

Jesus' Message

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Jesus Calls Matthew: Seeing as Jesus Sees

Before we get to Matthew and tax collectors, let's begin with a visual exercise. Some of you will see a duck; others a hare. Some can see both, but not at the same time. The same is true of another image: some see an old woman, others a young woman. You cannot hold both images at once. These optical illusions show two ways of seeing the same reality.

What does that have to do with our Gospel story? (Stay with me.)

Background: Capernaum

Mark, in his characteristically direct style, begins Jesus' ministry with a series of fast-moving episodes set in Capernaum, a fishing village on the edge of the Sea of Galilee, with a population of around 1,500. Though small, it was strategically important. It sat on the *Via Maris*—the great trade route from Egypt through Palestine to Syria—and marked the border between Galilee and Judea.

Galilee was ruled indirectly by Rome through Herod Antipas, while Judea was ruled directly by Rome, later under Pontius Pilate. Goods moving through this border town were taxed. That is where tax collectors like Matthew came in.

Capernaum also became Jesus' early base. Simon Peter lived there with his extended family, along with Andrew, James, and John, who ran a fishing business together. Philip and Nathanael were also nearby. A Roman centurion was stationed there—remarkably sympathetic to the Jews, even funding the synagogue.

Tax collectors were part of daily life in Capernaum.

Tax Collectors

Apart from the temple tax, there were state tax collectors—the *publicanii*. In Galilee, their revenue went to Herod Antipas. Matthew was one of them.

Tax collectors were despised for two reasons. First, they collaborated with the occupying power. Second, they enriched themselves by overcharging, lending money at illegal interest rates, and exploiting the poor. They were banned from synagogues and courts and were regularly grouped with prostitutes. They were regarded as beyond grace.

To understand the shock of this story, think today of people smugglers, racketeers, or those who exploit the vulnerable for profit.

Matthew was wealthy. He could host large feasts, filling his house with fellow tax collectors and other outcasts—and Jesus chose to eat there.

The Shock of Jesus' Choice

Jesus not only called Matthew but made him one of the Twelve. This would have appalled religious leaders, ordinary people, and almost certainly the other disciples. They now had to live and work with him.

Jesus did not choose a polished or impressive team. He chose fishermen, a former zealot, a tax collector, and others we know little about. What he did with them was like the miracle of the loaves and fishes. He shaped eleven of them into a team that turned the world upside down.

Matthew was the most surprising choice of all.

Jesus Sees Differently

Mark tells us:

As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. (Mark 2:14)

The Gospels repeatedly tell us that Jesus saw. For example:

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake..." (Mark 1:16)

Jesus sees differently from the world. People saw Matthew as he was and what he had done. Jesus saw what he might become.

Like a sculptor seeing a figure hidden in stone, Jesus saw potential. Michelangelo is said to have claimed that every block of stone contains a statue, and it is the sculptor's task to reveal it.

Jesus saw not only Matthew's guilt and corruption, but his latent faith, intelligence, and capacity for change. Perhaps Jesus had already noticed loneliness, regret, or a longing for a different life.

In terms of energy, Matthew was full of potential, waiting for the right moment to be set in motion.

Grace for Sinners

Jesus said:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17)

Throughout history, countless lives have been transformed by God's grace. John Newton, once a slave trader, later wrote:

"I am not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor what I hope to be; but by the grace of God I am not what I once was."

Three Challenges

1. Be alert to opportunity.

Jesus was attentive to the voice within and the needs without. Each day is an opportunity to see, to speak, to act. How many chances do we miss because we are distracted or self-absorbed?

2. See people as Jesus sees them.

Not only as they are, but as they might be. Someone said of Amy Carmichael that her weakness was believing people were better than they were. That is closer to Christ than assuming the worst.

God loves both the best and the worst. Seeing potential does not excuse wrongdoing, but it refuses to define people by it.

3. Spend time with those unlike us.

Jesus ate with outsiders. Church people must resist living only among themselves. We are called to engage with sceptics, critics, and those hurt by the church.

Conclusion

Some of us may be Matthew—needing to begin again. Others are disciples who need to relearn how to see.

May we ask God this week to help us see someone in a new light and respond as the Spirit leads.

Amen.