

The Apostle and Evangelist Matthew

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If someone were to compose a list of people whose jobs made them unpopular, the local tax collector would probably be high on the list. If the tax collector was someone who gathered revenue from his own people for the oppressive foreign government that had given him his job, his name would rise higher. If everyone assumed that this particular tax collector, like all of them, stole and kept some of the tax money, his name would shoot up to the top.

All of these negatives were true of the apostle Matthew, remembered on Monday of this week. He collected taxes from his fellow Jews to turn over to the Romans, and was despised both by his own people and by the class-conscious citizens of Rome. Whether he actually "skimmed off" money or not, people would disdainfully assume that he did.

Yet this man was chosen by Jesus Christ to be one of His followers—one of the twelve closest to Him, in fact. Jesus evidently saw something in this person that others didn't notice. As always, He looked more deeply and lovingly than anyone else could or would.

The Gospels describe Jesus' invitation to Matthew to "follow Me" in a way that conveys the man's isolation before the Lord called him. The fifth chapter of Luke first tells of Jesus calling the fishermen, Simon Peter and the brothers James and John, who are his partners. They are

out working together in their boats, comrades full of energy and purpose.

Matthew's call is different. He is "a tax collector...sitting at the tax office." He is alone, and though he too has a brother (James, the son of Alphaeus) he appears to be used to solitude. When he is called he leaves everything and follows, as the fishermen do. But he also shows a special generosity and gratitude by giving a "great feast" for Jesus to which other tax collectors and "sinners" eagerly come.

The authorship of Matthew's Gospel is disputed by some contemporary scholars. They suggest that it is in part a collection of Jesus' sayings gathered by the apostle. Yet several elements of the book reflect Matthew's Jewish background and his profession as a handler of money. The writer frequently points to Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, in an effort to convince Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He also reflects the hesitation of Jewish Christians to say God's name by referring to the "Kingdom of Heaven" rather than "Kingdom of God." His Gospel makes more references to money than any of the others, often using very specific terms such as "half-shekel" and "a hundred denarii."

Troparion - Tone 3

With zeal, you followed Christ the Master,
who in His goodness, appeared on earth to mankind.
Summoning you from the custom house,
He revealed you as a chosen apostle:
the proclaimer of the the Gospel to the whole world!
Therefore, divinely eloquent Matthew,
we honor your precious memory!
Entreat merciful God that He may grant our souls remission of transgressions.

Authorship aside, Matthew was a devoted apostle of His Master and Savior. After the Resurrection he traveled and preached, giving his life for the Gospel in Ethiopia. Whatever his sad past, he was lifted to a new and inspiring life by the One who said to him, "Follow Me."