

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in the Gospel, we see remarkable faith with the calling of Matthew, to which Matthew immediately responds to this call by following. We also have Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners and deeply disturbing the Pharisees who find this gathering of tax collectors and sinners a bit scandalous.

A very brief caveat about Matthew the tax collector and the writer of the Gospel of Matthew...it is another topic that has been debated over the years, but most modern critical scholars consider the Gospel to be an anonymous work written by an unknown author—likely a Jewish-Christian scholar—between 80 and 90 CE. Scholars often note that the text doesn't claim to be written by Matthew and refers to him in the third person.¹

The Matthew in our Gospel lesson today, I think we all know, is a tax collector or a publican as you will hear in certain translations. However, Matthew as a tax collector was a cultural outcast who was despised by his fellow Jews. Matthew in his time was viewed a religious apostate or a person who renounces a religious or political belief or principle. By his profession, he is also an extortionist who lined his pockets with his own people's money. And if that isn't enough to make you despise him, he is also a political traitor because he collaborated with the Roman Empire. But despite all of this, Jesus chooses Matthew and says to him, "follow me." And without hesitation or second thought, Matthew gets up and follows Jesus.

But if Jesus is truly the Son of God, why would he call this man named Matthew and upend social expectations...especially the expectations of the Pharisees? After all, the Pharisees were very moral and religious people who were often in the temple, studying the Law and making sacrifices. They were viewed as very righteous men because they did outward signs of holiness to be noticed by others. The public court of opinion formed by the hypocritical-façade of the Pharisees would conclude that what Jesus is doing is truly a scandal...this dinner party at Matthew's is really scandalous.

When we hear the word scandalous or scandal, what comes to mind? The term scandalous is defined as causing general public outrage by perceived offense against morality or law. Maybe we tend to see scandalous as a state of affairs that are disgracefully bad, typically as a result of someone's negligence or irresponsibility. Perhaps when we think of scandalous, we think of some group of housewives of some major city that we see on TV. Maybe we think of the Kardashians...they have made millions on being involved in some sort of scandalous public outrage or moral offense. If we are really hip to pop culture's scandalous goings-on, we are wondering how Justin Baldoni and Blake Lively are going to make out with their lawyers who still want to argue their case even though it has been dropped from the court of law but is still very active in the court of public opinion. But to really get the scoop on scandals, we need not look any further than Taylor Swift's next album or CD, or whatever they call it today, to see what and who she is singing about and who she is dissing...that will direct us to some kind of scandal. By the way, I have no clue about this stuff, I had to Google pop culture scandals to get a few

¹ The caveat of Matthew / Levi as the author of the Gospel according to Matthew comes from: <https://ehrmanblog.org/was-the-author-of-matthew-matthew/> this is a blog by Bart Ehrman centered on the history and literature of early Christianity, along with an AI overview found when Googling, is Matthew the tax collector the author of the gospel of Matthew.

names...Jennifer Lopez was in there too but I was way past interested by the time I got to Taylor Swift so you don't have to fill me in on the details if you know about this stuff because this is just nonsense and not the kind of scandal I am referring to. However, I suspect that if we were to discuss scandalous, this is the type of stuff that would come up.

But the scandals I am getting at are much deeper and much more significant. When I refer to scandals or scandalous, I think back to when I was young, the length of a guy's hair was one thing but the political violence along with the racial issues, the riots, the destruction, and the hatred that I saw first-hand because of political and racial fear was scandalous and very terrifying. The assassination of John and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were scandalous. The killing of four college students in Ohio who were protesting a scandalous war in Viet Nam I saw as frightening, but the killing of these students was also very scandalous. The resignation of a corrupt president was scandalous. I refer to the scandals that I witnessed as a kid because if I brought up what I think are the real scandals of today I would be too political. But today in our Gospel lesson, this scandal would be equal to these type of scandals.

In the Gospel, this dinner party with Jesus is a very political and a very impactful scandal before us, according to the Pharisees. According to the Pharisees, Jesus eating with these despised tax collectors and sinners is corrupting and scandalizing their covenant of table fellowship. According to the Laws of the Pharisees, shared food and drink symbolized a shared life and table fellowship expressed covenantal solidarity. The Pharisees may see this as a scandal, but Jesus sees the exclusion of the covenant as a stumbling block.

Jesus is showing the Pharisees that their law is a stumbling block. And in the Greek language, a stumbling block is a scandal. Listen how the Greek word for stumbling block is used a little later in Matthew's Gospel.

²³ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matthew 16:23)

A little later we hear Jesus say this to the disciples when they were wondering who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus responds by placing a child among them and says:

⁶ "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷ Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! (Matthew 18:6-7)

The Greek term for stumbling block is *σκάνδαλον* and is used figuratively to mean something that causes people to sin or gives occasions for sin...or that which causes stumbling or trouble. The question in this scene before us with the Pharisees and Jesus is this, who is causing the scandal or who is scandalous? Is it Jesus because he is eating with tax collectors and sinners or is it the Pharisees who hold others to their laws that exclude those folks like the tax collectors and sinners?

While the Pharisees may see a scandal in Jesus eating with the tax collectors and sinners, the scandal they see is merely their own stumbling block. And their response to Jesus eating with tax

collectors and sinners is something we see all the time in politics...they attempt to belittle or discredit the opponent and make others fear what is taking place. And in this case, the opponent is Jesus and the Pharisees attempt to discredit him by saying to his disciples:

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

In other words, what they are basically asking the disciples is, what kind of teacher would do this? They are asking in a way that they think can only be answered by discrediting or belittling Jesus. Regrettably, we would attack back by attempting to discredit the Pharisees by either belittling or discrediting them by bringing up all their faults. We would try to overcome their hatred with more of our hatred. But Jesus does not do this, he simply responds by explaining his mission and by quoting the prophet Hosea,

'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Here is what I love about this scene that is before us today. Jesus is eating with the tax collectors and the sinners and upsetting the Pharisees who basically concealed their law by their own faithlessness in it...the laws they held up to others, they themselves couldn't abide in. As I said, in ancient Judaism, table fellowship expressed covenant solidarity. What this means is that by sharing a meal with these tax collectors and sinners, Jesus identifies himself with these outsiders and welcomes them into His kingdom. By sharing a meal, Jesus is establishing a covenant with them...shared food and drink symbolized a shared life. But in the Pharisees eyes, Jesus is inviting all the wrong people.² And the Pharisees will not eat with the type of people like the tax collectors and sinners.

The Pharisees see Jesus as scandalous in that he is causing their law to stumble, but Jesus is actually removing the stumbling block that gathers the outsiders into HIS covenant of a table that invites us all into one meal. Jesus sitting at this table with tax collectors and sinners is more significant than just dining, Jesus will be feasting NOT on food, but on the return of sinners...while the self-righteousness of the Pharisees causes them to stumble and not see this shared life with Jesus.

We all cause a scandal when we come to this table and I am sure this would cause some to stumble over their assumptions of who is in and who is out or who is worth or who is not worthy. Nonetheless, in this bread and wine we share the life that is before us, the life that is Jesus Christ...the life that has been given for us all. We are NOT well, none of us are well, we are all in need of a physician, and we have come to him, Jesus Christ who is the one feeding us with his very body and blood, as we gather around this table with out-stretched hands. And placed into our hands is healing mercy that invites us into his kingdom.

In this Holy Meal here today, the Lord hands to us all, the pure grace of salvation. Like Matthew in this Holy Meal, we see that God has chosen us and God has chosen to give to us in this bread and wine, grace and salvation even as we are immersed in our worldly affairs, our sin, and all of our scandals. But without hesitation may we too gather at this table where Christ receives us and feeds us the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

² Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2010. "The Divine Physician (9:1-17), page 134.

Come now all is ready...Jesus does not call the righteous or saintly to the table...He calls ordinary people, like fisherman or tax collectors...He calls folks whom others might look down on and frown upon. Jesus does not call saints. He calls ordinary people like you and me, and makes us all saints in the promise that is this very meal that is set before us...come and eat the meal that makes us all one in Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.