

## “Responding to Christ’s Invitation”

When Jesus called Matthew, or Levi, as he is referred to in our Gospel reading from Luke, Matthew was sitting in a booth collecting taxes for the the governor of Galilee, Herod Antipas. From the ancient writings, we know that this son of Herod the Great taxed almost everything and everyone, including fisherman. Given the proximity to the Sea of Galilee as described earlier in Luke as well as the Gospel of Mark and of course the Gospel bearing Matthew’s name, it is quite possible he was sitting in a booth doing just that- collecting tax money from fisherman. How do you think Matthew was viewed by others? This guy sitting; not standing, not doing the manual labor required of fishing, but sitting in a booth; a booth which probably had shade- was collecting money for the Roman authorities who occupied his and countless other’s land. I’m sure ole Matthew was not a popular guy. His fellow Jews probably saw him as a traitor. If he had friends on the lake, they probably despised him and his comfortable little booth by the sea especially on the days they had to pay up! And yet, of all the people Jesus could have chosen, he called this guy who was so seemingly unqualified. He called this guy, who because of his job, was not really liked by most people. Not a lot has changed. With all due respect to any IRS employees out there, people generally don’t care too much for the tax collectors. But Jesus calls Matthew to follow him. Imagine that.

Fast forward a couple of thousand years and there is a husband and father not sitting in a booth outside, but in an office working his boring 8-5 job. He’s been doing it year after year with minimal advancement and little satisfaction. The pay is enough- it could always be more- but it keeps things going. He doesn't do a lot after work. He comes home, sees his kids for an hour or so, drinks a couple of beers and then falls asleep on the couch most nights only to wake up and do it all again. His relationship with his wife is more like that of a roommate than a marriage. There is one bright spot in his life, at least he thinks there is. It’s this woman at work. They know each other pretty well at this point. It just sort of “happened.” One thing led to another and you can figure out the rest.

They met a couple times a week for “lunch” at a local motel. Jesus is calling this man too.

Now, you may be thinking, wait a minute- Jesus calling Matthew is one thing but this man should be out of the running. He is eminently unqualified! Well, at the time he was lost and doing what he was doing, yes- he was unqualified. This guy was dismissing his marriage vows as irrelevant to his own perceived needs. He was ignoring his commitment and responsibility to his family. And most importantly, Jesus’ invitation to follow him was being completely ignored. So yes, I would say he was unqualified because he was willfully walking away from his faith. But Christ did not leave him. Christ’s invitation was still there. His invitation goes out to all. It surpasses all barriers. It is not exclusive to certain people like the ones who only mess up only a little bit; Jesus’ call is inclusive of even the greatest sinner.

Matthew responded to that call. Our text tells us Matthew left everything and followed Jesus. And the man who lost his way within his marriage? He too responded to Jesus’ call. He left that life of selfishness and committed himself to a new life. It was a life that was always there but a life he rediscovered as a baptized child of God. I can’t tell you what happened that made this man repent. I can’t tell you what happened that caused him to admit he had messed up “big time” and confess his sins to God. But I know God through his Spirit was a part of it. And even though their situations were completely different, this man, just like Matthew, responded to Christ’s unexpected and unconventional call with committed action! He left the familiar and followed Jesus.

Now to be clear, this man’s life is still a struggle- he and his wife still have some significant issues to work out. And we know from the Scriptures that Matthew’s life after leaving the comfort of the tax-collecting booth to follow Jesus was far from easy either. Matthew gave up a lot! He was living pretty good collecting those taxes, I can assure you. But he knew Jesus had the kind of power he could never have on his own. The man I mentioned knows that power. Do you know that power? It's the power of forgiveness. Christ died for sinners. His death and resurrection fixed what we could

never fix. And because Christ died for sinners, Matthew had a story to tell; the unfaithful husband has a story to tell as does his wife. We all have a story to tell.

And that story of responding to Christ's invitation begins with repentance, which is sincerely regretting our sins and asking for Christ's forgiveness.

You see, this topic of Christian discipleship, which we have been talking about for the last three weeks and will continue to talk in the weeks ahead is about first understanding the order of things.

You and I are saved by the grace of God through our faith in Christ. We say it and say it but do we really believe it? I pray that we do because it is God that does the saving. He sent Jesus to make things right once and for all and he wants us to talk about that. He wants us to let people know there is true hope in this world.

But let me be brutally honest. No one is really going to listen much less care if they think there is no difference between those who claim Christ as their Savior and those who don't. I would guess that if people in the office of the man I told you about earlier knew what he was doing but still heard him talking about the significance of his Christian faith while he continued to be unfaithful to his wife, folks would have questions about what following Christ really means and rightly so. But what if he humbly told those who knew of his "situation" something like this? "You know what? You might be aware of my inappropriate relationship. I know we both made a huge mistake. Personally, I admit the relationship went against everything my faith in Christ has given me. But I have confessed my sins and I know that even though I am not worthy, I have received the certainty of God's pardon in Christ. And because of that I am going to do my very best not to fall into this mess again." That kind of talk might just cause people to see the Christian faith differently and want to know more.

Why? Because Christianity is about forgiveness. And as unqualified as we sometimes think we are- whether we consider ourselves not good enough or think we don't know

enough about the faith- Jesus came to save us and all people from the consequences of our sins. Do we really believe that? Listen to Jesus himself.

In our reading from Luke, Jesus tells the grumbling Pharisees and scribes who had gathered at Matthew's going away banquet, that "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick..." That's us, isn't it? We have a sickness that only the great physician Jesus can heal. Doesn't that eternal truth demand some sort of response from us? Jesus tells you and me, just as he told those gathered in Matthew's house, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." And that's where our committed action begins.

As hard as this may be for some of us to hear, in order to truly respond to Christ's invitation with committed action, we must first commit to change some of those behaviors that are leading us away from him. Willfully and purposely ignoring the sacrifice Christ made on our behalf is not committed action. We all fail each and every day but when we get to the point we are purposely living in opposition to God without any concern for the consequences, we are not putting ourselves in the category of sinners called to repentance, we are putting ourselves in the category of the "righteous." And Jesus said he didn't come to call the righteous. The world tells us that whatever we want to do is fine- whatever it takes to be happy-go ahead and do it. But that's not what God says. He never said his will for our lives was to be happy. His will for our lives is that we are all reconciled to him. And the only way to do that is through Christ. It's the only way.

You know committed action to Christ will look different for all of us. But where it should be the same is in our daily confession of our sins with repentant hearts trusting in his promise of forgiveness.

And with repentance and the assuredness of God's forgiveness in Christ, our lives are renewed and restored. Paul says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come." That was true for the Corinthians; for Matthew;

for man I told you about earlier and it is true for each of us today. "Follow me," Jesus says. It's an invitation to follow the Savior of the world. How will we respond? Amen.