

“Follow Me”

Matthew 9:1-13

Key verse 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.”

My name is Steve Stasinos, and I’m a disciple of Jesus. 17 years ago I was sitting in a conference like this one, just where you are, thinking about how I needed a new direction. I wanted to be free from my immoral lifestyle, the drugs, the selfishness and nihilism that choked my life. I wanted to be part of something more. At that time I heard Jesus’ voice speaking to me, he said, “I am the way, and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6).” So I began to follow Jesus from that time, and what a life he has led me to! Let me pray. “Father, thank you for Jesus, who came to call sinners. Thank you for the power of Jesus’ words of invitation, that have given new life and direction to people for the last 2000 years. Please come Lord and speak to us. Open our ears and our hearts to hear Jesus say, “Follow me.” Give us courage and faith to obey him. In Jesus name, Amen.”

Last night through Spencer’s message we caught Jesus’ vision for disciples: to be with Jesus and become like Jesus. This morning we want to think about Jesus’ words: “Follow Me.” What did the words, “follow me” mean to Jesus and to a man named Matthew? Matthew really had no basis or desire to be a disciple of Jesus. Rather his motivations in life seem very selfish. Jesus called him anyway, saying, “follow me.” This calling transformed Matthew’s life. In his story we find hope for ourselves and our generation.

First, “*Son, your sins are forgiven*” (1-8). Before we meet Matthew, there is something Jesus wants us to know. Verses 1-2 read, “*Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. ² Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’*” Does that sound strange to anyone else? The man came to Jesus to be healed. It’s like going to the DQ and asking for an icecream cone and they give you brocolli. Surely Jesus did this deliberately. Jesus wants to talk about the forgiveness of sins.

So what is sin? When we don't do what God says to do, or do what God says NOT to do, that is sin. As disobedience, sin deserves punishment. But there must be more to it than just moral justice. Forgiveness of sins only makes sense in relationship with God. God created mankind in his image. Our lives are reflections of his character. When we do what he would not do, for example, lying, or stealing, we pervert our creation. We offend the God who made us. It's like we stole God's identity. You might think, "I'd never do that." But the Bible says, "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." Why are we lustful, lazy, proud and selfish? Why do we so easily fall into self-righteousness or self-condemnation? That didn't come from the character of our God. It is sin.

Sin has lethal consequences. The Bible says the wages of sin is death (Ro 6:23), and after death comes judgment (Heb 9:10). We will face God, whose image and purpose we rejected. At that time it will be too late for corrective discipline. Revelation 21:8 reads, "*But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.*" There is such an air of finality to this. No wonder we don't like to talk about it.

Yet Jesus says, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." Knowing the greater weight of guilt and shame due to sin, Jesus' words were a great comfort. Since he came by faith, this man was ready to receive Jesus' words. Jesus declared his sins forgiven. Raising four sons, I've come to see that we're all sinners. They can't help but be selfish sometimes and blow up in anger, hit each other with things, take toys away, irritate each other endlessly... Yeah, I'm also revealed as a sinner that way, since I too get impatient and angry. Without forgiveness, we'd hate and kill each other. Usually a hug and an "I'm sorry," is enough to mend all wounds. Forgiveness is really powerful.

The religious leaders thought Jesus was blaspheming, or lying about God. They had been well trained through tradition to deal with sin by a complicated system of sacrifices and ceremony. Jesus seemed to be challenging that. They refused to listen to Jesus, so they missed the point. The truth is: "*It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Heb 10:4).*" God isn't looking to condemn people and judge them for sin. He wants to forgive sins, and sent his Son to earth to take up the guilt, the shame, the fear of sin that we suffer under, the punishment for sin that we deserve, and bear it in our places on the cross. While dying on the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them (Lk 23:34)." So Jesus

challenged their evil thinking. Jesus said to them: *“Which is easier: to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up and walk”?* ⁶ *But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ So he said to the paralyzed man, ‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’* ⁷ *Then the man got up and went home (5-7).”* Jesus proved his authority to forgive this man’s sins the moment they saw him get up and walk. No longer was he stuck on a mat; he was a new man. This illustrates the power of forgiveness that removes the crushing weight of guilt and shame in a sinner’s life. All the people praised God in awe of what they had seen, certain that such authority was true. The man’s sins were forgiven.

Jesus has authority to forgive sins today. I’m not paralyzed, but I can relate to this man on a mat, in need of the forgiveness of sins. Without a clear direction in life, in high school I got into drugs and immoral living. I thought that living a rock’ n roll lifestyle made me cool and independent. Instead, I hurt others, disappointed my parents, and gave a bad influence for my younger siblings. I thought I was free and doing as I pleased, until I got to college. My freshman year at UIC I wanted to focus on school. But I found that I couldn’t stop doing drugs, living immorally. I was enslaved, experiencing guilt and shame and fear. I began to study the Bible. For two years my Bible teacher and fellowship loved me, like the friends bringing the paralysed man to Jesus. Jesus had mercy on me, and visited me. On the ride home from that conference 17 years ago I repented all my sins, one by one. As I remembered each broken relationship, every compromise, selfish act, it was like I heard Jesus say, “Your sins are forgiven.” I was suddenly free to follow Jesus, leaving my life of sin. He blessed my new life: I graduated and worked as an engineer. Jesus blessed me to marry. My wife Amy is so wonderful, because she loves Jesus and bears with me. We have four energetic, troublemaking but good boys. Jesus’ forgiveness of sins gave me new life.

More than just blessing my life, which I totally don’t deserve, Jesus also included me in the ministry of his mercy to others. He helped me live as a Bible teacher. While still a student, I taught the Bible to other students. One person I worked with sent me an email: “I feel far from God; will you be my shepherd?” Through Bible study, Jesus had mercy on her, called her and blessed her as a blessing. She now leads our BBF ministry in Chicago UBF. Her sister Michelle joined our small group. She likes to serve, not wanting to be noticed. Four years ago she was diagnosed with renal disease. She needed a kidney transplant. We held prayer meetings in my home for her. Weeks ago, Jesus revealed his mercy and power through prayer, as she received a kidney. She is here with us, and doesn’t like me mentioning her. But this is the glory of Jesus’ work revealed in

her. Amy and I have been so blessed to serve others. There are many more whom Jesus has touched through our prayer, preaching and Bible teaching. To participate in Jesus' ministry of mercy is the greatest grace and privilege, and we hope to be useful to him in this ministry the rest of our lives.

Jesus wants us to know that he has authority to forgive sins. Do you feel like you're stuck on a mat of sin? Every time you try to get up, just sucker punched back down by guilt and shame and fear? Jesus came to forgive your sins through his death on the cross. I hope each of us may hear Jesus say: "Take heart, son; take heart, daughter; your sins are forgiven."

Second, "*Follow me*" (9-13). Some of you in your Bible study and in your reading may have figured this out, but verses 9-13 are the author's life testimony. Look at verse 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.*" These two words, "Follow me," transformed Matthew's life. What did Jesus mean when he said, "Follow me"?

Jesus words, "Follow me" initiated relationship with Matthew. A relationship that came from Jesus' mercy and hope for Matthew. Jesus and Matthew seemed to be in two different worlds. Jesus was just passing through, preaching and healing, while Matthew was sitting at the tax booth, looking to ensnare the next victim of his extortion business. Yet Jesus saw a man named Matthew. Surely he saw what others saw: Matthew living to make money, squeezing it out of his neighbors. He saw the selfishness that motivated Matthew, his ambition and drive to get more money, to work hard, to achieve his goals. Others, sizing up Matthew, might envy him for his money. They might despise him for his selfishness. But not Jesus; Jesus saw something else. Jesus saw how this hurt those around him. His family's disappointment. Those who had to sell their houses, even their family members, in order to pay the taxes Matthew demanded. Jesus saw how this damaged Matthew. He could buy a nice house with his money, but without love and family he could not enjoy a home. He could buy a \$10k sleep-number bed with all the options, but couldn't sleep peacefully due to guilt and shame. Jesus understood Matthew. Jesus saw him as a sick man who needed a doctor. Jesus had mercy on him. He said to him, "Follow me." It meant: "I know who you are. I know how you came to be here. I know you. And I want to have relationship with you anyway." When Jesus said "Follow me" it meant Jesus chose Matthew. He had hope for Matthew's future. He took responsibility for him. Jesus words, "Follow me," were words of mercy and hope.

Relationships of mercy and hope remind me of the movie “Catch Me if You Can” with Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hanks. It is based on the true story of Frank Abagnale Jr.; an infamous criminal. When he was 15 years old, his parents divorced, and he was forced to choose sides. Instead, he ran away from home. In an interview he explained how this led to crime: “It begins with my parents’ divorce and its dramatic effect on me. I ran away and suddenly found myself a teenager alone in the world. I had to grow up very quickly and become very creative in order to survive. But what started out as survival became more and more of a game ... the more I got away with it, the more of a game it became.”¹ By impersonating airline pilots, a medical doctor, and later a lawyer, he conned people out of money and stole hundreds of thousands of dollars through check fraud. The FBI agent heading up his investigation was merciless, until he realized Frank was only a teenager. He began to have mercy on him, seeking not just for justice but to help him, and protect him from all the people he had hurt, some of whom wanted to kill him. While Frank was in prison, this FBI agent kept visiting him, and with hope invited him to join the anti-fraud task force. With hope he helped Frank use his unique skills to prevent other frauds and cons. A relationship based on mercy and hope transformed this young man’s life.

When Jesus said “Follow me” he opened a new life direction for Matthew. Matthew was stuck on the highway to hell of this world, working for money, using his strength and ability only for selfish gain. Jesus’ words, “Follow me” presented an exit ramp from that road and an entry into the path of God’s history. This was an invitation to learn from Jesus and grow in Jesus’ mind of compassion; becoming like Jesus. Follow me meant: I’m going to invest in you and make you the blessing you always wanted to be. By calling Matthew, Jesus wanted to reach all the other tax collectors and sinners in that area. Matthew’s life, which had been only centered on himself, could now be a blessing to others.

When Matthew heard Jesus say, “Follow me,” he believed Jesus forgave his sins. He made an immediate decision to follow Jesus, and in his joy the first thing he did was throw a party for Jesus. He invited all his old acquaintances, who were also tax collectors and sinners. They were surprised how Matthew had changed. Because of Matthew’s changed life, these people, who were just like him, could spend time with Jesus and experience Jesus’ love, mercy and hope just as Matthew had. What an amazing difference obedience to Jesus’ calling made!

¹ <http://www.historyvshollywood.com/reelfaces/catchmeifyoucan.php>

Nate Saint was one of five missionaries who were killed by [Waorani] Indians. He once said that his life did not change until he came to grips with the idea that “obedience is not a momentary option ... it is a diecast decision made beforehand².” When Matthew chose to obey Jesus’ calling, he grew as a disciple of Jesus. He became a blessing to his generation and those around him. Furthermore, he wrote Matthew’s gospel, which has been a blessing to so many for 2000 years.

The decision to follow Jesus is one to be renewed daily. His calling isn’t just one time, but gives direction for the rest of our life. Preparing this message, I researched the life of John Newton, one of the greatest names in evangelical clergy. His mother taught him the Bible from a young age, but she died when he was 7. His father turned him onto the life of a sea merchant. He fell to the temptations of a sailor’s life: smoking, swearing and immorality. He was pressed into Navy service, but when he tried to desert he was stripped of honor and flogged eight dozen times. Then he began working on slave ships. One turning point in his life came when his ship fell into storm and was taking on water. Newton awoke in the middle of the night and called out to God for help. The cargo shifted, stopping up the hole in the ship, and they drifted to safety. Step by step, he tried to follow Jesus. After marriage to his high school sweetheart, he worked to make money as a slave ship captain, and later merchant. It was hard to live his faith in that climate, but he had desire to follow Jesus. He followed George Whitefield’s preaching, and soon became a minister himself. He was known as a compassionate shepherd, giving spiritual advice and counsel to so many. He wrote hymns, including “Amazing Grace,” mostly to encourage those he served as a pastor. In 1779, near the end of his life, he became Rector of St Mary Woolnoth, a famous church. During that time, John counselled William Wilberforce, a new Christian to remain in office to work for the abolition of slavery³. His 34 years working as a slave ship captain exposed him to all the horrors of the trade, and haunted him. Finally in 1788 he wrote down all his experiences in a forceful pamphlet entitled *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*⁴ which worked powerfully to alter the opinions of people. Months before he died in 1807, he was able to see the British passage of the Slave Trade Act, abolishing slavery, closing a chapter of his life. Surprisingly, he referred to himself as the “old African blasphemer.” His life was full of experiences, ups and downs, but since he remembered this grace to him, he kept following Jesus, and made a difference for Jesus’ kingdom to the end of his life.

² Michael P. Green. (2000). 1500 Illustrations for biblical preaching (p. 253). Baker Books.

³ See the movie: “Amazing Grace” for William’s story.

⁴ You can read it in its entirety here: <https://archive.org/stream/thoughtsuponafri00newt>

From John Newton's story and Matthew's story, even my own story, one thing is clear: Jesus' disciples are people of weakness, and make mistakes. In contrast, Jesus is so perfect and holy. Hanging around us surely diminishes his image. For the past two millennia, people criticize his followers. Matthew drew criticism, as the Pharisees said to the other disciples, "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners (11)?*" But Jesus took this cost willingly. Why? Verses 12-13 read, "*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.*" Jesus shared God's heart's desire for mercy, not only sacrifice. Jesus reveals this mercy of God by bearing it all to be with sinners. Don't let self-condemnation or other's criticism hinder you from following Jesus. He is ready to receive you, no matter if you fell before or are making a first time decision. Get up, and follow him.

To conclude I have one simple question: Who are you following? Jesus says: "Follow me." Some are like Matthew, just hearing this invitation for the first time. Others may have heard and begun, and somehow got off on a tangent, not really focused on following Jesus. Either way, the time of decision is now. Jesus is initiating a relationship with you based on his mercy and his hope. He is calling you to a whole new life direction. Will you decide to follow Jesus?

"Father, thank you for your mercy and hope for sinners, revealed in Jesus. Help us. We have heard your word. Please help us respond to Jesus' words, to make that decision and follow him from this weekend. In Jesus' name, Amen."