



First United Methodist Church of Hanford
Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.



Reconciling Congregation

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GPS GUIDE Grow, Pray, Serve Guide for Weekly Reflection

(adapted from United Methodist Church of the Resurrection resources: sharechurch.com)

February 2, 2025 *Matthew the Tax Collector*

Scripture: Mark 2:13-17, Matthew 9:9, 13 and *Luke 5:28-29*, 32

Jesus Saw a Disciple Where Others Saw Traitor

MONDAY 2.3.25 Matthew 9:9, Luke 5:27

In the Roman Empire (which ruled Judea), there were no published tax rates and tax tables. Tax collectors operated more like extortionists, collecting all they could from helpless tradesmen and farmers. Much of the money they collected went to Israel's Roman occupiers; the rest went into their pockets. No wonder people hated them. Yet Jesus approached Matthew's tax booth and simply said, "Follow me." This showed Jesus' heart for reaching across social barriers to love even those society rejected.

- Matthew sat in his tax booth, cut off from his community by his choice to collaborate with Rome.
Yet Jesus approached him with an invitation, not condemnation. Unlike the religious leaders who shunned tax collectors, Jesus offered Matthew a new purpose and identity. When you meet people that others avoid or reject, how do you respond? Do you see them through society's eyes or through Jesus' eyes of love and possibility?
- Notice that Jesus' call to Matthew was direct and immediate: "Follow me." He didn't require Matthew to first clean up his life or prove himself worthy. Matthew responded by leaving his

lucrative position to follow Jesus right away. What might be holding you back from fully following Jesus today? What "tax booth" of comfort or security might Jesus be asking you to leave behind?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your invitation echoes through the centuries to my heart: "Follow me." The response you sought from Matthew you seek from me: "Yes, I will follow." Today I again offer you my "yes." Amen.

Jesus shocked religious leaders, ate with Matthew's friends

TUESDAY 2.4.25 Matthew 9:10-11, Luke 5:28-30

After calling Matthew to follow him, Jesus further shocked the religious leaders by going to dinner at Matthew's house with many other tax collectors and "sinners." In Judean culture, sharing a table meant accepting and embracing others as equals. The religious leaders couldn't understand why Jesus would associate with people they saw as corrupt traitors. But Jesus showed that God's love reaches across social barriers. For him, genuine spiritual leadership meant engaging with people society rejects.

• The religious leaders criticized Jesus for eating with tax collectors and "sinners." They thought mixing with such people would make him spiritually unclean. Jesus' view was utterly different. "While many religious leaders saw their task as being to keep themselves in quarantine, away from possible sources of moral and spiritual infection, Jesus saw himself as a doctor who'd come to heal the sick. There's no point in a doctor staying in quarantine." * Who do people in your life or community tend to avoid? How might Jesus be calling you to reach out to them? • Matthew responded to Jesus' acceptance by hosting a dinner where his friends could meet Jesus too. He didn't keep his transformative encounter with Jesus private but immediately created opportunities for others to experience Jesus' love. When you experience God's acceptance and grace, how do you share that gift with others? How can you introduce people to Jesus?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Matthew invited his disreputable friends. You happily joined them for a meal. Help me to learn from both examples how you wish me to carry myself as one of your followers. Amen.

* Wright, N. T., *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 101). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

Jesus United Political Enemies as Disciples

WEDNESDAY 2.5.25 Matthew 10:2-4, Luke 6:13-16

Jesus chose disciples with starkly different viewpoints and backgrounds. He included Matthew, a tax collector who collaborated with Rome, and Simon, a Zealot who violently opposed Roman rule. * These men likely saw each other as bitter enemies. Yet Jesus intentionally brought them together in his inner circle. God's kingdom transcends political divisions and social hostilities. Jesus created a new community where former enemies could work together, united by their commitment to following him.

- Matthew and Simon the Zealot occupied opposite extremes in their society's political spectrum—one working with Rome, the other violently opposing it. Yet Jesus called them both to be part of his closest group of followers. When you encounter people with very different political or social views from yours, how do you respond? What might Jesus' example teach us about bridging such divisions?
- Jesus didn't ask his disciples to ignore their differences or pretend they agreed on everything. Instead, he gave them a greater purpose that transcended their divisions—following him and sharing his message. What shared purpose or mission might help you work together with people whose views differ from yours? How can focusing on Jesus help bridge those gaps?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, too often politics says if you win, I lose. But you taught and acted on the premise that in the kingdom ruled by God's love, everyone can win. Help me to make that kingdom my life's guiding focus. Amen.

* "A second Simon is listed; he is further identified as *the Cananaean*.... Most modern commentators understand the word to be an Aramaic equivalent of "zealot," referring to the zealous group of Jewish revolutionaries who were anti-Rome. *New American Bible* renders "the Zealot Party member"; *New English Bible* "a member of the Zealot party"; Barclay "the Nationalist." (Barclay M. Newman and Phillip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* in the UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, p. 285.)

Tax Collectors Welcomed: Religious Leaders Objected

THURSDAY 2.6.25 Luke 7:28-35

Most Judean religious leaders were "complaining that John was too austere, complaining in the next breath that Jesus was too much the life and soul of the party.... People today still judge Jesus by their expectations, instead of pausing and probing into the evidence to see what was really going on.... Following the Messiah who is different to what we imagined is always demanding; but this is the only way to the kingdom of God." * Jesus needs to shape our expectations, rather than us demanding that he be like we expect.

- Tax collectors and other "sinners," with an inner sense of need, accepted John's baptism and Jesus' message. The religious leaders, sure they were already fine with God, refused to accept either John or Jesus. When have you seen a person's genuine spiritual receptivity help them overcome significant obstacles to faith such as ridicule or intellectual scorn from others?
- Jesus noted that the religious leaders found fault with both John's ascetic lifestyle and his own more engaged, accepting approach. They seemed determined to reject God's messengers who behaved in any way different from theirs. Have you ever found settled attitudes or preconceptions making it hard for you to recognize and accept God's work through people or methods that made you uncomfortable because they were different from what you were used to?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, faith can be just as subject to fads and fashions as clothing styles. Keep me focused on the central message of your kingdom, neither accepting nor rejecting ideas or ministries based on "what's hot" now. Amen.

* N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone Book 4) (pp. 88-89). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

Humble Tax Collector, Not Proud Pharisee, Justified

FRIDAY 2.7.25 Luke 18:9-14

In this pointed parable, Jesus challenged religious assumptions about who God accepts. He contrasted a Pharisee, proudly listing his spiritual achievements, with a tax collector who could only plead for mercy. Scholar William Barclay wrote, "The Pharisee did not really go to pray; he went to inform God how good he was.... No [one] who is proud can pray. The gate of heaven is so low that none can enter it save upon [their] knees." * Jesus said God values a humble heart over religious performance.

- The Pharisee in Jesus' story focused entirely on comparing himself favorably to others, especially the tax collector. Even his prayer was more about listing his achievements than connecting with God. "Jesus reveals what the divine judge would say about this: the tax-collector, not the Pharisee, returned home vindicated." ** When you approach God, do you find yourself measuring your spiritual life against others or honestly opening your heart to God's transforming grace?
- Methodist pastor James Moore wrote a book with the ironic title of *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned: But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*. *** The tax collector, despite his questionable profession and lifestyle, recognized his need for forgiveness rather than trying to justify himself. How can you avoid rationalization, and approach God with complete honesty about areas where you need forgiveness and transformation?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the transforming gift of forgiveness. Give me the courage and trust to claim that gift honestly when I need it, rather than trying to justify my actions or attitudes. Amen.

* William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Revised Edition). Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, p. 224. ** N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone Book 4) (p. 214). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.
*** James Moore, *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned: But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*. Dimensions for Living; Special Edition (March 1, 2012).

Acceptance Transformed Despised Tax Chief's Heart

SATURDAY 2.8.25 Luke 19:1-10

As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus likely would have overseen a network of collectors like Matthew. * They both represented everything their neighbors hated—they collaborated with Roman occupiers and grew rich by overcharging their own people. Something about Jesus drew Zacchaeus to climb a tree just to catch a glimpse. Jesus didn't lecture or condemn him. He simply showed acceptance by inviting himself to Zacchaeus' home. This radical acceptance transformed Zacchaeus so deeply that he voluntarily pledged to give away half his wealth and repay anyone he had cheated four times over. Through this encounter, Luke showed that Jesus' love could reach and change even those society had written off as hopeless. The transformative power of acceptance remains just as potent today. •

Jesus chose to publicly reach out to Zacchaeus despite knowing it would draw criticism from the crowd. (After all, Matthew was almost certainly there with Jesus.) Jesus' acceptance came before Zacchaeus promised any kind of change—Jesus simply said, "I must stay at your house today." This unconditional welcome sparked a dramatic transformation in Zacchaeus' heart and actions. When have you experienced the transforming power of being accepted just as you are? How might you extend that same kind of acceptance to others? Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' acceptance was both immediate and concrete. He pledged specific actions to address the ways he had wronged others. His transformation wasn't just emotional or spiritual. It led to practical changes in how he handled money and relationships. What specific actions show (or could show) that your encounter with Jesus' love is changing how you live? What concrete steps have you taken or could you take to make things right with others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you've invited yourself to my heart and my house in Revelation 3:20: "I'm standing at the door and knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them." I open that door to you today—come in and do your transforming work in me. Amen.

* "The person who promised to collect most, and who knew and bribed the right people, would then hire others to collect more than he had promised to submit. The people he hired would have a quota to meet, and whatever they collected above that would be their profit. Zacchaeus, 'a ruler among tax collectors' (Luke 19:2), may have been an example of a person near the top of this unjust system, while Levi (Luke 5:27) was a low-level tax collector." (Richard B. Vinson, sidebar "Tax Collectors" in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 112 NT).