, this or that.

If you had dinner with those rejects and outcasts, then you would not be on the right side. You accepted the unacceptable. You showed love to the unlovable. You sacrificed your life so that the people who did you wrong will be completely free from blame. Who am I talking about? Of course, I'm talking about Jesus. And by a total miracle worked by the Holy Spirit, it's not only Jesus, but also everyone who has been claimed by His forgiveness and welcomed by Baptism into His kingdom. We witnessed it today when Ace was called out of darkness into Christ our Savior's most marvelous light!

Like Saint Matthew, you answered the call of Jesus to "Follow Me" when you believed; when you said: yes, I am sick; yes, I trust that Jesus is the physician who has healed me and has given me life. Because my Lord loved me in this way, I have been set free to love others in the very same way. If I had to love my neighbor in order to earn my way to heaven, I would have never gotten there. Same with you. If I had to regiment my life with certain laws that show how different I am from others, I would have remained lost. But now that Jesus loved me and has done it all for me, I am now equipped with the love of Christ that can't stop showing mercy to everyone I meet, starting with those in my family and the fellow redeemed sinners in my church.

Your Lord and Savior Jesus comes today to eat with sinners. People may think you Christians are the wrong kind of person, maybe even a detriment to society that should be stopped, but all who publicly confess the same faith together and have repented of their sins are invited into His presence, at His table, to eat His Body and drink His Blood. We marveled at the Lutherans in Pakistan who risked their lives to believe in

Jesus. Now we're suddenly not that far away from what their situation is.

Before you share Christian love with others in your particular calling in life this week, something that might be dangerous or at least controversial in this social climate, receive first His mercy that is granted you in the forgiveness of sins and the precious gifts that flow from His cross. Offer your prayers and sacrifices of praise to God, participate in the holy liturgy that we cherish with your heart full of faith, then remember that your liturgy of serving others continues long after you leave this place and head toward your personal God-given mission field.

Rejoice in the baptism you share with Ace, whose death and resurrection with Christ you just saw take place right here. You, like him, have broken free from the endless law demands of either/or, this or that, and along with Saint Matthew, rejoice that you have received the life-giving care of Jesus, your Great Physician. You have received the healing you need. Go and learn what this means in your life, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Swallow the words of forgiveness and reconciliation with God, like Ezekiel did, make them part of your very being. And eat with Jesus, confident of His unfailing love for you, and look forward with expectation to the resurrection of the body and the eternal Sabbath that awaits in His accepting embrace.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.