

"A TAX COLLECTOR'S TESTIMONY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
June 9, 1996

## "A TAX COLLECTOR'S TESTIMONY"

### INTRODUCTION

It was a very simple statement....but let me say this, brothers and sisters....it cut and it hurt!

"See. This man eats with sinners and tax collectors!"

That was all. I remember it quite well...and those words hurt because I was one of those tax collectors.

What was it that Steve Forbes said in those primary campaigns back in the late winter? "Adopt a flat tax....and I'll dismantle the Internal Revenue Service". "And I'm proud to be paying taxes in the USA" Arthur Godfrey once said. "The only thing is, I could be just as proud for half the money I pay". And Jay Leno said something that caught my attention not too long ago...

"President Clinton says he looks forward to the day a citizen can call the IRS and get the right answer to a question. I look forward to the day I can call the IRS and get a recording that says, 'Sorry...that number has been disconnected!'"

Some of you may remember the remark made by Joe Louis when a sportswriter asked Mr. Louis...

"Joe....who hit you the hardest during your ring career!" And Joe replied, "Uncle Sam...Uncle Sam".

### DEVELOPMENT

People just don't seem to like tax collectors, do they? And things haven't changed as much as you might think since the day of Jesus. An archeologist digging around in Iraq uncovered a 3,000 old tablet that had on it this inscription:

"You can have a Lord. And you can have a King, but the man to fear...is THE TAX COLLECTOR!"

Back in my day, people both feared and detested tax collectors in a way that you cannot imagine. We were considered traitors by our own people because we did a lot of dirty work for Rome. It's true. I admit it. I was on my way to becoming a wealthy man for there were bribes and cutbacks and with a bit of creative manipulating of my collections, I could have stashed away enough so that I'd never have to worry about money again...

But then a man has to live with himself and I admit that deep down I was ashamed of who and what I was but I didn't seem to have the strength to make any changes in my life. I guess I was a bit like a whale that I read about in one of your papers recently. Seems that a gray whale made a wrong turn into a California River. Biologists believe that this whale which they nicknamed "Phyllis" was among hundreds of whales migrating north in the Pacific Ocean to Alaska when it mistakenly turned right under the Golden Gate Bridge and got lost in the San Francisco Bay.

Let me tell you what happened.

Guided by instinct that tells it to head north, Phyllis swam about 25 miles north through San Francisco Bay, San Pablo Bay and then into the tidal waters of the Petaluma River. According to what I recall reading, biologists played recorded whale sounds in an attempt to persuade this confused gray whale to reverse its course, but with little success.

Well, you know...I sympathize with Phyllis, that gray whale for there was a time in my life when I knew I was "off-course"....but I couldn't seem to get turned around. Friends tried to persuade me, but it didn't do much good. I wonder....have you ever known anyone like that? Out there on the wrong road, bit unable to make a "U-TURN"? Maybe the battle is with the bottle...or maybe it's an adulterous affair....or perhaps fraud at work. Oh, it's terrible to be involved in something you know is wrong and at first you tell yourself, "it's no big deal". Then you say that "I'll quit before it really takes hold". And then you wake up one day and find you can't quit. ...you're HOOKED!

For some people, it's like food and over-eating. By the way, have you read about that new soap that's on the market in Japan? It's a soap for washing away fat. No kidding. It's true. It seems that along with a fondness for fatty western food in Japan..where French Fries and spaghetti now compete with traditional fare....has now come an interest in keeping slim.

The Economist of London reports that the "latest evidence of this is to be found in the Customs Hall at Tokyo's Narita Airport". Several thousand bars of something called SEAWEED DEFAT SOAP were confiscated last Summer from travelers returning from Beijing and Hong Kong. This soap is reported=or reputed to wash away the pounds. Airport officials seized soap from those who violated the 24-bar limit established by Customs. Defat Soap costs \$2.00 a bar in China and \$15.00 a bar in Tokyo. Think of what it would go for at Kennedy/Airport! Friend, be careful....the product may not live up to your expectations.

Oh, I wish it were that easy...don't you? To wash away fat...to wash away regret...to wash away a bit of sin. But it's not easy. So there I stayed at my Tax Table...ashamed and corrupt....but with no power to change. Yes, I was a sinner. I was a traitor to my own people and I was powerless to change. Yes, I was a bit of an outcast!

AN OUTCAST IS RIGHT!

Now most people...at least, most religious people... want to have nothing to do with you when you're in that sort of state or condition. Certainly the Pharisees would have nothing to do with me. And, in a way, I understand why. You see, they were guardians of our faith. If it hadn't been for them, for the Pharisees, our faith might have been swallowed up by the pagan faiths swirling all around us. The Pharisees studied the Law. They preserved the Law. And even more important, they kept the Law to the best of their abilities. Thus, they kept their distance from me. In their eyes, I suppose I was just about the worst kind of sinner. The Pharisees weren't bad people. They just seemed to lack compassion and imagination and were without any humor....like so many religious people.

Your Oscar Wilde once wrote something scathing...a little poem....about such people. How did it go?

"The Chaplain would not kneel to pray....  
by his dishonored grave;

Nor mark it with that blessed cross...  
that Christ for sinners gave.  
Because the man was one of those....  
whom Christ came down to save."

Oh, I don't mean to criticize. Some of my best friends are religious people. It's just....well, it's just that I found a better way. To tell you the truth. I found THE WAY. Let me tell you about it and how it all happened...

#### I FOUND THE WAY

It was a beautiful day in Jerusalem and I was sitting at my desk with the door open, looking out at the people going by and then suddenly I saw this Man coming near my door. He was not like other men. There was something that drew me to him.....you could see love and acceptance just shining in His eyes. He was a forceful man and yet strangely gentle. But when He saw me sitting behind my little desk there in the tax office, He spoke just two words. "Follow Me" is what He said. I didn't bother to put away my scroll or my pen and papers in a drawer. I just got up and walked out and yes - I followed Him!

You see I had been struggling with my situation....filled with regret and with shame, but powerless to change and He walks by my office and in a moment, I'm able to make a change I thought I'd never be able to make. It's like I was suddenly pulled through the birth canal into a whole new life.

It's like a man I read about in one of your papers...down in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It seems he fell asleep in a trash bin. I guess he was too drunk to realize that soon a garbage truck would be coming along to take the refuse in that bin off to the county compactor and incinerator. Fortunately, some worker at the incinerator came across him...saw his hands and pulled him out. The Safety Director at that Incinerator plant said this:

"Good chance he would have been bull-dozed and buried and covered over....and that would have been the end. No one would have ever known what happened to him!"

The man was conscious when pulled free and was rushed to a local medical center... he had only a few scrapes and bruises. He survived...amazingly!

I guess I was a lot like that man in that trash bin. My life was just about as hopeless as his...in spite of the dollars I had managed to stash away. If Jesus hadn't been passing by my office door that day, no telling where I might have ended up. But He did walk by and spoke those words, "Follow Me!". That was all He said. Imagine that! Me! A "despised tax collector"...an outcast among my own.

At the time I didn't know why He would have shown interest in someone like me. It was only a short time later that I found out. Ironically, it was when some of the religious people came around to criticize Him and they asked, "Why does your Master eat with sinners and with tax collectors?" And when the Master heard their criticism and their question, He gave them an answer that has changed forever how Christians are to look at those "outside" the ranks of the righteous. His answer...His reponse went something like this:

"Those who are well have no need of a physician...but those who are sick. GO" He continued...."and learn what this

means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice'" And then He concluded with these priceless words...."For I came not to call the righteous....but SINNERS!"

Yes, I was one of those "sinners"....but mind you, I was not the only one. In fact, it would have been difficult to have found a more unlikely group of "hangers-on" than those who followed Jesus. There was...Mary Magdalene. You know what rumors and gossip there was about her! Then too, there was Simon and Andrew....James and John...with the smell of fish on them. And there was Philip, from Bethsaida....the man with the Greek name...thus when some Greeks came to find out about Jesus, it was Philip they usually approached...but Philip was too bashful to say anything about the Master. He asked Andrew to intervene. Then, too...there was Nathaniel who is sometimes referred to as Bartholomew. It was he who made that rather disparaging remark about the hometown of Jesus, asking, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Imagine that? And Philip said, "Well....come and see."

Then, too, there was the man named Thomas....you remember him as the "Doubter". A bit hard-headed, but you can say that his heart was certainly in the right place. Most of you have never heard of James, the Less...or Thaddeus, as he is sometimes called. Or, even Simon the Zealot. He was a revolutionary. He and I would have had difficulty sitting at the same table or even being in the same room if it hadn't been for Jesus. We looked at things differently...he was 'way over to the "left". And, of course....there was Judas Iscariot....actually, an outsider would have probably considered him to be the most promising of the entire lot, but you all know what he did.

AS FOR ME As for me? By now you've probably guessed that my name is Matthew and that I'm the Son of Alphaeus, sometimes known as Levi. Matthew. The Tax Collector. Oh, I'm not proud of my past. One of your Bible scholars, a William Barclay, once called me a

"Quisling....as one who had sold himself into the hands of his country's masters for gain and profit."

And, of course, he's right, but that was then and this is now! One day, Jesus came by my door and made me an offer I could not refuse. All He said was, "Follow Me" and I did.

Tradition says: that I followed Him all the way up until my unfortunate death as a martyr. I was such a stalwart follower that one of the Gospels is down to this day attributed to me....it's the first book there in your New Testament. I wrote it to help the Jews....the very people I betrayed....I wanted them to see that Jesus was the fulfillment of all those Old Testament prophecies. I wanted them to know of the difference that Jesus can make in the life of a person. I followed Him to the remotest parts of the earth, just like He commanded us. In fact, most scholars can't even agree where I was martyred, I traveled so much....whether it was in Ethiopia to the south, or Persia to the East or even Pontus on the Black Sea, to the northwest. All they seem to agree on is that I never turned back!

WHY I'M HERE TODAY Perhaps some of you may wonder why I'm here today. Let me try to explain and I'll try to do this briefly, for you've been so attentive and have listened to me....maybe there is someone present today who is heading down the wrong road and feeling powerless to turn back.

I'm here to tell you that there is SOMEONE who can help you make that turn. Maybe there is someone you know who is out there on the wrong road.... someone in your family or in your circle of friends, or a colleague at work. Maybe you've written them off...just like the religious folk wrote me off. Let me urge you to reconsider. You know, this Jesus had a gift of seeing something of value in everyone He met. And because He gave people like me hope, we were able to change. Maybe you know someone who needs your acceptance and affirmation and support....yes, your love.

Or, maybe you need to look at yourself as a Church. You're such an attractive group of people. And certainly, you are a credit to this city and to this neighborhood. But there are some people who may feel shut out. Maybe because of their economic status or their skin color or because of a life style they've adopted. Look out for them. Be alert to their presence.

And then let me close by placing a question on your heart. Who are you here for? The well? Or, the sick? If Christ can make such a radical change in my life, maybe there are some persons that this Church needs to be reaching out to. Some lonely person. Some fatherless child. Some economically challenged family. Some handicapped person. Who knows what will come out of it? Who knows, maybe some day they will have a gospel attributed to them as well.

I've got to leave you now for there's another gathering of people I'm going to go to and speak to....about the Man who made it all come together for me. Thank you for listening and God bless you and my prayer is that He will make it all come together for each of you!

PRAYER            Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these quite moments, O God. Wrestle with us in the shadowy corners of our hearts...our lives....where anxiety and doubt....sin and selfishness....may have hold. Renew our faith in Christ as "THE ONE" who can bring it all together for us....and confirm within us the feelings and the intentions of these moments here in this Church on this June Sunday....the decisions that may be forming. Like Matthew of old, may we too, rise up and follow Jesus with renewed energy and enthusiasm. In the Spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen.