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St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist (Observed)
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Matthew 9:9-13
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, IN.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

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.

We have just one verse for the call of Matthew. Jesus walks up to Matthew's tax booth, says two words, and Matthew gets up and leaves everything to follow Jesus. But what does that mean?

Matthew's a tax collector. His is a well-paying job. He's probably got everything a person could want in this life—a big house, wealth, good food, friends. Luke records for us that Mathew hosts the dinner in our text. So, he's got the space to throw a party, and he's got enough friends that show up that other people notice it and even some folks who aren't friends aren't immediately asked to leave—you know, the Pharisees. And yet, when Christ calls him, Matthew simply and willingly leaves all that behind. No more wealth coming from his lucrative job. The cupboards would be left bare; the house abandoned—all so that Matthew could follow Jesus around wherever he went. Matthew is given over to a life of teaching and proclaiming Christ, whatever the cost to himself.

St. Matthew should impress and humble us. Christ's command for Matthew to follow Him meant that Matthew had to give up everything, all that he had, all that he was. And what's Matthew do? No uncertainty, not a moment's hesitation—*he rose and followed Him*.

He left everything? Yes, everything. That should impress you. Would you do the same? You've been called to follow Jesus, too—all Christians are to take up their crosses and follow their Lord. Our lives don't belong to us; they're not our own. Rather, we are to live as God's servants until He calls us home. Do you believe that? Do live as if that's true? Or are you more concerned with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? Sure, we've had to give up or forgo things as Christians—but don't they pale in comparison to what Matthew is called to, the burden the Lord placed upon him? In fact, much of the time, the things we have to give up are sinful things that hurt us anyhow, aren't they?

Matthew gave up everything to follow Christ. Tradition holds that Matthew died a martyr's death in A.D. 60—thus the red paraments for the blood he shed to witness Christ.

Following Christ for Matthew meant torture and death. Do any of us reasonably expect to face that in our following of Christ? Maybe more than a few years ago, but not really. Yet how often do we grumble about simple things that we as Christians who follow our Lord are to do? How about the burden of coming to church? Bible study? Confirmation class? And what about loving our neighbor? Christ commanded Matthew to give up all; yet He lets you serve, lets you follow Him right where you are—allowing you to decide how and where you live—all in Christian freedom. When being a disciple of Christ becomes hard or inconvenient or embarrassing, however, what do you do? The call of Matthew, his leaving everything willingly, his forsaking of luxury and ease and a life without suffering—well, it should humble you. It humbles me. And it ought to encourage us to pay better attention of how we are to serve Christ in our own lives—how we ought to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Some of Matthew's neighbors had no love for him or God. *And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"* Jesus not only calls Matthew, but He sits down and eats with sinners and tax collectors!

Sinners is a catch-all category. Tax collectors get mentioned specifically both because Matthew was one but also because they were particularly despised. I'm sure we'd give someone who worked the IRS today a bit of grief over his job—especially every April—but we'd probably be joking. It was worse in Jesus' day than just taxes. Imagine the U.S. was conquered by Russia, China, or whoever. Then that foreign power sent tax collectors to take your stuff, demand bribes, whatever. Didn't we start a war over taxation way back when? In Jesus' day, this was even worse. The tax collectors were your own family members—traitors both to country and family. That's the situation in Jesus' day—and that's who this Matthew is that Jesus calls. Even if Matthew were an honest tax collector, he was still a sellout to the Romans, taking good, hard-earned money away from his Jewish brethren and giving it to uncircumcised pagans. And then Jesus sits down and eats with Matthew and other sinners? Jesus actually talks to 'bad' people? He must be no better!

Though they think themselves to be better, it's the Pharisees who are the 'bad' people in this account. Their question isn't one of curiosity but of criticism. And they're cowardly

about it, too! They don't talk to Jesus; they badmouth Him to His disciples. "Your teacher seems pretty dumb to us. Look at what he's doing!" It's sneaky; it's rude; it's tricky. They're definitely not putting the best construction on things or explaining things in the kindest way. Nope, they complain behind Jesus' back. Nasty business, that.

Their snide comments get around to Jesus. So...what will Jesus do? How will He respond to these complaints, these attacks? Will He defend Himself? "I've done nothing wrong here!" Will He defend Matthew and his guests? "Matthew is a fine, upstanding citizen. These are good people." Will He chastise the Pharisees? "If you've got a problem with Me, come to Me. Leave My students out of it." No, Jesus doesn't do any of these things.

But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." It's as if Jesus said, "Why am I here? Why would I eat with sinners? Precisely because they are sinners and need Me, need My teaching, need My preaching, and, most of all, need My forgiveness." Jesus is blunt: "Yeah, these are 'bad' people, sinners. They need help, and they're humble enough to know it." Even virtuous St. Matthew—who by rights should make us blush—is just another sinner in need of Christ's healing. St. Matthew, Apostle and Gospel-Writer, records this for us and has us meet him—how do we meet Matthew? We meet him as a sinner. But he's not ashamed of that. Sure, he's not proud of his sin, nor is he indifferent to it. Rather, he's not ashamed of being a sinner whose been healed by the Great Physician, Jesus Christ. Do you see what Jesus is teaching with this? This call to Matthew is recorded for your benefit, so that you might learn and be strengthened, so that you might follow Christ to where He's leading you. So, you are to learn just this:

YOUR SIN IS GREAT, BUT THE GOD WHO CURES YOU AND HEALS YOU OF THAT SIN BY
HIS DEATH UPON THE CROSS IS GREATER STILL.

In fact, Jesus spells it out for the Pharisees. He says, "*Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'*" Jesus quotes Hosea against them. It's the perfect text because Hosea deals with a wife who'd fall in the 'sinner'-category just as the LORD deals with unfaithful Israel. Jesus is saying, "You Pharisees should've known what I'd be doing here. What does God desire? God desires to show mercy, to show love! God is more pleased showing mercy to a sinner than listening to you talk on and on about how wonderful you are and all your sacrifices, as if you're doing anything for God."

Even when we're faithless, God is faithful. Though we deserve to be cast away, He desires to be merciful to us. God loves mercy. God loves showing mercy. You've sinned; God handles that. He gladly and eagerly shows mercy. If anything, what upsets God more than sinning is when you downplay His forgiveness, when you brush off His mercy—when you would rather toot your own horn than focus on His mercy. As Christians, you still do bad things—just like St. Paul still did the bad things he didn't want to do—and you should always strive to do better. But the Christian faith isn't about what you do. Rather, it's about the mercy God shows you because of and through Christ's death upon the cross. And this is what we're to learn—the same thing Matthew learned as one of Christ's disciples, and it's the heart of what we learn today, so that we don't become like these backbiting Pharisees who complain about everyone else and puff ourselves up with vainglorious works. This is what we're to learn: God is merciful, and He desires to show you mercy. Confess your sin; receive His mercy.

Didn't you do that right before the Divine Service? Together, we said, "O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You...be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being." And He was! Right then and there, God forgave you your sins on account of Christ's "holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death." Through the pastor, God was gracious and merciful to you. And He is!

To be a Christian—and this isn't an optional part of being a Christian—to be a Christian, to be in relationship with God is nothing less than to receive His mercy. Jesus says, "*For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*" Who does Christ call? He calls sinners. Matthew is called...and his sins are forgiven, and Matthew learns and grows in the faith and even writes Scripture. Who else is called? All those sinners there present—called to repentance, called to receive God's mercy. And who's left out? The Pharisees, the ones who think they're righteous, the ones who think they aren't sinners. Jesus rebukes them, "When you've realized your need for mercy and forgiveness, then you too will be welcome at the feast. Until then, until that time, there's nothing here for you." The same is true for us: If you're haughty, if you're self-righteous, then there's nothing in this place for you. If you trust in your own works, that you're just such a wonderful Christian... well, what good would preaching the cross, what good would preaching forgiveness do you? Until you know that

you're a sinner, God will have nothing to say to you other than a word of Law to show you your sin.

But you know that you're a sinner. Still, as a sinner, you're tempted to downplay this: "Well, sure, we're all sinners. But I'm not as bad as the next guy. I mean, he's bad!" Let's be blunt: We are sinners. Period. But today we see and understand what the Gospel-Writer Matthew so desperately teaches throughout his Gospel: Jesus calls you, too. He invites you to His house, to hear His healing Word of forgiveness preached to you. He called you into His family by the waters of Holy Baptism. You are called even to His Table, to His meal, His Supper, to receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. This is what we all have in common—we are all sinners called to receive together Christ's life-bestowing and forgiveness-granting Supper—called to be healed of our sin by the Supper of the Great Physician and called to be given His strength. Did you know that the Church Fathers called the Supper the "medicine of immortality"? In His Holy Feast, Jesus eats with sinners, and He brings with Him angels, archangels, and all the saints of heaven.

Dear saints in Christ, don't be afraid to strive against your sin. Strive every day to live as God has called you. And when you sin—because when you set yourself to Christ's standards, you will see your sin—remember that God desires mercy. Christ has already made the sacrifice. Indeed, Christ calls you, a sinner, to His house to bestow that mercy upon you. This is what Jesus did for St. Matthew, and it's what He does for each and every one of us. God grant that we remember this all the days of our earthly life and remain faithful unto death.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.