

Matthew's Day in Court

Moments after I said "amen," discouragement set in. There was hardly anyone outside the courthouse. The few people that were outside (not counting the hot dog vendors who had already refused to be on the show--more than once) were scurrying from building to building, or from the courthouse to their cars in the parking lot. The few people I was able to ask to be on the show quickly refused the offer. The fish were scarce, and the ones that were there just weren't biting.

Then I noticed a young man walking slowly in my direction. He was wearing an "In-n-Out" sweatshirt. His hands were in his pockets and his head was down.

"Hi." I said. "I don't want to sell you anything."

The young man smiled.

"I'm with a radio station called 'The Way of the Master.' It's a live show, and during the show we do a couple of segments in which we interview people on the streets. We ask two basic questions to start the conversation. Would you consider yourself to be a good person? And what do you think happens to someone when they die?"

"I don't know." He said hesitantly. "I'm coming to court today to take care of a couple of warrants. I would feel like a hypocrite."

"Well, would you consider yourself to be a good person?"

"Not right now."

"What do you think happens to a person when they die?"

"They go to heaven, or they go to hell."

"On what basis does a person go to heaven?"

"By believing in Jesus."

"Do you think being a good person has anything to do with it?"

"No. There are Buddhists that are nice people, but that won't get them into heaven."

He looked at me and squinted, as if he was trying to figure out who I was and what I wanted from him. "Are you a Christian?" He asked.

"Yes I am. And the radio show is a Christian radio show."

"It is?"

"Oh, then I don't think I could do it. I would really feel like a hypocrite."

"Do you have a Christian background?"

"Yes. I've gone to church all my life."

"My name is Tony, by the way." I said as I extended my hand.

He shook my hand and said, "I'm Matthew." (Matthew is 18.)

"Matthew, are you sure you are a Christian?"

"I use to think so. But now," glancing at the front door of the courthouse, "I'm not sure."

"Why are you at the courthouse, today."

"To turn myself in. I have two warrants."

I reached into my back pocket and removed a bi-fold wallet--the one containing my badge. I showed it to Matthew. His eyes got as big as saucers.

"Matthew, I don't care why you are at court, today. What I care about is where you are going to spend eternity. Matthew, I believe in a God who is sovereign. I don't believe in coincidences. There is a reason why we are having this conversation. Please be on the show. It could be the most important conversation of your life. Look. I've been in this courthouse hundreds of times. I promise you won't be late for court."

"Okay. Could we sit down?"

"Sure." We made our way to a nearby bench.

"Where do you go to church?" I asked.

"Grace Community Church."

"Really?"

"Yeah. John MacArthur is the pastor."

"Yeah. I know. I went to The Master's Seminary."

"So, are you still living at home?"

"Yes."

"What does your mom think about you being in court, today?"

"She doesn't know."

"Your mom doesn't know that you were arrested and are appearing in court, today, for two warrants?"

"No."

It was at about that time that Todd came on the phone, and I briefed him about Matthew.

After the commercial break, I introduced Matthew to Ray and Todd, and I handed Matthew my cell phone. **Click here** to listen to Ray and Todd's conversation with Matthew.

Matthew sat, leaning forward, with one hand holding the phone and the other hand covering much of his face. It was obvious that Matthew's heart was heavy. From before I first approached Matthew, the young man was under either the weight of conviction, the fear of the consequences he believed he was facing, or a combination of the two.

Once the conversation was finished, I took the phone from Matthew. "Tony. Talk to Matthew." said Todd.

"I'm going to go into court with him."

"Okay. Good-bye."

"Matthew, if it's all right with you, I would like to come into court with you. Would that be okay?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's get you into court. I'm going to take my backpack and put it in my car."

"You're going to come back, right?"

"Yeah. I just don't want to lug this big thing into court. Don't worry. You go check into Division 3, and I will be in there in just a minute."

"Okay."

I ran to my car, stowed my backpack, and ran back to the court. I showed my badge to the security officers at the front door so I could bypass security. Division 3 was crowded with people waiting to have their day in court. Matthew was sitting alone on a bench, on the right side of the courtroom. I sat down next to him.

The judge entered the courtroom and took the bench.

I shared the courtroom analogy and the gospel with Matthew, which was particularly appropriate considering our surroundings. I explained to Matthew that a person is allowed to defend himself or herself in court.

"There's an old saying around courthouses. 'Any man who tries to defend himself in court has a fool for a client.' I loved it when I went to court and someone I arrested insisted on defending himself. I knew the case would end with a conviction, because the person defending himself didn't know how to conduct a trial, typically knew he was guilty, and was going to try to lie his way to a 'not guilty' verdict.' The guy didn't stand a chance, and the trial usually included some comic relief."

Just then, the judge called the first case. As providence would have it, the defendant was a man charged with drunk driving. He insisted on defending himself. The judge spent several minutes trying to explain to the man that the evidence against him was significant; but he insisted upon serving as his own attorney. The judge gave the man a pre-trial hearing date, all-the-while shaking her head.

"Like I said, Matthew; any man who tries to defend himself in court has a fool for a client. The same is true for any person who stands before Almighty God on the Day of Judgment and tries to argue his own case. He has a fool for a client. God will find him guilty. And God will sentence Him to eternity in hell for breaking His Law."

We sat together and listened to several cases. "I'm really nervous." said Matthew.

"Good." I said, putting my arm around his shoulder. The look on his face told me he wasn't expecting that answer.

Now, it was Matthew's turn to stand before the judge.

The judge explained to Matthew the charges against him. Matthew was quick to enter a guilty plea. Before accepting the plea, the judge tried to explain the consequences for such a plea. Seeing that I had been sitting with Matthew, the bailiff motioned to me to come to his desk.

"Are you this kid's friend or family member?" The bailiff asked.

"No. I'm a retired deputy sheriff and I now serve as a chaplain. I just met him a couple of hours ago. I'm just here to try to provide him with a little moral support."

"Oh. Well, he's in way over his head. Do you think you can help him understand what he's looking at?"

"Sure. Any idea what the D.A. is offering him if he takes a plea?"

"No. But I can find out."

"Okay."

"Why don't you take him out into the hallway and have a talk with him."

"Sure."

The judge called a recess. Matthew and I left the courtroom and sat on a bench, in the hallway. I explained to Matthew the D.A.'s offer. I also explained to him that if he plead guilty to the open charge, that would expose him to possible jail time stemming from a probation violation on another case.

Matthew said he understood the consequences for entering a guilty plea and was ready to face the judge, although he was hoping for leniency. I helped him fill out the paperwork indicating that he was waiving his right to have an attorney present, as he entered his plea.

Matthew was about halfway through the document when he sat the pen down on the bench. He looked at the paper for several moments.

"Are you having second thoughts?" I asked.

Matthew lifted his head, looked at me, and then stared at the exit of the courthouse. I knew what he was thinking. I have seen the look on the faces of many people when I worked patrol. It was the special look people got right before they tried to make a run for it. The look on Matthew's face brought back

memories--some good, and some bad.

"You know," he began, "I could take off, right now. I can run right out that door."

"Yes, you could. But you won't"

"I don't know. It's very tempting. See." Matthew got off the bench and took a few steps toward the door. "See. It would be so easy."

"You're not going to run."

"Why not?"

"Because you know in your conscience that you will never be free. You may be out of jail, for a little while, but you won't be free. You will constantly look over your shoulder. You will flinch every time you hear a siren or see the red and blue lights of a patrol car.

"*Sit Down.*" I think he recognized by my tone of voice that I wasn't asking.

Matthew sat down on the bench and continued filling out the paperwork.

"You know, Matthew, the same is true for you, spiritually. Your conscience is at work. You know the truth. You've heard it all of your life. And somewhere inside of you, you know that you will never be free of your sin until you repent and receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior."

"I know."

We finished the paperwork and re-entered the courtroom. As we took our seats, a young lady, not much older than Matthew, was being sentenced to more than

90 days in jail. Matthew looked at me several times with a very concerned look on his face.

I put my arm around him, patted him on the back, and said, "It's going to be okay. You're doing the right thing."

The judge called Matthew's case. He plead guilty to the open charge and did not contest the probation violation charge. The judge sentenced him to thirteen days of community service, a fine, and an extension of his probation. Matthew had his day in court. To his surprise, he was going home.

We left the courtroom and made our way to the clerk's office so Matthew could pick up his community service paperwork. As we waited for Matthew's name to be called, we continued our conversation about the state of his soul. I learned that there were two sins in particular that Matthew was not ready to give up--one criminal, both immoral.

"Matthew, you do understand, don't you, that you are willing to spend eternity in hell so you can indulge your flesh--so you can continue to wallow in the sin you love more than life itself."

"That is what I'm doing, isn't it?"

"Yep."

Matthew stared at me for a few moments, and then gave me a rather odd look. It was as if he was looking at me, and then suddenly saw someone else.

"What?"

"Are you for real?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you walked up to me. We talked. You put me on the phone, and I had that conversation. And then you spend three hours with me in court."

I chuckled and held out my arm so Matthew could touch it. "Yes, Matthew. I'm flesh and blood just like you. I'm a sinner just like you."

"You've been so nice to me. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Look. I may never see you again. I hope I do; but I might not. I just care about you and I don't want you to spend eternity in hell. There's nothing I can do about that. All I can do is tell you the truth and hope that the Lord leads you to repentance and faith."

Once Matthew saw the court clerk, we left the courtroom and walked to my car. I gave Matthew my book and some other resources, along with my business card.

"If you have any questions, give me a call. I hope to see you in heaven someday."

"Thank you."

We shook hands. Matthew walked away with books, CD's, and his skateboard in hand. I got into my car and drove home. I thanked and praised God the entire drive home. And I prayed that God would draw Matthew to repentance and faith.

Before we parted company, Matthew promised to listen to the second hour of today's show with his mother. The plan was that after listening to the show with her, he would tell his mother everything about why he was in court and about the conversations he had. I hope he kept his word.

Please pray for Matthew. Pray that the Lord will save him.

It was a remarkable day of fishing--all for the glory of God.