

Jesus Calls Matthew

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Matthew 9:9-15

Sermon Series:
Calling People to
Faith

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Today is Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of Wittenburg Church in Germany. In doing so, he sent shock waves through Europe, stirring up long-smoldering desires for change and causing reform to burst forth in the church.

The church of the 16th century was in dire need of reform, but it would be a mistake to believe that Reformation began with Martin Luther. That was a critical event in church history, but since Adam and Eve fell in the garden and sin entered the world, God has been about the work of reforming his people—leading, guiding, molding, making and shaping them into His image. The past two months, we have been looking at how God has been calling His people to be a part of that work, starting with Abraham, Moses and others. God called people to speak to, correct and lead his people.

Last week, we looked at Jesus' calling of the twelve. Today's passage is the call of Matthew, and it really is a fitting text for Reformation Sunday, because in it Jesus clarifies what it means to be called as a disciple and to be transformed through a relationship with him. Through the call of Matthew, we see the kingdom priority, the purpose, and perils, and in the next

few minutes, I want to look at each of these in some depth.

The call of Matthew shows us that to live as a disciple of Christ means we are called to embrace the kingdom priority of living in relationship with Jesus and following him wherever he leads. We cannot underestimate how remarkable it was for Jesus to call a tax collector to follow him. In Palestine, tax collectors were typically members of the local community. They were obligated to collect a certain amount for the Roman authorities, but whatever extra they collected was considered their commission. So, these tax collectors often tended to extort excessive amounts of money and, thus, were despised and hated by their own people.

What is equally remarkable is that when Jesus calls Matthew, he follows. Collecting taxes provided a lucrative income for him and, so, following Jesus cost him greatly. The account of Matthew's call in the Gospel of Luke says, "Levi got up, left everything and followed him."

Matthew left behind not only his profitable profession but really his entire way of life. It really was a miraculous turnaround in this man's life. But Matthew, like the other disciples, longed to live in Jesus' presence, to get to know him, to learn to love, to learn his ways, to be an apprentice, to be a

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part of what he was doing in the world. There was a lot they did not know or understand, but they did long to be with Jesus, and they rearranged their lives for that. And they were willing to leave behind everything to follow him.

The priority of following Jesus always has to come before any other human relationship and responsibilities—no matter what the cost. Sometimes that means we won't be understood, sometimes it will mean painful separation from those we love. My brother and his family visited us last week, and while I had a wonderful time, I have to admit feeling a little melancholy, too, not knowing when I will see them again. I have lived all of my adult life far from my family of origin. Many of you know the reality of that, as well. But we are to commit ourselves to following Jesus wherever he leads; our first priority and allegiance must be to Christ and going where he calls us to go and doing what he calls us to do.

I have been reading a book that includes biographical sketches of ancient believers, including St. Augustine, St. Antony and St. Francis. All of these men were wealthy but gave all they had to the poor to follow Jesus. When I first was called to follow Jesus, I didn't really have anything to give up. But I was in college, studying to become an English teacher, and coach when God called me into campus ministry. Instead of making money, I had to raise money for my own support, which was a very new and strange concept and not understood by family.

You can relax because I'm not asking you to leave your families or your jobs or your home. Relinquishment takes many different forms. Sometimes, following Jesus means staying where we are but relinquishing our ambitions to make Jesus our first priority. For some, it will involve a redirection of time and energy or financial resources. For others, a change in personal relationships, a change in vocation; but for each person, a call to discipleship is all-consuming. A complete change in priorities is required of all would-be disciples.

While making our relationship with Jesus requires relinquishment and counting the cost, it also brings great rewards. The promise is an abundant life in this world and eternal life. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly." We are desperately afraid of leaving anything behind. So afraid, that we hold tightly to things and hold loosely to Jesus, not believing that what we gain in return is infinitely more than we could ever give up or even lose.

In his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard writes: "The impression gained by most who hear about 'counting the cost' of following Jesus is one of how terrible and painful that cost is. But to count the cost is to take into consideration both the losses and the gains of all possible courses of action, to see which is most beneficial. This done, Jesus knew, the trials of discipleship would appear to be the only reasonable path. As has been said, 'He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to

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gain what he cannot lose.' The cost of non-discipleship would then be seen for what it is—unbearable. That is why one would become able to sustain cheerfully the much smaller 'cost of discipleship.'”

I have found that to be true in my own experience. I know I would be a fearful, bitter, depressed woman if God had not grabbed hold of me. What I do have is joy, and peace, and love, and meaning and purpose. I have the abundant life Jesus promised to all, and it is immeasurable.

Every day, we have opportunities to make our relationship with Jesus a priority. Today and every Sunday, we live out that priority by coming to worship. We relinquish the other commitments and opportunities we have to follow Jesus and worship him. The giving of our gifts is a specific act of worship that involves relinquishment. But there is also the reward of knowing that we have the unspeakable joy and privilege of participating in God's work in building up the body and sharing the good news in this community and around the world. There are countless ways we can live out the priority of our relationship with Christ.

But we also see from Matthew's call Jesus' heart for the lost and his desire to use us to reach out to those who don't know him. Once Matthew follows Jesus, he immediately throws a banquet and invites all of his tax collector buddies so that he can introduce them to Jesus.

Matthew demonstrates through his life and action that the Kingdom Purpose is reaching people

for Christ. There are many things that we the church can do and are doing, but evangelism is the core, the heart, the center of mission. It consists of the proclamation of salvation in Christ to nonbelievers, in announcing forgiveness of sins, in calling people to repentance and faith in Christ, in inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is a world of hurt outside the walls of our church, but often we can be so busy and consumed with our own lives and needs that we miss the opportunities that come to us every day to be a witness for Christ. I believe with all my heart that the purpose of the kingdom of God is to reach out to people outside the boundaries of our own homes and church and sharing the good news in word and deed.

It can be daunting to think about reaching all the lost and hurting in the world for Christ. Many of us are quick to say, “That's not my gift; that's not what God has called me to.” God hasn't called most of us to be a Billy Graham, but there are a few things each of us can do. Matthew is such a great example for us, because he shows us that reaching others is more about lifestyle than methodology or program. Matthew threw a party and invited both his religious and his irreligious buddies. It was an intentionally mixed crowd—a party with a purpose.

Some in our church did this very thing on Wednesday by inviting not only our church family but the community to a pre-Halloween parade party right here in this build-

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ing. It was great fun and it spoke volumes about the joy of faith. The high school students are doing the same with their costume party tonight. Our concerts and many other children, youth and adult ministries are for this very purpose. We want to continue that sort of hospitality here, and each of us can pray for and invite friends to join us at these fun, non-threatening events. But we can do the same sort of thing on a smaller scale in our own homes and neighborhoods as we host or attend dinner parties or block parties and simply cultivate authentic relationships.

Each one of us can identify and pray for those family members, friends and neighbors who don't know Christ. Each one of us can study God's word for our own growth and also to help others in answering questions others might have about the faith. Each one of us can reflect our own Christian journey—even write it down and practice sharing it with family members, friends and our small group. To be a witness simply means to share what you have seen and heard, and each of us can do that, no matter who we are or how long we have known Christ.

I know from experience that as we pray and stay open to God, He will open doors for us to sensitively, compassionately and creatively share not only the good news but our very lives with others who do not know Him. After seminary, I did temp work for a time at a corporation while I was awaiting my first call to a pastoral position. A number of the women would go to lunch together and do needlework. I consider myself a craft-

challenged person, but because this is what the group did, I decided to join them just to be with them, to have time to talk with them, and build relationships with them. And God opened doors to talk about Him and to talk about faith.

The manner in which God wants to use us is consistent with the way He has made and gifted us, and it will primarily be in the sphere of relationships where we live and work and fulfill our God-given vocations. But be sure of this: God longs to multiply His love through each one of us.

We have seen that to live as a disciple of Christ means we are called to embrace the kingdom priority of a relationship with Christ, and we are to embrace the kingdom purpose of reaching people for Christ. But this passage also highlights a potential peril and issues a warning. The Pharisees were very religious people and very serious about following the law. But the problem was that they emphasized external behavior and conformity to the law rather than a heart relationship with God. They used the term "sinner" to describe anyone outside the boundary of their group. A sinner was anyone who did not follow their strict code of behavior or the expectations of their sect. And what's more, they would never eat with sinners, because that meant they, too, would become "defiled."

In contrast, Jesus welcomed a true diversity of people to his table, both reputable and disreputable. Jesus' open-table fellowship challenged their social and religious exclusivism. Jesus regularly challenged the boundaries and statuses

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- Jesus

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the Pharisees believed were sanctioned by God. Consequently, they considered him an enemy of social stability.

When the Pharisees objected to his interaction with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus seized the opportunity to clarify his mission by saying, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” One of the most distinctive features of Jesus’ message and ministry is the promise of salvation to “sinners.” But in this passage, we see an incisive play on words. Jesus shows that he has a different meaning for sinner than they do. They define a sinner as someone who has violated the law according to their interpretations. But to Jesus, a sinner is any person who remains opposed to the will of God. The great irony here is that the Pharisees consider themselves to be righteously healthy because of their strict adherence to the law—their sacrifice—but they are blind to their real sinfulness before God. They failed to understand that the law was given as a thermometer to show sinners they were sick—not to make them well. The law demonstrates how all fall short of the glory of God and that all are in need of God’s mercy and grace and forgiveness.

So Jesus urges, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” The motley crew sharing a meal with Jesus knew their sinfulness. They couldn’t avoid it. Matthew was one of them. But the Pharisees are so engrossed with their religious self-righteousness

that they cannot see their own hard-hearted sinfulness.

I am always disturbed by the Pharisees, because I know that at times in my life I have been too much like them. I have fallen into the trap of thinking that God loves me or approves of me because I am working so hard, trying to do the right thing, trying to be good enough. I think it is sometimes easy to forget who we really are. We really are all sinners. No matter who we are or where we come from, no matter how dressed up and cleaned up we look on the outside when we come to this clean, white, new building on a Sunday morning, still, we really are all sinners. We all fall short of the glory of God.

But that is only half the truth. The other half is that we are deeply loved by God—no matter who we are, what we have done, or where we come from, God loves us. He is crazy about us—not because we deserve it or have done anything to earn it. He just loves us—so much so, that “He sent his only Son into the world that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” For those who receive the Son, there is forgiveness of sin and a new and eternal life.

The peril that the Pharisees fell prey to was restricting God. They really thought they had God figured out; they put God in a box. But they failed to recognize God in the flesh when He was standing right in front of them, and they failed to accept the new thing that God was doing right there in their midst. That peril is very real for the church in every time and place. This was largely the problem prior to the Reformation

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when Martin Luther read Romans and realized that the salvation did not come by works but by grace through faith.

And this peril is relevant even in our lives, even in this church right here, right now. Even those of us who have followed Jesus for a long time can fall into the trap of thinking that we know what needs to be known, that we're doing what needs to be done, we've gone as far as there is to go in the spiritual life. We fall prey to the peril of restricting God when we think we have arrived. We can be too focused on external behavior and circumstances rather than internal issues of the heart, mind and soul. Like the Pharisees, we can become very comfortable in the garb of our religion rather than being disturbed and challenged by the uncertain, uncontrollable movements of the Spirit that are meant to be characteristic of a relationship with God.

Someone once said, "Faith is giving as much of yourself as you know to as much of Jesus as you know." That is a true statement and helpful to those who are just coming to faith. But what we know of ourselves and what we know of Jesus should always be changing and growing. More and more we need to be experiencing reformation—that is, coming out of the darkness into the light of God's love. We are always in need of more light from God to shine on the darkness of our sin and our distorted ways of understanding God, ourselves, our faith and the world.

We are always in need of forgiveness and healing and transformation. We are always in need of

the power of the Spirit to blow in unexpected and sometimes disturbing ways to lead us into deeper understanding of the truth and to bring renewal, a refinement, a reformation of our beliefs, character and behavior.

Some time ago, I heard it said that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, but for the rest of us the program is change." The program is change, because growth cannot happen without change. Re-formation cannot happen without change. Jesus promised the abundant life to those who follow him, but sometimes we miss out because we, too, are afraid or too proud and stubborn to let go of what we think we know in order to grasp hold of the life Jesus has to offer that is characterized by the love and mercy of God, the grace of Christ, and the power of the Spirit. This is the life Jesus is calling us to as we are drawn into a relationship with him, and we are empowered to be used by him in reaching others, as we resist the peril of restricting him and his work in us and the world. Jesus is calling you and me to follow him. May we listen and respond in faith.

