

Introduction

The phone sounded. Finally! We had been expecting a call for over an hour now and the electronic ring broke the tension and the silence and signaled we were about to get the news. I answered the phone and on the other end of the line was that familiar voice we all know around here. It said, “Mr. Pastor Dr. Ross, this is Ted Groves of Grace Community Church.” He was calling to let me know that the decision had been made, and the church was issuing me an invitation to come on to the staff. It was a call we gladly accepted and our lives have not been the same since. In our text this morning we are looking at another man who got a life-changing call, who also said yes and whose life was turned upside down, and who in fact has, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit written the very words we read this morning.

[Read Text; Pray]

Charles Dickens’ timeless tale, *A Christmas Carol*, presents a wealthy, self-absorbed, greedy, and callous man by the name of Ebenezer Scrooge. He lives and accumulates wealth by taking advantage of the poor. People all around him are suffering and he has the means to assist them but cold-heartedly refuses. He is the kind of man people love to hate. At one time the writer of this morning’s text could not have been much different from Scrooge. That’s the kind of people tax-collectors in Jesus’ day were known to be. But this morning we are looking at how all that changed. It changed because of a call—the call of Jesus. Our study of the text reveals several aspects of that call.

First, I want you to see that the Call of Jesus is . . .

I. A Targeted Call.

A. In other words Jesus aims at particular people in his call. He targets them. The clear target of Jesus’ call in Matthew 9:9 is Matthew. “As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” Jesus targeted Matthew. He saw him and he spoke directly to him and he called Matthew.

My son Philip and our daughter-in-law Ellie are with us this morning. I think Philip is still overjoyed because a little over a week ago he got not one but two deer in one night—first a doe and then within minutes a buck. He let the arrows fly and they did what they were made to do. And now he has got all this venison he will have to move to Wisconsin. I got a call from him the other night while all that adrenaline was still pumping through his system and he told me how it all came about. He said he was getting kind of bored and saw a ground hog and thought about targeting it, but decided not to since that was not really what he was after. And yet as circumstances would have it, his release got caught on his jacket and the arrow that he had loaded accidentally flew out of the bow into the air. It was as his eyes followed the arrow's dive into the ground that he saw her. There she was. The doe stood just beyond where the arrow sunk into the ground. It seems the Lord himself had targeted the doe for Philip to shoot.

This is how it was on this seemingly normal day in the life of Matthew the tax-collector. "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew, sitting at the tax booth." And Jesus targeted Matthew, not for death as with a deer but for the life only Jesus can give. Matthew is writing in the third person as though he is an onlooker, but keep in mind that Matthew is telling us his story. And with that in mind, think about the flow of Matthew's narrative. He has just brought us up stairs one-by-one which lead us to increasing heights of comprehending the divine glory of Christ. He is king over disease. He is king over nature. He is king over demons. And as we saw last week, he is king over the forgiveness of sins. So now, having arrived at the top of the stairs, it is as though Matthew cries out, "And that is good news, because here is my story." Forgiveness is just what I needed. As Jesus went on from where he healed the paralytic and forgave his sin, he saw me—Matthew!

And there I was in my BC days. BC is before Christ. I was sitting at the tax booth. I was there at the tax booth where we made ourselves rich. I was there at the tax booth where me and my buddies cheated people and laughed about it. I was there where the wine flowed and the prostitutes hung out. That is where I was when Jesus saw me and said, "Follow me," and I did. Jesus saw me and he targeted me and he got me with his call.

B. Matthew's call from Jesus reveals the kind of people Jesus calls. Who does Jesus target and whom does he call? At the end of this section Jesus straightforwardly states, "For I came NOT to call the righteous but sinners." He calls those who do not deserve it. He calls sinners. He calls the unclean, the filthy, the scum, the scoundrels. He calls tax-collector types. That's who he calls. He calls folks who are a stench in the nostrils of God, those whose righteousness is filthy rags. He calls people who rest under the just condemnation of God.

None of us are too fond of the IRS, but the reputation and image of the tax-collector in Galilee in the days of Jesus was an ultimate low. The Jews particularly despised tax collectors because they became like traitors to their own people. The territory was in the grips of occupation from outsiders, and those outsiders taxed the Jews. The tax revenue in Galilee was collected under the authority of the regional governor, Herod Antipas. Capernaum was an important city being a major port on the Sea of Galilee and a major trade-route-intersection. Taxes were levied on imported goods at a rate of as much as 12.5%. To make matters worse, the publicans made their living by taking a share of the taxes they collected. And many became quite wealthy. Their wealth and the way they accumulated it resulted in resentment from the Jews in general, who looked down on them and separated themselves from them. That left the tax collectors to be friends with other outcasts like prostitutes, scoundrels, and other low-life.

But such a place in society did not keep Matthew from getting the attention of Jesus. As Jesus was passing by, he saw Matthew. He noticed him sitting there at the tax booth. Unlike your every day average Jew, however, Jesus refused to be repulsed. He refused to cast a searing glance. He looked at Matthew and saw exactly the kind of man for which he came from heaven to earth. He did not see a good man. He did not see a man all puffed up in self-righteousness. He saw a man that knew what kind of crowd he ran with. He saw a man with many blemishes. He saw a man who would readily admit that he had broken every one of God's commands. He saw in Matthew a pitiful sinner, just the kind of person he came to save.

C. Jesus did not come to call the righteous but sinners. Nobody is worthy to belong to Jesus. No one deserves to be part of the kingdom of heaven.

The Jews by and large were so mixed up. They looked at the law as a ladder to heaven. Keeping the law in the externals was therefore the goal. What they failed to grasp is that the purpose of the law was never to provide a means of being made right with God. It does express the way to love God and love neighbor, but in reality the law exposes how far each of us is from that standard from our very heart. The function of the law according to Paul in Romans 3 is to silence every mouth before God and render the entire world accountable before him, "for by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin." Unfortunately, one of the evidences of a sinful heart is the reticence to admit sinfulness. So of first importance, to receive the call of Christ, persons must see themselves for the sinners that we are. Jesus is not calling the self-righteous, those who try really hard. He calls those who realize they have no business being called because their goodness is filthy rags.

D. This is good news because each of us is a sinner! If you are already a follower of Christ this morning, I want you to follow Matthew's example in this text. Stop and recall, if you are able, where you were when Jesus came to you. It is that place and time at which the reality of your sinfulness met with the sense of Jesus seeing you in the midst of your sin, but instead of turning away, he called out to you to come to him. What a relief to know that Jesus came to seek and to save sinners.

If you are not a follower of Christ, then perhaps in the midst of this message this morning you can discern the call of Jesus upon yourself. You know yourself to be a breaker of God's law. Yet you realize that your sins do not scare Jesus away. He sees you not with contempt but with compassion. He sees you sitting at your tax booth, the emblem of all that separates you from God, and yet there he is as though urging you to come. Jesus Christ loves sinners. He hates sin, but he loves sinners. And yet if you are not yet willing to come to terms with that sin, he is not ready to call you. First, you must see yourself as the sinner that you are.

Not only was the Call of Jesus a targeted call, we see also that it was . . .

II. A Costly Call.

Jesus saw Matthew and then he spoke to him. What he said articulates the demand of the call. "He said to him, 'Follow me.'" The call of Jesus is to follow, and that is a costly proposition.

A. What did Jesus mean by this command? In part, he meant literally to follow him around. Jesus was calling Matthew to become his disciple to join his band of disciples and to follow Jesus around all the places he went and to learn from Jesus as he went. It was the manner of teachers in the day to function in this way. They were teachers without a classroom so to speak. The classroom was the world and the learning was continual. Followers would listen to the teacher and learn from him memorizing what he would say.

To be clear Jesus said to would-be followers that to come after him would be costly. It would be costly as it would demand the sacrifice of self. In fact, they would be required to take up a cross. They would be walking the path to death.

For Matthew following Jesus full-time like this would mean giving up a lucrative career as a tax collector. R.C. Sproul made an interesting point in his commentary. When the two sets of brothers, Andrew and Peter, and James and John, were called by Jesus to follow him and become fishers of men, they always had the option if things did not work out to return to fishing. And they did exactly this at one point. But for Matthew there was no such safety net. Leaving the tax booth meant leaving it for good as there would be many men just waiting on such a lucrative position. Matthew knew that following Jesus meant turning his back on everything to follow him.

B. But there was more to this than simply the lucrative position Matthew would be leaving. Following Jesus also meant becoming his student, learning the truths of the kingdom from him, having his thinking molded and shaped by him. It also meant becoming his imitator, learning to live as he lived. Jesus is the example after which his followers are to pattern their lives. Peter says in 1Peter 1:21 that Christ left you an example so that you might follow in his steps. Following Jesus also meant identifying with him, owning his cause, living to promote his movement and even dying if

necessary for the goals and objectives of the gospel and the kingdom. "Follow me" was an all-encompassing call. It was a life-transforming call. Matthew was never going to be the same.

C. The demands of Christ have not changed. They are still the same. The call to salvation, the call to repent and believe the gospel is indistinguishable from the call of Jesus to "Follow Me." Jesus addressed the crowds, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." You either save your life for yourself or you lose it to Jesus. To come to Jesus as savior from sin is to come as Lord over your life. It is to come to him to follow him—to believe what he teaches, to be holy as he is holy, to love as he loves, to serve as he serves, to sacrifice as he sacrificed, even to suffer as he suffered, and to call others as he called them to 'follow him.' To follow Jesus is life-transforming. It is to forsake the pattern of this world because his pattern is totally different. The pattern of the world is to reject God's law, to pursue worldly goods, to get all you can, can all you get, and sit on the can. That was the life of a tax-collector in Galilee; it is a life of sin, a life of pleasure, a life of selfishness. Jesus calls sinners to abandon sin, to set their sights on him and follow.

It is so easy in contemporary America to be convinced that a prayer makes us a follower of Christ, a trip down an aisle or being baptized in water makes us a follower of Christ. But you cannot be a follower of somebody without following. I look up in the air this time of year and see geese flying together. They are in formation, and there is one goose in front leading while the others come behind. The entire formation shifts on the basis of how that first goose leads. Following Jesus is like that. He is in the lead. His life is a pattern. Christ's true disciples follow that pattern. We get off track sometimes to be sure, but if you are not following after him though imperfectly, you are not a follower of his. And if not a follower then one who is seeking to save your life, and you will end up losing it.

So the call of Jesus is a targeted call. It is also a costly call. Next, take stock of the fact that the call of Jesus is . . .

III. A Transforming Call.

A. The conclusion of verse 9 sets forth that Matthew rose from the tax booth and followed Jesus. But the outstanding piece of evidence that his life was being transformed is what happened next. Verse 10 tells us that "Jesus reclined at table in his house." Matthew brought Jesus home with him. And he set him at his table. When you follow Jesus, you don't leave him at the church building. You bring him in to the midst of your everyday life. You bring him into your home. You take him to work. You bring him into everything you do and everything you are. You bring into you friendships, your marriage, your family, your everything. Are there any areas in your life this morning where you are shutting Jesus out? Is it as though you have said to Jesus, "You can come this far but no further?" That's not following Jesus. To follow Jesus is to open every door, every closet, every room, and say come in. Come in and clean up. Come in and make use of this life for you and for your kingdom and glory.

B. But we notice that not only was Jesus reclining in Matthew's home, so were Matthew's friends. "Behold, many tax collectors and sinners" were also reclining at table with Jesus and his disciples. This is indeed a life in transition, a life being transformed. Leaving selfishness and selfish pursuits behind, Matthew has opened up his house to Jesus and his disciples and he has opened up his home so his friends can also meet Jesus. One of the first things people do when they begin to follow Jesus is they want their friends to know. They want their friends to know about the change, but even more importantly, they want their friends to know the One who has made the change in them. They want them to hear the same gospel news they heard that they might also enter in to the joy of Jesus Christ. That is what Matthew was doing. What a change! Instead of taking, he is now giving! Instead of profiting from people through taxation and scheming and dishonesty and conniving, he opens up his home hospitably to offer people the opportunity of receiving life.

C. You cannot follow Jesus without life transformation. Your whole orientation must change. And it will change if you are really following him. It is hard. It is work. It takes effort. It takes a selfless orientation to life. It takes daily surrender. It takes being amazed that he has called you and targeted you for life. It takes bearing a cross to yourself, but that is exactly what Jesus has done for his people. His example is the one we are to

follow. And a major part of this transformation is living to give others the opportunity of meeting him as well. So, I have to ask myself and I have to ask you and challenge you with this question this morning. What are you doing to introduce other people to Jesus? Are you introducing your friends to him? Your neighbors? The people out there who are in the same boat you used to be in . . . without hope and without God? Every follower of Jesus should want others to meet him too. Part of following Jesus is caring about your neighbor enough to warn them of judgment and tell them of the savior. So at least begin to pray, "Lord, use me to introduce others to Jesus. Lord, show me how I can tell them about you." And begin to look for opportunities and take advantage of them.

The final aspect of the call of Jesus that we need to see this morning is that it is . . .

IV. A Confusing Call.

A. It was not Matthew the tax collector who was confused. But some were. It was the Pharisees. It was that group of meticulous rule and tradition followers who viewed themselves as better than everybody else. They checked all the religious boxes and gave themselves straight A's in religious observance. And they looked down their noses at the riff-raff that were the tax collectors and sinners.

So they saw Jesus mixing with the scum, and they were confused. After all these were the ones who were ripping off the common people and padding their pockets with blood money. These were the womanizers and money-launderers. These made the back-alley deals. They might be the equivalent of drug dealers and pimps and rapists and abusers in our day. And Jesus was reclining at table with THEM! "Now wait a minute," they reasoned, "something is wrong with this picture. Does not the Bible show how God hates such sins as these people live in? Have not they broken every single one of the commandments? They do not even come to the temple bearing sacrifices! They are far, far from God! And yet this one who calls himself the Son of Man comes and eats with them. Those people are so bad that simply to eat with them makes one unclean." This is how the minds of the Pharisees worked. And for that reason they were confused and asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such as these?"

B. Jesus answered their question. He responded with an explanation and an exhortation.

1. The explanation was this. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." What a merciful Savior is Jesus! The sins of these people are despicable and repulsive. But they are in need. They are like sick people. They need healing. They need a doctor. They don't need to be abandoned; they need to be loved. They need the gospel. They need one to make them well. And that is why Jesus came. And that is why he ate with them. Don't count sinners out of heaven. Rather have a heart for them and rescue them. Rescue the perishing and care for the dying. Like Jude says, "save others by snatching them out of the fire." Jesus did not come to commit our sins but he came to bear our sins, to free us and transform us. It is like Paul said to the Corinthians: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God." Jesus said to the Pharisees "I did not come for sinless people; I came for sinners." If you reach out to help sinners, you are going to get your hands dirty. It is a messy business, but that is why I am here. Wow. That provokes a question for each of us. Are you getting your hands dirty to help sinners?

2. Now, that was the explanation. Quickly, let's look at the exhortation. Here it is. "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" Jesus is quoting the prophet Hosea 6:6. Basically what Jesus is encouraging the Pharisees to understand is that God is not nearly as concerned with great displays of religious observance as he is with great displays of mercy. He is just and he will deal with sin in his time and he will do so perfectly. But you, leave that up to God. Vengeance belongs to him. What he wants for those who are his is not to be known for shaking their fingers at sinners and outcasts but showing them kindness, fundamentally the kindness that seeks healing from their sins. Is there someone in your life this morning that you just want for them to get what is coming to them? That is the attitude of the Pharisees. What you need to do with that desire

is to repent of it and seek to love that person, show mercy to that person, just like Jesus has shown mercy to you.

Conclusion

In Dickens' story Scrooge experiences life-transformation through a series of dreams. It is the kind a change that makes the heart-warming story so powerful. We have an even better one before us this morning because it is not a novel but real life. The one relating the events to us is the one who experienced the life change. It was brought about by more than a motivation to do better through fearful dreams. No this was a change brought about by the same power that healed the sick, stilled storms, commanded legions of demons, and forgave and healed a paralytic. The power of Jesus was exerted on the heart of a "such-were-some-of-you" kind of person. Matthew got a new heart, followed Jesus, and he would never be the same. That's your story as well if you have answered yes to Jesus' call. Go forth and live it out. If that is not your story, it can be. Jesus calls you now, "Follow me!" This morning will you get up, leave your tax booth, and follow? Why would you not?