

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (NIV)

Follow alone with Levi

1. Heeding the call of Jesus
2. Living in gratitude to Jesus
3. Boldly confessing Jesus

Dearly Beloved of the Lord Christ,

Where would any of us be without the call to faith extended to us by the Holy Spirit? We would not be here this morning in this church. We honestly would not be able to join in the confession of our faith according to the words of the Apostles Creed as we will do a bit later. It is God who works in us both to will and to do that which is pleasing to Him. God has called us to faith in Jesus. Faith is God's gracious gift to us. Our faith embraces knowledge of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. It encompasses an ascent to His Word and a trust in His leadership as well as His Redeeming work.

Previous to this lesson Jesus had healed a paralytic. In the Word of God before us Jesus was passing by the tax booth which Levi managed. He called to Levi or Matthew as we know him, to follow Him. Just think about this for a moment. Tax collectors were considered among the worst people in society. They were lumped together with criminals and prostitutes. They were barred from the synagogue, being forbidden to have any religious or social contact with the "respectable" Jews. They were unclean. They were regarded as traitors and liars. So this man Matthew was as likely a candidate for discipleship as Saul of Tarsus.

When Jesus saw him, he simply said, *Follow Me*. The text says, *Matthew got up and followed him*. Here was a man with whom most of society would not wish to be seen. Yet Jesus called him as a disciple and later as an apostle. What did Jesus know that the rest of the people did not know? Jesus knew that left to himself, Matthew would be lost from the kingdom. Jesus loved Matthew. Jesus wanted Matthew not just as a disciple at that time. He wanted Matthew as a companion through all eternity. This was a call to discipleship, a call for Matthew to follow Jesus and it was based on Jesus completing the work He had come to do. It was a call to the cross.

For Matthew that call was compelling. Matthew knew in his heart of hearts he was not right with his God. He knew that his life was such that he did not qualify for a place in the kingdom even though he was a descendent of Abraham. He knew that he had done things to offend God and his neighbor. He knew that he could not buy his way into the kingdom. His conscience told him these things.

But here was a teacher who had recently healed a paralytic. The accounts of Jesus' miracles were the topic of many conversations in Matthew's circles. Who is this man who commands the winds and calms the sea? Who is this man who can heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf? These questions would perhaps have kept lingering in Matthew's mind and conscience. But on this day Jesus said, **Follow me.**

Do you find yourself in this lesson? Were you as Matthew was before he was called by Jesus? Our self-righteous nature might want to rise up and say, "I was no traitor, as Matthew was. I was no outcast from society as Matthew was. I was not looked upon as unclean." The truth is that we all were going astray. We were all lost as sheep without a shepherd. Until Jesus called us to faith we were sinners lost in our guilt and shame. The same powerful Word reached into our hearts and minds and set us on a course with Matthew heeding the call of Jesus to be what He has made us – His disciples.

To celebrate the occasion, Matthew prepared a dinner at his home to honor Jesus and to introduce Him to his friends and associates. They are described as **tax collectors and sinners.** These two words were lumped together as an expression of the most unsavory characters. Matthew's motives were pure. He wanted to share his good fortune with his friends. Did he even hope that others would find answers to their most nagging questions of life and salvation? Might the opportunity to speak with Jesus result in them being called to follow as Jesus disciples? When you are filled with joy, isn't it something you want to share? When you find peace for your conscience, isn't it something you want others to have?

We do the same thing. We bring a new born to the font for the Holy Spirit to make it a child of God and heir of salvation and we go home to a dinner to which we invite our family and friends to celebrate the event. After our children are instructed and have pledged their lives to Jesus in the rite of confirmation, we celebrate by having a dinner to which we invite our family and friends to share in our joy. It is done to honor our Lord Jesus who has made it all possible.

There is another aspect to this gathering we should not miss. Matthew didn't do this in a remote place under the cover of darkness. He held the dinner in his own home. He was not trying to keep his faith and discipleship a secret. He wanted to honor his Messiah by openly confessing Him before his family and friends.

The Pharisees observed this with critical eyes. They did not have the courage to openly confront Jesus. Instead they spoke to Jesus' disciples. Obviously their purpose was to cast doubt in the minds of the disciples. **Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners'?** It was an accusation as much as it was a question. Even though they had not addressed Jesus directly, He responded to them. He made the self-evident observation that sick people need a doctor, not people who are perfectly healthy. Just so, those who believe they are righteous in God's sight by means of their character and conduct are not interested in a call to repent of their sins and turn to a Savior. However, those who recognize their personal sinfulness and unworthiness can appreciate the Good News of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the way Matthew felt and he was eager to share his joy with his friends and associates.

In the O.T. lesson God said through the Prophet Hosea, **I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings. Samuel had also said to disobedient King Saul, Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams (ISam.15:22).**

You and I live a life that is pleasing to God by walking in the way of His commandments, not by making our own rules and boasting about our observance of man-made rituals. Even careful outward obedience to God's commandments is not enough. God wants us to recognize our personal need for forgiveness and our inability to change our status before Him, then to seek His mercy and to trust His promises.

This is, perhaps, the most difficult part of our walk of faith – to live in the promises of God. Our growth in faith and trust is marked by our confident living and by our reaching out to others in love. So follow along with Levi. Heed the call of Jesus. Live in gratitude to Jesus. Confess Jesus in your daily relationships. Amen.