



Matthew 9:9-13

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As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. ¹⁰ And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus Calls the “Wrong” Guy (Thank God!)

Matthew was a rather unlikely choice to be one of Jesus’ chosen twelve. Of course, when we think of Matthew, we think of him as “Matthew: evangelist, apostle, disciple.” But before this event in our text, he was thought of as “Matthew: tax collector, traitor, filthy rich sinner.” Not exactly disciple material!

And we know what the Pharisees thought about that choice. They come right out and say it. They were *less* than impressed. Jesus had exercised *terrible* judgment, they thought. Because *good* people do not hang out with *bad* people, and good people most *certainly* do not invite bad people to be their disciples and representatives. And we really can’t be too hard on them for coming to that conclusion. There is more than one Bible verse warning against exactly that: Don’t hang out with the wrong crowd. And *Matthew* was the wrong crowd. So, the Pharisees were *shocked*. They knew what had just happened even better than Jesus did: Jesus had called the wrong guy.

But I imagine it wasn’t *just* the Pharisees that were concerned. I imagine that not a few of Jesus’ *own* disciples raised their eyebrows when Jesus stopped at the tax booth. “You want *him* to follow you?” Matthew was a tax collector, a sellout! He was a guy who made it clear that *his* god was his own belly. He had chosen to turn on his own people and bargain with Rome for the sake of his own personal financial gain. His career revealed his priorities in life. And on Matthew’s list of priorities, there was room for neither God nor country nor his fellow man. Matthew spent his days looking out for number one. He was a materialist, a lover of things, a lover of self. And his job proves it. And the disciples must have known all that and *had* to have agreed with the Pharisees: Jesus had called the wrong guy.

Now, to be *totally* truthful, I *also* have some problems with Jesus’ selection of Matthew. Getting called as a disciple is an honor, it is a really good thing, a tremendous blessing. But really good things like that are only supposed to happen to really *deserving* people. That’s how it’s supposed to work, isn’t it? That’s how we think: good things should happen to good and deserving people.

If you watch any sort of reality competition show, you’re familiar with the sort of puff piece sob stories that the showrunners provide as backstories for the various contestants. They grew up poor, they were bullied, they don’t have many friends, they were in an accident, their relative died—we’re told these things so that we can have someone to root for; because you can only root for a person to win when they’re *deserving* to win. And the people who are deserving to win the *most* are the people who have suffered tragedy and who are nice and who are generous and who could really use the money. I don’t want that millionaire jerk to win. He doesn’t *need* it, and he doesn’t *deserve* it. After all, “deserving” really just means “good and poor.” That’s how we tend to think, anyway.

And so, I can think of a few people who were *deserving* of the special attention that they received from God. Peter, Andrew, James, John—they deserved it! Good guys, salt of the earth, fishermen, uneducated, poor. Great choices, I'm happy *they* got called. Or what about those shepherds abiding out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night? Outcasts, uneducated, poor, overlooked by society. Great selection, Lord, couldn't have done better myself! Or how about that lowly, poor maiden from that backwater town, chosen to bear the Son of God? What a *perfect* choice, Lord!

All of *these* people fit the bill: good and poor, and therefore, *deserving*. But *Matthew*, on the other hand, was neither good *nor* poor. He wasn't helping anybody but himself, and *he* was filthy rich. Matthew was *not* down and out. Matthew was *not* one of the poor-but-honest folks at the bottom of society. So, what was Jesus doing here? Whatever happened to ***“he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty”***? (Luke 1:53) Jesus called the wrong guy, didn't He?

Now, the Pharisees *also* did not like it when Jesus went after the poor and the downtrodden, society's losers. It was a bitter pill for them to choke down that Jesus treated the poor and uneducated as worthy of His time. But *we* are used to that. We've become conditioned to that. In fact, we *expect* Jesus to go out to the fringes and to come to the aid of the powerless and the humble. That's what Jesus is *all* about, He makes a career of that sort of thing.

But with *Matthew*, Jesus doesn't follow His own rules! And that bothers us. Because Matthew had made *deliberate* choices about his life. He was *not* a helpless peasant by no fault of his own. He was *not* a victim of the system. He was *not* downtrodden and poor. He was *not* an honest guy caught in the evil of others. Matthew *was* the evil other! Matthew *was* the system! Matthew was a calculating, rich, fat cat—and Jesus calls him to follow Him. What a grossly *unfair* thing to do. Jesus called the wrong guy! What an *unbelievable* and *bizarre* thing for Jesus to do!

Now, there is a word for this sort of inexplicable, bizarre, and unfair behavior by Jesus. Do you know what that word is? It's called, “*Grace*.” Grace! That's a great word, isn't it? That's a word that we *love*. That's a word that we sing about, and we *love* when we sing about it. “Amazing Grace—How Sweet the Sound” of *that* word! “Grace Has a *Thrilling* Sound”! “By Grace I'm Saved, Grace Free and Boundless” and I'm going to sing about it . . . but I won't always *agree* with it. And that is the problem.

“Grace” means *undeserved* love. It means that I don't deserve God's love, but God loves me anyway. And that's true. And I *like* it when God dispenses His undeserved love towards a sinner like *me*. What I find myself *not* liking is when God dispenses His undeserved love towards a sinner. . . like him. Like her. Like *that* type of person. Like the type of person who would do *that* sort of thing. (You can fill in the details for yourselves.) And that way of thinking shows me that at times I think of grace as something I *could possibly* deserve more than someone else, maybe because I see myself as more righteous than someone else.

That was the Pharisee's opinion as well. And that sort of “righteousness”—that idea that they could *deserve* God's grace more than others—Jesus has no use for it. No use for the guys who are “deserving.” And He dismisses them: “If you are satisfied with your righteousness—fine. Keep it. And go on and get out of here, and take your righteousness with you. Oh, and put some effort into what really matters. Go figure out what ‘mercy’ means.”

As for Matthew, he knew what mercy meant. He was getting a crash course in it, personally tailored for him. Jesus calls Matthew, and Matthew does the most astounding thing: he leaves his successful sin behind and follows Jesus. And that also is bizarre and unbelievable. Why didn't he balk at that invitation? Why not keep the status quo which had to have been so much more comfortable than following Jesus? Why does Matthew drop everything and follow Jesus?

I don't know what was on his mind, but I do wonder about it. Perhaps it was as simple as this: Jesus came to him with something no one else would have offered. **"Follow me."** "Join me. Come be with me. I *want* you to follow me." After all that he had done, with the reputation he had earned, the way he was regarded by family and friends and neighbors and shunned by all—now he is sought out by Jesus and invited, **"Follow me."** One thing must have been so clear to him: he had received mercy.

Jesus shows the same mercy to you today. He also has come to you with the invitation, **"Follow me."** And that is *not* because you are deserving, it is *not* because there are different levels of righteousness and you're better than average, it is *not* because you belong to a more innocent category of sinner. That's not how this works.

Jesus explains how this works: **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."** In Jesus' mind, those are the *only* two categories. The whole human race is in two subsets. There are the righteous people who are healthy and well, and then there are the sinful people who need a doctor to heal them.

The first category is easy: it's empty. There aren't any people in it. The *second* category is also easy: that's everyone—everyone is in it. With respect to Jesus, there is no one who is righteous and well. With respect to Jesus, you and I are just sinners who are sick and who *need* a doctor. And He is the Doctor, and He has come for you and for me and for all. He comes to call us to follow Him, *even though* we're the wrong guys. And we are just that. We're the wrong guys. But Jesus calls us.

And He does this for you for the same bizarre reason He did it for Matthew. Simply grace. He loves the people who could not deserve it. He loves the people that have nothing to offer. He loves you, and He loves me. Never minimize just how bizarre God's grace really is, and never forget that the most bizarre reality of all must *always* be that God gives His grace to *you*. That's what He does. He gives grace.

And so, God chose Matthew. Why? I have no idea, but He did. God chose me. Why? I have no idea, but He did. God chose you. Why? I have no idea, but He did. He most certainly did.

Don't try to figure it out. *Do not try* to figure that out. You'll likely start finding reasons that just are not true. Instead, just revel in this reality: you are the recipient of grace. God calls the wrong guy. He *always* does. He chooses you. And so, what do *you* say when Jesus calls the wrong guy? How about this: "Thank God!" Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.