

Yeshua Calls Matthew & Eats with Sinners To Be Like Yeshua Means – To Serve Others

We continue to explore the Christian Torah from the Gospel of Matthew. In this post, we will explore the calling of Matthew to follow Yeshua and His eating with sinners.

Calling of Matthew

"As Yeshua passed on from there he spotted a tax-collector named Mattityahu sitting in his collection booth. He said to him, "Follow me!" and he got up and followed him. ~ Matthew 9:9

Matthew (*Mattityahu*) was a Jew who worked for the Romans (specifically for Herod Antipas) as the area's tax collector. (In Mark and Luke, he is called "Levi." Most people in these days had two or three names: a Jewish name, a Roman name, and possibly even a Greek name.) Mathew's tollbooth taxed commercial goods being transported from the sea to land from the citizens, as well as from merchants, passing through town. (Recall that K'far-Nachum was a customs post on the caravan route between Damascus to the northeast and the Mediterranean Sea to the west.)

Tax collectors took a commission on the taxes they collected, so most of them overcharged and kept the extra profits. Thus, most Jews hated tax collectors because of their reputation for cheating, their support of Rome, and their constant contact with "unclean" Gentiles. A Jew who accepted such an office shamed his family and friends and was excommunicated from the synagogue. The **collection booth** was an elevated platform or bench. Everyone knew who Mathew was, and anyone passing through the city that had to pay taxes could find him easily.

Read out of context, you might think that Yeshua walked by one day and said **follow me and he did**. However, according to several commentators, this would not have been the first time that Yeshua had seen Mathew, for Yeshua had often walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Apparently Yeshua saw in Mathew what he could use in his ministry. For example, we can see Mathew's attention to detail and careful record-keeping skills in the way that he wrote this Gospel. Certainly Mathew had seen Yeshua before and, with the crowds, probably had been impressed and intrigued with this man. Thus, one day Yeshua said two simple words: *"Follow me."*

The words are in the imperative mood, meaning this was not just a request, but a command, a call to become a talmid (see 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21). Yeshua called Mathew to walk the same road. That Yeshua called such a notorious person into his circle of talmidim certainly must have shocked the other talmidim, as well as the trailing crowd. Following upon the discussion of Yeshua's ability to forgive sins (9:1-8), this episode dramatically demonstrated the range of sinners that Yeshua could and would forgive. Mathew recognized that Yeshua was not inviting him; Yeshua was calling - commanding him. Consequently, Mathew obeyed; **he got up and followed him**.

Mathew's radical obedience would cause a great change in his life. Already ostracized by fellow Jews, Mathew's decision to follow Yeshua would make no difference in this regard. But Mathew was probably very wealthy - tax collecting was a lucrative occupation; so when Mathew walked away from his booth, he not only snubbed Rome but also a lifetime of potentially great wealth. Several of the other talmidim could always return to fishing, but Mathew could never turn back.

When God calls you to follow or obey him, do you do it with as much abandon as Mathew did? Sometimes the decision to follow Yeshua requires difficult or painful choices. Like Mathew, we must decide to leave behind those things that would keep us from following Yeshua. Remember, He wants us full-time. Count the cost.

"While Yeshua was in the house eating [in Mathew's house], many tax-collectors and sinners came and joined him and his talmidim at the meal. When the P'rushim saw this, they said to his

talmidim, "Why does your rabbi eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" But Yeshua heard the question and answered, "The ones who need a doctor aren't the healthy but the sick. As for you, go and learn what this means: 'I want compassion rather than animal-sacrifices.' For I didn't come to call the 'righteous,' but sinners!" ~ Matthew 9:10-13

Mathew responded as Yeshua would want all his followers to do - he followed his Lord immediately, and he called his friends together to meet Yeshua. Mathew held a **dinner** for his fellow **tax collectors** and other notorious **sinners** so they also could meet Yeshua. The fact that Matthew's house was large enough for **many** to eat there suggests he was a major rather than minor tax collector. At Mathew's house there gathered a crowd that Yeshua could not reach in the synagogues. The tax collectors had been ex-communicated.

The term **sinners** referred not only to immoral and pagan people, but also to the common people who were not learned in the law and did not abide by the rigid standards of the P'rushim. The P'rushim regarded these people as wicked and opposed to the will of God because they did not observe the rituals for purity, which enabled them to eat with others. These people gathered at Matthew's house, where they knew they were welcome, and they **ate with [Yeshua] and his talmidim** and listened to the message this marvelous teacher had for them. Yeshua once again demonstrates that He is willing to go to where the people are – the people that need him the most.

"When the P'rushim saw this, they said to his talmidim, 'Why does your rabbi eat with tax-collectors and sinners?'" According to the P'rushim, contact with these *tax collectors and sinners* made a Jew unclean; to sit and *eat* with such people was particularly heinous. Sharing fellowship around a meal indicated close association and identification with that person. The P'rushim would have nothing to do with such people, expecting them to change before dealing with them. They saw themselves as righteous and everyone else as sinners.

Then along came this man, Yeshua, who was popular, taught with great authority from the Scriptures, and claimed to speak for God himself. Yet, he also ignored their man-made regulations and seemed to condone sin by keeping company with sinners. They watched Yeshua and followed his every move, and their anger continued to boil as he flouted their man-made rules, which they often elevated above the laws of God (see, for example, 15:1-20). The P'rushim, so strict in their observance of their laws as they attempted to retain their "purity," refused to eat with common people because the sins of the commoners might make them ceremonially impure. In this instance, Yeshua probably stepped on every man-made regulation about eating - and the P'rushim were not happy about it!

"But Yeshua heard the question and answered, "The ones who need a doctor aren't the healthy but the sick. As for you, go and learn what this means: 'I want compassion rather than animal-sacrifices.' For I didn't come to call the 'righteous,' but sinners!'" Yeshua's calling could not have been more plainly said; He came to call us sinners to repentance and acceptance of Him as our Lord and Savior!! Yeshua heard the P'rushim's question and had an answer for these self-righteous, influential religious leaders. The first part of Yeshua's answer was from a common proverb on the healthy and the sick. Those *who are well* do not seek out a *physician*; the physician's waiting room is filled with those *who are sick*. They recognize their need and come to the one who can make them well. The physician, in turn, spends his time helping the sick get well.

Yeshua then told these self-righteous P'rushim to *go and learn what this means*, implying that they did not understand their own Scriptures. This was a common tactic of the Rabbis when they would say, "Go and learn," to students who did not understand or apply correctly God's Word and needed to go back and study more.

The P'rushim thought they knew Scripture perfectly; Yeshua told them to go back and study again the words of God spoken through the prophet Hosea, ***I desire mercy and not sacrifice*** (Hosea 6:6). Hosea's words were not a blanket condemnation of the sacrificial system of the Jewish nation at the time; rather, God was condemning a thoughtless, mechanical approach to sacrifice. If a person's heart is far from God, ritual will become empty mockery and rote repetition. God did not want the Israelites' rituals; he wanted their hearts. Yeshua challenged the P'rushim to apply Hosea's words to themselves.

God wants a heart attitude that includes a right relationship with him and with others, an attitude that reaches out to those in physical and spiritual need. Yeshua carried the proverb a step further and explained his messianic mission. "I am here because these are the people who realize their need and welcome me." Yeshua did not come to *call the righteous to repentance*, for the self-righteous do not recognize their sinfulness. But these *sinners* saw their need. ***This was Yeshua's audience.*** Yeshua, the Great Physician, healed people of physical illnesses, but he knew that all people are spiritually sick and in need of salvation. Luke recorded Yeshua's words about his mission as, ***"For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost."*** (Luke 19:10).

In my next post, we will explore Yeshua's teaching on fasting and new wine.