

The Triumph of Mercy over Sacrifice (Matthew 9 : 9–13; 12 : 1–8)

Rev. Stanisław Witkowski

Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow
stanislaw.witkowski@upjp2.edu.pl

The Gospel according to St. Matthew was addressed primarily to Jewish converts to Christianity. Matthew is the only one of the Four Evangelists who cites the words of the prophet Hosea 6 : 6: “For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice” (ἔλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν).¹ He cites these words in a translation that is consistent with the Septuagint and places them in the context of two pericopes. The first appears within the context of Matthew’s summoning and the feast with the tax collectors and sinners (cf. Matthew 9 : 9–13), while the second one is situated in context of Jesus’ disciples picking and eating grain on the Sabbath Matthew 12 : 1–8). Both are polemics with the Pharisees. For Matthew, Hosea’s text is the key to interpretation² in light of which the evangelist summarizes Jesus’ mission. Moreover, it appears as the Halakha, or the rule or way to live. We will analyze these texts in light of cultural anthropology³ and canon law.⁴

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- 1 For more on the topic of the translation of “not sacrifice” or “more than sacrifice” cf. S. Witkowski, *Ludzki wymiar miłosierdzia. Specyfika Mateuszowego nauczania na temat miłosierdzia*, „Polonia Sacra” 8 (2004) nr 1, p. 272–273.
 - 2 Cf. J. Gnlika, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, Freiburg, Basel, Wien 1993, p. 332 (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 1).
 - 3 Cultural anthropology allows us to notice the difference between the cultural phenomena that were dominant in Jewish milieus with regards to tax collectors, sinners, and matters related to keeping Sabbath and the image of social relations and celebrating the Sabbath as seen through the eyes of the author of the inspired text. Cf. R. Fabris, *Dall’esegesi all’ermeneutica*, [in:] R. Fabris e Collaboratori, *Introduzione generale alla Bibbia*, Torino 2014, p. 685 (Logos. Corso di Studi Biblici, 1).
 - 4 From the canonical perspective, we read the Bible as one whole. Its texts mutually illuminate each other and allow us to understand their meaning.

1. The Summoning of Matthew and the Feast with the Sinners (Matthew 9 : 9–11)

Jesus summons Matthew while he works in his profession in the customs post. In Capernaum, where Jesus was (cf. 9: 9), there indeed was a customs post located on the trade and military route leading to Damascus.⁵

The tax collectors knew the local people well because they themselves usually came from the environments in which they worked. They demanded that they procure a certain sum of money for the authorities in Rome. Meanwhile, all surpluses became their property.⁶ The tax collectors were corrupt and frequently took bribes.⁷ They had a reputation for demanding more money than was necessary.⁸ Among Jews, the profession of tax collector was considered unclean, because tax collectors' income was frequently the fruit of fraud and illegal trade.⁹

Tax collectors were compared to thieves, usurers, gamblers, or “people of the earth” who did not know and did not respect the law.¹⁰ Tax collectors constantly dealt with pagan inscriptions and pagan iconography.¹¹ The traditional expression “tax collectors and sinners” (cf. verse 10; 11 : 19; Luke 15 : 1; 18 : 9–14) and the collation of tax collectors with pagans (cf. 5 : 46–47) shows how they were viewed by society. Jews avoided tax collectors and wanted to have nothing to do with them.

By summoning Matthew, Jesus makes it clear that he does not care about the background of his disciples and is not motivated by his social status, intellectual condition, or religious status.¹² The very fact of summoning Matthew

5 Cf. S. Grasso, *Il Vangelo di Matteo*, Roma 1995, p. 249 (Collana Biblica).

6 Cf. M. J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, Grand Rapids 2004, p. 364 (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary); H. L. Strack, P. Billerbeck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus erläutert aus Talmud und Midrasch*, München 1956, p. 377 (Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch, 1).

7 Cf. W. F. Albright, C. S. Mann, *Matthew. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, New Haven, London 2008, p. 106 (The Anchor Bible, 26).

8 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids–Cambridge 2008, p. 351 (The New International Commentary on the New Testament); D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Dallas 1993, p. 238 (Word Biblical Commentary, 33A).

9 Cf. S. Grasso, *Il Vangelo di Matteo*, op. cit., p. 249.

10 Ibidem.

11 Cf. W. F. Albright, C. S. Mann, *Matthew. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, op. cit., p. 106.

12 Cf. S. Grasso, *Il Vangelo di Matteo*, op. cit., p. 249.

to go with Christ is an expression of Divine Mercy, because due to his unclean profession Matthew was morally and religiously suspect.¹³

The synoptic tradition references an episode in which Jesus partakes in a feast with tax collectors and sinners right after the description of the summoning of Matthew. The term “sinners” (cf. Matthew 9 : 11- 13; Matthew 11 : 19; Matthew 26 : 45) can broadly refer to people whose behavior causes scandal. Meanwhile, from the Pharisees’ point of view, the sinners were those who did not follow the traditional interpretation of the Scriptures (cf. Matthew 15 : 12). By visiting the house of a person like Matthew, Jesus and His disciples incurred the Pharisees’ immediate disapproval. They considered feasting with such people to be a scandal¹⁴ and shame¹⁵ because in the ancient world a shared meal was a sign of community. The presence of “many” (cf. verse 10) such undesired people must have intensified their opposition. Furthermore, the feast was of a ceremonial nature, as emphasized by the revelers’ reclining (συνανέκειντο) position.¹⁶

The question: “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Verse 11) expresses the Pharisees’ detachment from Jesus the teacher. For them, separation from sinners confirmed genuine religiosity. Their distance from Jesus is emphasized by the very term “teacher,” which in the Gospel according to Matthew always appears in the words of people who were distant to Jesus and did not recognize Him as the Lord (cf. Matthew 12 : 38; 17 : 24; 19 : 16; 22 : 16, 24, 36).¹⁷ The expression “your teacher” (Verse 11) is, in fact, somewhat sarcastic. It can be expressed in the words: “What teacher would act like that?”¹⁸

13 Ibidem.

14 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 353; A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia według św. Mateusza 1–13. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz*, Częstochowa 2005, p. 375 (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny. Nowy Testament, 1.1).

15 Cf. J. Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 331. The author references: Baraita to Barakhot 43b.

16 Luke's reference to a great feast (δοχή μεγάλη – Łk 5, 29) corresponds to the reclining position described by Matthew.

17 Cf. A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia według św. Mateusza 1–13. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz*, op. cit., p. 375.

18 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 354.

2. Jesus' Apology for the Rejected (Matthew 9 : 12–13)

Jesus defends the tax collectors and sinners, using two dictums that are of a complementary nature. The first is: "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do" (Romans 9 : 12). This statement confirms everyday experience. As early as in the times of ancient Greece there was the expression: "Physicians do not visit the healthy, because he wants to bring the ill back to health."¹⁹ Likewise, Pausanias, king of Sparta (409–395), noted that "physicians do not tend to spend time with those who are healthy, but with the sick people."²⁰ For Jesus, sinners are the truly sick ones (cf. Matthew 4 : 24; 8 : 16; 14 : 35). Concern for them culminates in the words for them to follow Him. This type of summons is comparable to therapy. The sinner is a sick person whose healing allows one to become a disciple.²¹

The second dictum occupies a central position. It is preceded by the rabbinical, scholastic expression "go and learn"²² (πορευθέντες δὲ μάθετε – Verse 13). It suggests that the Pharisees are ignoramuses who are unfamiliar with basic Biblical teaching.²³ Thus they must learn to correctly understand the Scriptures.²⁴ However, from the context it is clear that they must learn mercy.

The phrase "I want mercy, not sacrifice," presented at the beginning of Hosea 6 : 6 was the subject of criticism of a faith based only on external worship and a mechanical relationship with God²⁵ devoid of the engagement of the heart.²⁶ He who became unclear through contact with sinners no longer had to participate in it. The prophet's text was therefore opposed to purely ritual religiosity symbolized by the term "sacrifice."²⁷ Instead, it was a call for

19 Cf. J. Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 332, przyp. 13.

20 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 354. The author cites: Plutarch, *Apophthegmata laconica*, 230 F and Dio Chrystosom, *Orationes*, 8.5.

21 Cf. S. Grasso, *Il Vangelo di Matteo*, op. cit., p. 250.

22 Cf. H. L. Strack, P. Billerbeck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus erläutert aus Talmud und Midrasch*, op. cit., p. 449.

23 Cf. D. L. Turner, *Matthew*, Grand Rapids 2008, p. 253 (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament).

24 Cf. C. Blomberg, *Matthew*, Nashville 1992, p. 157 (The New American Commentary, 22).

25 Cf. J. Jeremias, *Der Prophet Hosea*, Göttingen 1983, p. 88 (Das Alte Testament Deutsch, 24.1).

26 Cf. W. D. Davies, D. C. Allison, *Matthew 8–18*, London–New York 2004, p. 105 (International Critical Commentary, 2).

27 Cf. J. Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 333.

mercy, which is God's essential attribute (cf. Exodus 34 : 6) and is the basis for God's covenant with Israel.²⁸

By quoting Hosea 6 : 6, Jesus questions the Pharisees' concern for ritual purity. Instead, he demands concern for people held in disdain and relegated to the margins of life.

The second dictum is explained (γάρ – “because”) in the expression “I came not to summon the just, but the sinners.” In a synthetic way, it encapsulates Jesus' mission consisting above all of going to the sinners.

The verb καλέω (“to summon”) describes in the Gospel according to St. Matthew the summoning of James and John (cf. 4 : 21). Although it does not appear in the description of the summoning of Matthew the tax collector, Matthew is the perfect example of Jesus' “summoning of sinners.”

This principle does not only refer to Jesus' closest disciples, but it also encompasses the “many” from the tenth verse and those following Christ in general.

The purpose of Jesus' disciple is properly understood righteousness (cf. 5 : 6; 10 : 20; 6 : 33). However, it is a peculiar kind of “righteousness,” one that emphasizes sacrifice over mercy and is not the righteousness of God's Kingdom (cf. 5 : 20). Those who base their lives on this attitude will not enter through the narrow gate.²⁹ With regards to people who are righteous in this sense, it is difficult to believe that they need Christ, Who “will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1 : 21; 8 : 11-12). The purpose of summoning sinners is not for them to remain in sin, but for them to find true righteousness.³⁰

3. Picking Heads of Grain during the Sabbath (Matthew 12 : 1-2)

Mercy in interpersonal relations also extends to celebration of the Sabbath. With regards to this matter, the debate with the Pharisees was not related to how to keep Sabbath, but how to celebrate it. The Old Testament clearly says that one cannot work on this day. However, it is unclear what according to the Old Testament qualifies as work. Certain activities that should be avoided are even enumerated: gathering manna (cf. Exodus 16 : 22-30); gathering wood

28 Cf. S. Grasso, *Il Vangelo di Matteo*, op. cit., p. 250.

29 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 355.

30 The term “sacrifice” generally means a legalistic attitude. Cf. J. Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 445.

(cf. Numbers 15 : 32–36); plowing and harvesting (cf. Exodus 34 : 21); burning wood (cf. Exodus 35 : 3); trade (cf. Nehemiah 10 : 31, 13 : 15–22; Amos 8 : 5); and carrying heavy things (cf. Jeremiah 17 : 19–27).

The scholars, however, wanted to create an all-encompassing list of prohibitions so that everyone would know what is and is not prohibited. Mishnah's Treatise³¹ concerning the Sabbath enumerates thirty-nine categories of activities that are considered work. Some of them are very petty, such as “writing two letters.” Travel is not directly referenced in this list. However, it was considered to be work. A route that one could travel on the Sabbath could not exceed 2,000 steps.³²

The field containing wheat through which Jesus walked had to therefore have been near a city, because His disciples are not criticized for violating Sabbath travel rules. Picking grain from another's field was condoned by Old Testament law in cases of an extreme need to satisfy one's hunger (cf. Leviticus 19 : 19–20; Deuteronomy 23 : 25–26). The Pharisees, who were zealous defenders of the law, accused Jesus of allowing His disciples to do something that was prohibited during the Sabbath. In their understanding, picking grain could have been interpreted as “harvesting;” furthermore, eating them entailed grain in their hands (cf. Luke 6 : 1). This activity could have been considered to be “threshing.”³³ Both of these activities were on the list of thirty-nine activities banned on the Sabbath.³⁴

4. Arguments from the Scriptures for the Benefit of the Disciples (Matthew 12 : 3–5)

In response to the Pharisees' accusations, Jesus references two analogies from the Old Testament (Verses 3–4, 5–6), each time introduced by “Have you not read...” (οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε – Verse 3). This formula also appears in other places and introduces a polemic or argumentative quote from the Old Testament

31 Mishnah above all contains Halakhic resolutions, or legal norms based on the Torah or resulting from it. It was given its final form by Judah ha-Nasi around 220 AD. However, its framework existed earlier in oral form. In Mishnah, the first treatise in the section dealing with the holidays is devoted to the Sabbath.

32 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 455.

33 Ibidem, p. 457.

34 Cf. N. Kameraz-Kos, *Święta i obyczaje żydowskie*, Warszawa 2000, p. 29–30.

(cf. 19 : 4; 21 : 4; 21 : 16- 42; 22 : 31).³⁵ Furthermore, it suggests that what Jesus says should be obvious to everyone familiar with the Old Testament.

The first analogy refers to the story of David in Nob (a shrine built after the destruction of Shiloh by the Philistines) described in 1 Samuel 21 : 1-6. The Old Testament narrative does not say that David “entered into the house of God” but that the priest Ahimelech gave him the bread of offering³⁶ stored inside the shrine, which only priests entered. Presumably, Ahimelech himself took it out for David, or gave him old bread of offering (the latter scenario seems more likely), which was replaced with fresh bread.

Jesus’ words that David went to God’s house sound bolder than the original words in the Old Testament. David’s request was justified by the comment that he and his companions were hungry,³⁷ much like Jesus’ disciples. The referenced story with David does not mention the Sabbath, but one can infer that it took place on the Sabbath because breads of offering were regularly exchanged on that day (cf. Leviticus 24 : 8). David did not violate the Sabbath, but the principle that only chaplains could eat such breads (Leviticus 24 : 9).

In the second analogy, Jesus references a legal argument that exercised greater authority than the Book of Samuel.³⁸ On the Sabbath day, the priests made sacrifices, which were related to previous preparations and the slaughter of animals (cf. Numbers 28 : 9-10). Additionally, they exchanged breads of offering (cf. Leviticus 24 : 5-8). The law itself required that they fulfill these duties. This was thus in accordance with God’s will. They did not therefore violate the Sabbath and were not at fault in this regard. The rabbis also said that service in the temple and circumcision naturally had priority over rest on the Sabbath day.³⁹

35 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 458.

36 Bread of offering (οἱ ἄρτοι τῆς προθέσεως – cf. Matthew 12 : 4) meant twelve fresh breads regularly placed in the tabernacle (temple) and also described as “the bread of presence.”

37 The lesson from ἔφαγον (“they ate” – Matthew 12 : 4) is more privileged, as it is contained in the Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲁ) and the Codex Vaticanus (B). Meanwhile, the version with ἔφαγεν (“he ate” – cf. Mark 2 : 26; Luke 6 : 4) can be found in the context of Matthew in P⁷⁰, C D L W Q f¹³ latt syc, co.

38 Cf. R. Fabris, *Dall’esegesi all’ermeneutica*, op. cit., p. 679.

39 Cf. H. L. Strack, P. Billerbeck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus erläutert aus Talmud und Midrasch*, op. cit., p. 620; C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids–Cambridge 1999, p. 356.

5. Jesus' Authority (Matthew 12 : 6–8)

Jesus' backs up His arguments from Scripture with three statements, of which Hosea 6 : 6 again occupies a central position and sounds like the general maxim. Undoubtedly, the Pharisees had to know it, but they drew no practical conclusions from them, since they criticized the disciples' behavior.

The words “something greater than the temple is here” (τοῦ ἱεροῦ μεῖζόν ἐστὶν ὧδε) are an external frame for Hosea 6 : 6 and refer to Jesus' authority.⁴⁰ In it, we can observe *a minori ad maius* reasoning. Presently, the point of reference to God is no longer the temple, but Jesus.

By declaring that His disciples are innocent, Jesus allows them to understand that their actions were permitted. By admitting that His disciples were right, He suggests that the Pharisees' interpretation of the Sabbath is erroneous. They found fault where God Himself did not find it. Jesus' moral evaluation of His disciples and acknowledging their innocence is the same judgment that the law foresaw for their services on the Sabbath day.⁴¹ Additionally, it is bolstered by the same term ἀνάιτιος (“innocent”), which is present both in Verse 5 in relation to the priests and in verse 7 in reference to the disciples. Jesus thus opposes the tendency to add on further burdens originating in the Pharisees' oral tradition.⁴²

The final maxim, which is of an explanatory nature (γάρ – “because”) also serves as an external frame for Hosea 6 : 6 and the conclusion: “you would not have condemned these innocent men” (Verse 7). It says that Jesus is the

40 The words “something greater than the temple is here” (τοῦ ἱεροῦ μεῖζόν ἐστὶν ὧδε – Matthew 12 : 5) are to an extent surprising, because we would expect the expression: “someone greater than the temple is here.” In Matthew 12 : 41–42, we can find a similar formula with a comparison to the figures of Jonas and Solomon (“there is something greater than Jonah [Solomon] here” – καὶ ἰδοὺ πλεῖον Ἰωνᾶ ὧδε – Mt 12, 41; καὶ ἰδοὺ πλεῖον Σολομῶνος ὧδε – Mt 12, 42). In these places, Jesus probably references His role as the intercessor between God and people. Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 461. Meanwhile, Turner believes that the neuter gender μεῖζον – Matthew 12 : 5 is justified because it emphasizes the more general quality of greatness than Jesus' individual, specific greatness. Cf. D. L. Turner, *Matthew*, op. cit., p. 310, przyp. 6. Meanwhile, Luz suggests that “something greater” should be understood as mercy (τὸ ἔλεος – cf. Matthew 12 : 7), which has priority over the sacrifices offered up in the temple. Cf. U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 8–17)*, Zürich, Neukirchen, Vluyn 1990, p. 181–182 (Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 1.2). However, it is difficult to accept such argumentation, because it does not correspond to the already referenced verses 41–42.

41 Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 462.

42 Cf. M. J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, op. cit., p. 441. The disciples were at fault not according to the law of the Old Testament but according to the Pharisees' interpretation of the Law.

Son of Man⁴³ Who has power over the Sabbath as well. Only He can interpret the law for His disciples and determine how the Sabbath is to be celebrated. By receiving this power from God (cf. Leviticus 23 : 3), the Son of Man makes it clear that this prerogative is revealed as Divine mercy.⁴⁴ Thus the Sabbath cannot be bruised by a lack of mercy.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The quote “I want mercy not sacrifice” from Hosea, which appears twice in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, is the criterion Jesus uses to resolve disputes with the Pharisees with regards to contacts with tax collectors and sinners as well as celebration of the Sabbath. The Pharisee tradition, which shaped Jewish public opinion, was decidedly in favor of separation from people burdened by public sins as well as rigorous fidelity to the Sabbath. Meanwhile, Jesus brings back mercy in interpersonal relations and emphasizes its absolute priority in confrontation with tradition conceived of as purely external ritualism, legalism, or imposed human tradition. As a higher authority, Jesus specifies that mercy is manifested in the form of solidarity with the rejected (Matthew 9 : 9–13) as well as clemency and openness to those who have found themselves in an inevitable situation.

Abstract

The Triumph of Mercy over Sacrifice (Matthew 9 : 9–13; 12 : 1–8)

This article presents Jesus’ polemics with the Pharisees concerning the rules of conduct with regards to publicans and sinners (cf. Matthew 9 : 9–13) and disputes related to celebration of the Sabbath (cf. Matthew 12 : 1–8). In both cases, Jesus resolves the controversial matters using the following principle: “I want mercy, not sacrifice” (LXX Hosea 6 : 6). In light of this verse, Jesus tries to demonstrate to his opponents that the basic standard reference terms towards those rejected by society and those in need is mercy. The Pharisees’ isolating and pitiless tradition is of merely human origin and does

43 Jesus’ title “Son of Man” refers to Daniel 7 : 34–35, where it appears in the context of universal power exercised over all the nations by someone similar to the son of man. Much like in Matthew 9 : 6, in Matthew 12 : 8 Jesus’ future authority is anticipated. The Son of Man is now the Lord – cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, op. cit., p. 462.

44 Cf. J. Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 446.

45 Ibidem.

not correspond to God's plan. That tradition is opposed to mercy, which belongs to the essence of God (cf. Exodus 34 : 6).

Keywords: mercy; sacrifice; tax collectors; sinners; Sabbath day

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