

People of the Bible

Matthew

Matthew was one of Jesus' twelve disciples. He is also the author of the Gospel of Matthew. The name Matthew means "gift of God." His Jewish name was Levi which Mark and Luke use in their Gospels. He was the son of Alphaeus and a brother of James the Less, also a disciple of Jesus (Mark 2:14).

Matthew was a resident of Capernaum. Capernaum was at the top of the Sea of Galilee. It had at this time a large population. Fisheries were numerous and it was a busy area for navigation and trade. The Romans established a customhouse in this area and Matthew was a tax collector when Jesus called him.

There were two kinds of tax collectors, the Gabbai and the Mokhes. The Gabbai were general tax collectors. They collected property tax, income tax and poll tax. These taxes were set by official assessments. There was not much graft at this level.

The Mokhes collected a duty on imports and exports, goods for domestic trade, and virtually anything that was moved by road. They set the tolls on roads and bridges, beasts of burden and axles on transport wagons, a tariff on parcels, letters and whatever else they could find to tax. Their assessments were often arbitrary and motivated by greed.

There were two kinds of Mokhes – the Great Mokhes and the Little Mokhes. The Great Mokhes stayed behind the scenes and hired others to collect taxes for them. Zaccheus was apparently a Great Mokhes – a "chief tax collector" – Luke 19:2). Matthew was evidently a Little Mokhes, because he manned a tax office where he dealt with people face to face (Matthew 9:9).

Matthew was the worst of the worst. No self-respecting Jew in his right mind would choose to be a tax collector. They bought franchises from the Roman emperor. They extorted money from the people of Israel to feed the Roman coffers and padded their own pockets. They often strong-armed money out of people with the use of thugs. They were the most despicable and vile, with unprincipled scoundrels. Their friends were the riffraff of society – petty criminals, hoodlums, prostitutes, and their kind. It is no wonder that they were very hated and barred from the synagogues and temple.

Why would Jesus call someone like Matthew to be a part of His inner circle? Matthew stands as a vivid reminder that the Lord often chooses the most despicable people of this world, redeems them, and gives them new hearts. Then He uses them in remarkable ways.

Matthew possessed a number of qualities. He was familiar with Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and even Latin. Matthew had an orderly mind and an ability to keep accurate records. These traits were very helpful in the tax collector occupation. They also served him well as a disciple of Christ and author of his Gospel.

Matthew exhibited many more positive attributes. He was a humble, self-effacing man who kept himself almost completely in the background throughout his lengthy account of Jesus' life and ministry. In his entire Gospel he mentions his own name only two times. Once is where he records his call [Matthew 9:9] and the other when he lists all twelve apostles [Matthew 10:2-4]. We know that Matthew knew the OT very well. His Gospel quotes the OT 99 times and quotes or alludes to more than 60 OT prophecies and indicating how they were fulfilled by Jesus. That

is more than Mark, Luke and John combined. Matthew quotes out of the Law (first five books of the Bible), out of the Psalms, and out of the Prophets.

Matthew was doing quite well in an earthly sense. What caused him to instantly and without hesitation “rise and follow Him?” Several thoughts are advanced: (1) Matthew knew about Jesus, because sitting in the crossroads of Jesus’ ministry, he would have heard information all the time about this miracle worker and preacher of good news. (2) Deep down inside he knew and loved the OT. He knew the prophecies. The Word of God prodded his conscience and brought him to repentance. He was so thrilled to have found the Messiah that he held a large banquet in Jesus’ honor and invited all his friends [mentioned in a previous paragraph] Luke 5:29-32).

We know that Matthew wrote his Gospel with a Jewish audience in mind. Although this Gospel is meaningful for everyone who reads it, it was addressed primarily to people familiar with the OT Scriptures. This included Jewish believers in Christ as well as Jews who did not yet recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah.

Like most of the Apostles, Matthew seemed to have evangelized in a number of countries. Tradition says that Matthew ministered to the Jews both in Israel and abroad for many years. Some of the areas of his work might have been: Ethiopia, Northern Greece, Syria and Persia. It is thought that he was martyred for his faith in Ethiopia.