

Introductory

This text has very close parallels in Mark (2:13-17) and Luke (5:27-32). In all three Synoptics, this pericope is sandwiched between The Paralytic Healed and The Question About Fasting. It's been a long time – 12 years, I think – since this text has come up on Sunday morning. It happens to come up on St. Barnabas Day, so we get to sing LSB 518 with verse 17 *and* verse 25!

Textual Notes

9. Once again, Jesus is on the move, “Καὶ παράγων ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐκεῖθεν εἶδεν ἄνθρωπον καθήμενον ἐπὶ τῷ τελώνιον, Μαθθαῖον λεγόμενον – and Jesus, departing from there, saw a man sitting at the tax booth, called Matthew.” That noun “τελώνιον – tax booth” occurs only three times in the NT, in the three parallels of this pericope. Matthew, or Levi, is said to be stationary at that place.

In case we think it possible that Matthew just happened to be sitting there, he later specifically identifies himself (10:3) as a “τελώνης – tax collector.” Not all tax collectors are the same because not all taxes are the same. The common and deeply rooted understanding of Matthew is that he was a “tax farmer,” a vocation which by its very nature invites and encourages cheating and theft.

I myself have on many occasions talked like that about Matthew, and I think that way of thinking is a holdover from the KJV, which calls Matthew and his ilk “Publicans,” which comes from the Latin word for “tax farmer,” a term I just learned this morning. Britannica.com is familiar with the term and uses it at least three times. It talks about taxation in Palestine at the time of Jesus,

A story preserved by Josephus (*The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XII, section 154 ff.) indicates that tax farming, whereby the right to collect taxes was auctioned or was awarded to privileged persons, was employed for the collection of local taxes.

Britannica also talks about taxation in Elizabethan England,

The actual collecting of taxes, moreover, was increasingly handed over to tax farmers. The more efficient methods of collection by tax farmers enabled the crown to gather a larger proportion of its revenue than previously.

The term used by the KJV translators has its etymology in the Latin language, but if you talk about a “publican” today in the UK, that term is associated with the “public house” or “pub,” which is ubiquitous in those parts. It's a place where you go for fish and chips and a pint, and it has nothing to do with taxes, and as you can see, the words have separate etymologies. Language is like that.

The concept of “tax farmer” and the term “publican,” which means “tax farmer” would have been in the forefront of the thinking of the 1611 translator of the KJV. Their use of the term “publican” to translate “τελώνης” indicates their belief that Matthew was, in fact, a “tax farmer,” which we have all been taught. He may well have been, but not necessarily. Not all taxes are the same.

If I want to drive my car to Chicago on the Ronald Reagan Memorial Tollway, I pay the toll and I pay tax on the gas to put into my car. If I don’t do that, then I don’t pay the toll or the tax. I would call that a “use tax.” I don’t mind so much those taxes because I think it fair and right that people who use things should be taxed for those things. I don’t smoke, and that tax is very high.

Before the I-Pass, there were toll booths manned by toll collectors on that toll road. Maybe Matthew was a toll collector and not a tax farmer. Jesus is on the move, and Matthew is not. Did the moving Jesus seek out the stationary Matthew at his office? A more likely encounter would have Matthew sitting at what we would call a “toll booth” with Jesus stopping to pay the toll.

Several commentators think like that, including Ellicott, who says of the place,

Literally, at the custom-house, the douane of the lake. The customs levied there were probably of the nature of an octroi on the fish, fruit, and other produce that made up the exports and imports of Capernaum.

In the Shakespeare Concordance, “publican” occurs once, and not in a complimentary manner. In The Merchant of Venice (1,3,362), the hated Shylock calls Antonio a “fawning Publican,” right before he says that he hates him because “he is a Christian,” but really because Antonio lends without interest. Meriam-Webster says the word has connotations of “traitor” or “collaborator.”

I’m not saying that the KJV were not right in choosing to make Matthew a “tax farmer.” To be sure, tax collectors are twice paired with prostitutes, “tax collectors and prostitutes” in the NT, and seven times – including coming up here – with sinners, “tax collectors and sinners.” That such pairing seems to be a matter of course would be an argument for “tax farmer,” not “toll collector.”

I wonder what Matthew thought when he saw Jesus approaching. Did he expect Jesus to say to him what Jesus said to him? Probably what Jesus said to him was the last thing he expected to hear from That Guy. Likely he was used to being looked at and spoken to in a mostly negative, critical, even hateful way. But Jesus says what He says; even a tax collector can become a Pastor.

Whatever the details of their meeting, “καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ Ἀκολούθει μοι. καὶ ἀναστὰς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ - and He said to him, ‘follow Me,’ and rising up, he followed Him.” Up to this point, Matthew had chosen the familiar to apostleship, relatives like James and John, fishermen like Peter and Andrew. They were also fine, upstanding citizens and contributors to the local economy.

Matthew was a taker. Whether he was taking tolls or collecting one or more of the myriad taxes levied on the Jews, at the end of the day, the money was going to Rome. I don't actually know anybody who works for the IRS, but I have had dealings with them over the years. Nobody likes dealing with that bunch. Nor do I know any toll collectors, but in my dealings with them...

Nobody doubts that whatever the tax, the collectors at that time – it was a good way to get rich. Yet we see no hesitation in Matthew as he jumps right up, leaves his brick-and-mortar tax structure behind, and follows Jesus. As noted on other occasions, not everybody did that, and I suppose there are men who are qualified for the Apostolic Office but don't do it for the usual reasons.

10. It seems reasonable to think that what happens next can be seen as a result of Jesus calling Matthew to be an Apostle. Other tax collectors – who maybe thought they were too bad for Jesus – come around, “Καὶ ἐγένετο αὐτοῦ ἀνακειμένου ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ - and it came to pass, as He was reclining in the house...” We might translate that first verb “and it just so happened,” as sarcasm.

Like I said, the calling of Matthew happened, and then “it just so happened, καὶ ἰδοὺ πολλοὶ τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἐλθόντες – look! Many tax collectors and sinners were coming.” The second verb, “ἀνάκειμαι,” is consistently translated “to recline,” and it often appears with the noun “table,” and it always means that people are sitting down for a meal. Except they are laying down.

In many cultures, they sit on the floor to eat. I suppose that's okay unless you have chairs, which are no longer owned exclusively by the wealthy. I got a dining room table and six chairs for under \$200, but that was nine years ago. We now see the same verb with “συν” added, so “συνανέκειντο τῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ - they began to recline with Jesus and His disciples.

The way that verb “to recline” is used in the NT, it means that they are in the process of eating a meal, a personal and intimate social gathering. Who do you allow to dine at your house? For us, it's mostly family and a very few friends and we may be more inclusive in that regard than they would have been in the time of Jesus. Yet we see multiple presumed strangers coming around.

Matthew's use of the same root verb (to recline) twice, the second time with the prefix “with” tells us that what Jesus has been doing and habitually does with only His intimates, He now shares with disreputable people. We have talked before about the meaning of “ἁμαρτωλοὶ.” Are they harlots, or unrepentant sinners, people whose bad reputation is greatly deserved, or maybe Gentiles?

11. It's like the Pharisees were stalking them, “καὶ ἰδόντες οἱ Φαρισαῖοι ἔλεγον τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ - and the Pharisees, seeing (that) spoke to His disciples.” What all did they see? They clearly saw Him go into the house, they saw the tax collectors and sinners go into it as well, and they seem to know that they're eating, but did they see and hear Jesus bid Matthew to follow Him?

I find it curious that they don't just ask Jesus, but instead, asked the disciples, “Διὰ τί μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν ἐσθίει ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν – Why is your teacher with tax collectors and

sinners?” People ask other people or my wife before they ask me, and I don’t really get that either. The question is not about Jesus “eating” with those people, but about Him being “with” them. .

Oh, wait. Luke says they ask why He “eats and drinks” with those people. In their world, you did not want to have any contact with those people. Tax collectors were constantly in contact with Gentiles, whose uncleanness would have been passed on to anybody in contact with them. One commentator opined that collectors would have been in a state of almost perpetual uncleanness.

Besides that, they themselves would not be caught dead associating in any way socially with those kinds of people, let alone allowing them into their respective domiciles. The Sadducees were the party of collaboration with Rome, and anybody working for the Romans was seen by people like the Pharisees as collaboration. They were just unsavory characters, and hookers are hookers.

Like in the case of racism in that day, it’s hard for us Americans to imagine the class consciousness present in that culture. If you were born well, you had everything, and nothing was going to change that. If you were not, you had nothing, and nothing was going to change that either. If you think Downton Abby or the Royals and then multiply that several times, that’s what it was like.

12. The ears of Jesus burned, and He points out, “ὁ δὲ ἀκούσας εἶπεν Οὐ χρείαν ἔχουσιν οἱ ισχύοντες ἰατροῦ ἀλλ’ οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες.- Hearing, He said, ‘the strong have not need of a doctor, but those being sick.’” That sounds to me and the commentators like a proverb, and the meaning is clear. Doctors do, in fact, spend a lot more time on sick people, and almost none on the well.

That proverb is in answer to a “why” question, and that’s why. No matter what kind of tax collector and no matter the honesty or dishonesty of individual collectors, as a group they were seen by all – the Pharisees do not disagree – as being spiritually sick. As such, they are the ones who need spiritual healing. The Doctor seems to be saying that the Pharisees were not in need of healing.

13, I think instead He may be saying that the Pharisees *think* they are not in need of healing, because He says, “πορευθέντες δὲ μάθετε τί ἐστὶν Ἐλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν – leaving, learn what is,” and then He quotes from Hosea (6:6, see the OT reading) “οὐ γὰρ ἤλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλούς – I want mercy, not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

The translations almost all have the verb “leaving” as a command, “go,” but it’s not a command, but “learn” is, in the Imperative Mode. But that doesn’t mean that He’s not telling them to leave. Meyer captures the sense of what’s going on here,

πορευθ. μάθετε] corresponds to the Rabbinical form מְלַךְ אֵצֶל, which is used in sending one away, with a view to fuller reflection upon some matter or other, or with a view to being first of all instructed regarding it; see Schoettgen

It reminds me of the British euphemism, “off you go,” spoken – for example – by Gordon Ramsay when he has told an aspiring chef (or a group of them) to go and perform a task.

He's telling them what to do, but it's not really a command, but he *could* order them to leave. But they all know what he's saying, but he's being nice, and that's Euphemism.

It's spoken in the Indicative Mode; it's self-evident that Jesus is the teacher, and they are the students. They do not buck Him on that – this time. From their short exchange – a summary? – it is clear that on this matter He is the teacher, and they have a lot to learn from Him. Some of these things you just have to figure out on your own. Off you go!

He wants them to begin their study in Hosea, because if they understood Hosea 6:6, then they would not have had to ask His disciples “why” he is socializing with those kinds of people. They also would have known that the broader message of Hosea is the need for repentance and the dire consequences awaiting the unrepentant. Pharisees, take heed.

He ends by pointing out to them exactly who He came “καλέσαι – to call.” That word is most often used in the NT when you're talking about identifying something or giving it a name. The irony He expresses using that word is that most people would identify the Pharisees as “righteous” and the tax collectors and sinners...Jesus does just the opposite.