



[Matthew 9:9-13](#)

Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners

Date: 70 CE

Place: Antioch (majority view)

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Matthew

Reference:

9:9-13

Commentary:

Much scholarship has been devoted to establishing the Jewish context of Matthew's Gospel, with its Gentile context (including significantly the Roman imperial system) less discussed. Some scholars of the last decade or so, however, have sought to address this. There have been two dominant positions on this issue: 1) that the Matthean author is addressing a mixed audience of both Jews and Gentiles, and as such, supports taking the salvific message of Jesus to both (see Brendan Byrne, "The Messiah in whose Name 'The Gentiles will Hope,'" p. 55-73); and 2) the Gospel writer's community have suffered greatly at the hands of the Romans in Antioch, and wish to avoid the Gentile world as far as possible (see David Sim, "The Gospel of Matthew and the Gentiles," p. 19-48). In order to appreciate the complexity of the Matthean author's narrative, the Roman imperial context cannot be ignored, as it is alluded to in various episodes with varying degrees of subtlety.

This passage comes after the second triad of miracles in Matthew's Gospel, and forms part of the other half of an inclusio framing the three miracle stories. The first inclusio, found at Matthew 8:18-22, sets the scene for the miracles through the words of an enthusiastic follower of Jesus, who pledges allegiance to him and vows to follow him anywhere. Jesus tempers his enthusiasm, however, by warning that discipleship comes at a significant cost, and should not be undertaken lightly. In this episode, however, which is also narrated by the other Synoptic Gospel writers, Jesus is confronted by the scribes of the Pharisees over his choice to eat with tax collectors and sinners (although [Mark, 2:14-17](#), and Luke, 5:27-32, refer to the tax collector called at the beginning of the passage as Levi). When Jesus's disciples are questioned as to why their teacher feels it appropriate to eat with these social outcasts, Jesus himself replies that in the same way the healthy do not need medical help, it is useless taking God's message to those who have already heard it and are living according to it. Both Greek and Jewish sources are disapproving of tax collectors (see, for example, Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 14.14; Mishnah *Nedarim* 3:4; Tosefta *Nedarim* 2:2), however, as John Donahue argues ("Tax Collectors and Sinners," p. 42), it might be more accurate to render the term ??????? as "toll collector," as while more direct taxes, such as poll tax, were managed by the central authorities, indirect taxes, such as those on land, customs, and transportation, were given over to individuals to control, who would sit in toll booths by the road.

The passage is essentially a continuation of the theme of discipleship, and the degree of commitment required to follow Jesus wholeheartedly; one must not only abandon the majority of their distracting worldly concerns, but also be prepared to take the gospel message to those not normally associated with – in this case, Jesus sets the example by eating with tax collectors and sinners. As Richard France states, this story illustrates "the new values of the kingdom of heaven which will increasingly put Jesus and his movement on a collision course with traditional Jewish piety" (Richard France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 351). Tax collectors like the Matthew of this story would be tasked with collecting the various taxes put in place by Herod Antipas (at this point, Galilee, unlike Judea, was not yet subject to direct Roman taxation), which would be customs duties on the goods which came through and were traded in Capernaum, a border town (Herod Philip's tetrarchy was on the other side of the Jordan). Despite being Jewish themselves, such toll/tax collectors, therefore, were unpopular because of their employment by a Roman-sanctioned government (regardless of any accusations of swindling on their part). It is therefore unsurprising that tax/toll collectors are frequently referred to in the Gospels alongside "sinners" (see also Matthew 11:19; Luke 15:1, 18:9-14), "fornicators" (Matthew 21:31; Luke 18:11), and "Gentiles" (Matthew 5:46-47, 18:17), even if the tax/toll collectors themselves could be Jewish, as in Matthew's case. As stated above, the type of tax collected by Matthew (and arguably the others who dined with Jesus) was not a direct imposition of Rome.



However, Herod Antipas ruled under Rome, and sought to please the imperial overlords as far as possible. Therefore, the passage probably at least in part evidences Jewish disdain for those such as Matthew who worked for Rome's tetrarch, playing a part (however indirect and small) in what was perceived as an oppressive regime counter to the rule of God. The fact that Jesus is willing to eat with those considered social outcasts by his opponents here also shows that his followers need not pay attention to strict social rules regarding where and with whom it was appropriate to eat; rather, his message and following is open to all.

Keywords in the original language:

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- [???????](#)
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [disciples](#)
- [Jesus](#)
- [Pharisees](#)
- [righteousness](#)
- [sinner](#)
- [tax collector](#)

Bibliographical references: Byrne, Brendan, "[The Messiah in Whose Name 'The Gentiles will Hope' \(Matt 12:21\): Gentile Inclusion as an Essential Element of Matthew's Christology](#)", Australian Biblical Review 50 (2002) : 55-73

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