

What is your opinion? Will tax collectors enter the kingdom of heaven before you?

Matthew was a tax collector who heard Jesus invite, "Come follow me." Matthew abandoned earthly wealth to follow Jesus. In the eyes of men, he went from riches to rags. But Matthew saw the pearl of great price and gave up all to seek eternal treasure. "As he sat at table in his house, behold many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples" (Mt 9:10). No sooner was he converted than Matthew drew after him a whole crowd of tax collectors along the same road to salvation. The conversion of one tax collector gave many of Matthew's professional colleagues an example to follow.

Zacchaeus was another tax collector. We must recall the Holy Land was an occupied territory. To collect taxes was to aid the enemy. And tax collectors were also despised because they had the flexibility to pad their own pockets by taxing more than was needed by Rome. The attitude of Zacchaeus is similar to Matthew's. He readily responds to Jesus' invitation and greets him with joy. He too is ready to set aside wealth. "Behold, half of my possessions Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over" (Luke 19:8). This tax collector too offers an example of conversion and repentance.

What is your opinion? Will a fallen woman enter the kingdom of heaven before you? When Jesus encounters the woman of Samaria at Jacob's Well, he asks her for a drink. This woman is estranged from the community and must come to the well at a time when others are not present. She is a great sinner, and Jesus reaches out to her like the shepherd in search of the lost sheep. He thirsts so that she may drink of the life-giving waters. He helps her realize her life of going from one man to another has been a search for happiness in all the wrong places. Encountering the truth with mercy and justice, the woman recognizes a new healthy path forward and she willingly accepts the life-giving water that Jesus offers. Once reconciled, she can't wait to share the good news. She has experienced the joy of the gospel and rushes off to bring others to Jesus. Many began to believe in Jesus because of the word of the woman who testified (John 4:39).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus encounters another woman who is ostracized by the community. This one was caught in adultery and the community is ready to stone her to death. The propensity to violence extends to Jesus. They wish to trap him so they may cast stones at his teaching. He simply draws in the sand before responding, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). The angry crowd leaves one by one and then Jesus sets her free with the encouragement to sin no more. Here we are left to fill in the blank . . . but we can easily imagine that she left joyfully and was eager to share the good news of God's love and mercy.

What is your opinion? Will tax collectors and fallen women enter the kingdom of heaven before you? From each individual we see Repentance, Gratitude, Conversion, and Invitation. In their own, right each of the tax collectors and each of the women were great sinners. Jesus invites each to a new way of life. Repenting of past sins, they are set free. They experience a newfound joy and they are thankful. They are ready to begin a new way of life. Conversion takes hold and they can't wait to go and invite others to follow Jesus.

In the sacrament of penance, Jesus invites each of us to repent of our sins. He offers us love and mercy and forgiveness. He thirsts for us to turn from wicked ways ... and yet many talk a good game but do not respond. Mother Teresa went to confession every 8 days. On one occasion, she turned to the confessor outside of confession and commented: "Everyone says I am a saint, now you know better." What is your opinion? Are you more saintly than Mother Teresa? Will tax collectors and fallen women enter the kingdom of heaven before you because they more readily accept the mercy of God and joyfully invite others to do the same?