

# How Much Do We Know about Matthew the Disciple?

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I did not grow up in church. But I grew up in a part of the Bible Belt. As such I knew from a young age that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were names of people who had written stories about Jesus. But who were these men? Today we will consider Matthew. Who was he and why did he write about Jesus?

Matthew, also known as Levi, is listed as one of the 12 disciples in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts. We know from the narratives that he was a tax collector. But is there more we can learn about Matthew? Does church history tell us anything about this disciple?

## **Who Was Matthew the Tax Collector?**

We are first introduced to Matthew in the ninth chapter of the book bearing his name. There he is identified as “sitting at the tax booth.” In the other gospel accounts he is listed as Levi, the son of Alphaeus. This means that Levi is a Jew. This makes his “sitting at the tax booth” all the more despicable.

Nobody likes paying taxes, but it was even worse in first century Capernaum. There were two types of tax collectors. The first type was the general tax collectors—they collected things like property tax, income tax, and poll tax. These were a fixed rate and usually collected by Romans. The second type of tax collector was the one who would tax everything. (This was somewhat similar to our sales tax today, but it wasn’t a fixed rate.) The way these tax collectors made their money was in whatever they could

squeeze out of the people. They'd give what was due to Rome and then pocket the rest. The more corrupt they were, the more money they could make. Rome didn't care what kind of tax these locals charged so long as they got their cut.

Matthew was the second type of tax collector. Now some of these types of tax collectors would be a chief tax collector; they'd hire others to do their dirty bidding. (If you've heard of [Zacchaeus](#), he was one of these tax collectors. But not Matthew. Matthew was one of the little guys who did his own thing—who set up his own lemonade stand and milked his own people out of their hard-earned dollars.

Needless to say, tax collectors were hated and despised. Not only were they daily reminders of Roman domination, they were just crooked and dirty. Many Jews considered submission to Rome to be treason against God. And so to sell out like Matthew had done—this is just unthinkable. How could someone do such a thing? What kind of person is this?

The Mishnah and the Talmud (Jewish writings) had whole sections dogging on tax collectors—and lumping them in with thieves and murderers. It was actually ruled by Jewish rabbis that it was okay—lawful even—to lie to tax collectors.

What do the religious leaders say to someone like Levi? They tell him to repent. Change your life. Quit your job. Stop being such a lying, thieving, cheat. And then *maybe* God will have something to do with you. Start studying the Torah (start reading your Bible) and get your life cleaned up and then you won't be such a bum.

This was the world that Levi lived in. Even if he wanted to repent—there is no way that he could live up to those expectations. Did Matthew buy into this narrative? Did he believe that he was a traitor and would always be a traitor? Did he believe that there was no way for him to become righteous? Did he identify as a sinner? That was how the world was divided up in his day; the righteous and the sinners. The righteous were the ones who worked hard to follow God. The sinners did not. There was a word for the common folk, those who did not study Torah. They were the outcasts.

The answer for one like Matthew was simple. Do better.

The religious answer in the first century was to help people adapt to their brokenness or even to figure out how to protect society from a further contagion—further brokenness. It was to manage brokenness. And it was to help people do better and to be better. Sin management.

But then Matthew met Jesus...

**How Did Jesus Call Matthew to Be a Disciple?**

The calling of Matthew in all three gospel accounts is relatively simple. Matthew is a tax collector, he meets Jesus, he leaves everything and becomes a disciple of Jesus. The Bible does not give us many more details except that Matthew immediately throws a party and invites all of his friends. But the simplicity of this passage speaks volumes.

Jesus messes up the system the religious leaders had created. There are still categories of righteous and sinners, but Jesus says that “only God is righteous.” Jesus, who is God, is the only one in the righteous category, and everyone else is in the other category. Being righteous happens through a relationship with Jesus, not through changing your ways. You see this in Jesus’ call of Matthew. It’s simple: “Follow me.” This is Jesus telling Matthew that what matters is his connection to Jesus.



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He will have to leave his tax collectors booth. (Luke makes a point of this). There *is* a real heart change for Matthew. But there is more than this going on. Jesus is willing to be positively identified with this tax collector. This tax collector is becoming one of his followers. Jesus isn’t simply into moral reform, he is after total transformation. And this is what happens because Matthew not only leaves his tax booth but he immediately begins sharing the good news with his buddies.

Sinners and tax collectors like Matthew have no [hope](#) of ever becoming righteous. But the problem is, neither do the Pharisees and scribes. They too are sinners, but they don’t have the capacity to see it. You see, legalism doesn’t change the world. The story of Matthew’s calling reminds us that what creates change is not legalism, it is the gospel. The gospel transformed a hated tax collector and made him into a faithful disciple of Jesus. Little else is known about Matthew. We know that he was called by Jesus and we know that he kept following Jesus. He wrote the gospel account which bears his name. Church history gives us a few other clues, but these cannot be verified.

## **What Happened to Matthew?**

The gospels and Acts do not tell us what happened to Matthew. We can assume that he persevered to the end, otherwise his gospel account would have been suspect. But how did he die? Where did he continue to minister?

The earliest reports say that Matthew continued his ministry in Ethiopia where he eventually met his end. Michelangelo's painting, *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, had been commissioned by Cardinal Contarelli. He was given explicit instruction as to what should be in the painting; namely, Matthew being slain by a soldier who was sent by a wicked king with a crowd of onlookers. This is connected with the legend that Matthew was killed by an Ethiopian king who was not appreciative of Matthew's rebuking him for lusting after his own niece (a believer).

In Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* it states rather simply that, "The scene of his labors was Parthia, and Ethiopia, in which latter country he suffered martyrdom, being slain with a halberd in the city of Nadabah, A.D. 60." Early church fathers differ on his manner of death, though. Some have him burned, others stoned, some beheaded, and still others have him stabbed to death. One other early historian has Matthew dying a natural death. There is also a gnostic writing called *The Acts and Martyrdom of St. Matthew* but it is a fanciful work with little to no historical bearing.

Ultimately, we cannot know for certain. But we do know that Matthew was radically transformed by Jesus and spent the rest of his days telling others about the good news of Christ.

### **Matthew Points Us to Christ, not Himself**

I wish we knew more about Matthew. Why do we have such an important work, the Gospel of Matthew, written by this man but so little historical knowledge of him? But is that not the nature of gospel work? The Gospel of Matthew is not about Matthew, it's about Jesus. He is a pointer. Matthew has done his job if our attention is focused upon the one he is pointing towards, and not the finger which does the pointing. So is it a surprise that we know so little of Matthew?

In his diary, Robert Murray McCheyne once wrote these words: "I need to be made willing to be forgotten. Oh! I wish that my heart were quite refined from all self-seeking. I am quite sure that our truest happiness is not to seek our own—just to forget ourselves—and to fill up the little space that remains, seeking only, and above all, that our God may be glorified.

This is the way of discipleship. Who was Matthew? We don't know many details, but we know the important one. He was a sinner and through Jesus he became a disciple. Matthew was one who followed Jesus. Is there a better thing that can be said about someone?

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