

Unlikely Disciples

Matthew 9:9-13

Introduction

Picking a Team: Think about picking a team (e.g., gym class, kickball, dodgeball, backyard football, etc.). I loved sports but I wasn't always the most successful athlete (e.g., -2 points in JJV basketball, *true story*). I was more of a trivia guy (I'm no Ken Jennings), but I had my moments (e.g., 8th grade Bible class, me against the class). *Don't forget you can't spell **trivial** without **trivia**. All that to say, **if you were building a team** (e.g., squad), **who would you pick?**

- If you were picking **Team Jesus** you wouldn't pick these guys. This is the most **unlikely** team of misfits you could imagine. It's full of rough around the edges blue-collar workers and religious fanatics, those who were fully against the current political system and those that sold out to the government ("the political man"). And here is the story of the calling of a particularly unlikely disciple—the author of this gospel—and other sinners like him.

⁹ 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."¹

Jesus calls sinners to follow him.

1. Unlikely Followers (vv. 9-10)

⁹ 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.

Discipleship is the Goal: The teaching was verified by the miracles but the goal wasn't just a good sermon and a magic trick. God uses the message and the miracles **to invite us into a discipleship relationship**.

¹ ⁹ Καὶ παράγων ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐκεῖθεν εἶδεν ἄνθρωπον καθήμενον ἐπὶ τὸ τελώνιον, Μαθθαῖον λεγόμενον, καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, Ἀκολούθει μοι. καὶ ἀναστὰς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ. ¹⁰ Καὶ ἐγένετο αὐτοῦ ἀνακειμένου ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, καὶ ἰδοὺ πολλοὶ τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἐλθόντες συνανέκειντο τῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ. ¹¹ καὶ ἰδόντες οἱ Φαρισαῖοι ἔλεγον τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, Διὰ τί μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν ἐσθίει ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν; ¹² ὁ δὲ ἀκούσας εἶπεν, Οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχουσιν οἱ ἰσχύοντες ἰατροῦ ἀλλ' οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες. ¹³ πορευθέντες δὲ μάθετε τί ἐστίν, Ἔλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν· οὐ γὰρ ἤλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλοῦς.

- I see this mistake in a lot of our thinking, that we love Jesus for his **gifts** not for **himself**. Jesus hasn't come *primarily* to fix your situation *but* to transform you. He is calling you to follow him (to find your life, joy, and hope in him).

Matthew the Tax Collector: He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth Matthew (sometimes called Levi elsewhere in the Bible, two names are very common in the Bible and in multi-lingual culture). The **scandal of Matthew's discipleship** is his occupation as a **tax collector**. Why was tax collecting such a sin?

- At its core, tax collecting was a **traitorous** act. Tax collectors were collecting *for* the Roman Empire. It's working for the enemy, it's selling out (e.g. French Nazi collaborators).
- You're not only getting a paycheck from the enemy, you're using your knowledge of your own people (e.g., language, culture, etc.) to help the enemy. **You're a sellout.**
- Not too mention, tax collectors famously had a reputation for abusing their position to enrich themselves (e.g., taking more than is owed, etc.).
- Just how bad are tax collectors? Look at how the Bible groups them:
 - "Tax collectors and sinners" (e.g., 9:10, 11; 11:19).
 - "Tax collectors and prostitutes" (Matt 21:31-32).
- Pay attention to this, **Jesus called a despised sinner to be his disciple.**
- Discipleship is also for those that society keeps at arms length (e.g., church planting in wealthy places, forgotten people, etc.).

The Invitation: He said to him, "Follow me." Follow after me, come behind me, etc.

- Etiquette required a rabbi's disciples to walk literally "behind" his teacher (they walk behind out of respect, submission, and imitation).
- Typically in first century Judaism, the student pursues the Rabbi they want to learn under (e.g., PhD *doctorvater*). Jesus is not typical, he pursues his disciples. Think about it, Jesus isn't waiting for you to come find him, he is pursuing you (e.g., Surely goodness and mercy shall follow (i.e., pursue) me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever", Ps 23:6). God is chasing you down. God won't stop (e.g., "The Hound of Heaven").
- Jesus calls and pursues us.
 - We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). Not *so that* but *because*.
 - "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4).

The Response: And he rose and followed him. Matthew didn't leave in resignation (e.g., Eeyore) but in a spirit of joy. He threw a dinner party! There was no seeming fear or hesitation to leave (e.g., "immediately"). Why the difference from Matthew to us? We sometimes are so worried about what we're sacrificing and giving up (e.g., sometimes we are so somber in what we're sacrificing instead of joyful in what we're receiving). Think of Christians in persecuted

places who know their decision to follow Jesus might cost them their livelihood, family, or even their life yet they are joyful!

The Friends: And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

- Even a sinner has his friends (5:46, love those who love you). Your salvation is an opportunity to a new life *and* also to invite those from your old life to join you.²
- Matthew, a sinner, shows mercy to sinners.

A Risk: Jesus eats with these sinners. Jesus has a reputation (at least an accusation) of being a drunkard and a glutton because he eats (i.e., is a friend with) with “tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19). Jesus never sacrifices his holiness or his behavior but he is willing to sacrifice his reputation.

- Eating with these could “defile” Jesus but we’ve seen this before (e.g., touching a leper). Jesus is less concerned with perceived purity than with saving a sinner. Jesus never saw a sinner as *gross* or *yucky*. He was never afraid to touch them or eat with them.
- He eats with them! Table fellowship is a big deal. It’s still a big deal today but it was especially a big deal in 2TJ. To enter someone’s home and share a meal with them was reserved for intimate friends and would have implied an endorsement of their life and lifestyle.
 - If you wait until someone is ideologically or morally identical to you before you enter their world and become their friend then you’ll always be eating alone. God is not calling us to **isolation** but **generous hospitality**.
 - Jesus is the most holy, set-apart, morally pure, righteous, and ethical person to ever walk the face of the earth, if he can dine with “sinners” then you can leave your holy huddle and get into the mess of the world.
- I think the reason Jesus could eat with these people and the Pharisees couldn’t had a lot to do with the way they identified them. The pharisees defined these people by their sin. Jesus doesn’t. Their personhood and value flows out of their being made in the image of God.
 - **You are not your sin.** You are made in the image of God, and this is true of every person you meet.
 - A 7th century hermit, Vitalis, lived in the desert until he was 60. He then moved to Alexandria to work as a day laborer earning only enough money to hire a different prostitute each night. The Christians of Alexandria were (not unreasonably) appalled by this behavior and denounced him to the bishop. Despite their frequent complaints, the bishop insisted that they mind their own business. Unable to stop Vitalis themselves they could do nothing but treat him with disgust. Then one day Vitalis was killed in the street (whether by a sanctimonious Christian or a disgruntled patron of the prostitutes, we’re not sure).

² Are these really “sinners” or just not as scrupulous as the Pharisees. While the latter is true, there seems to be a genuine moral connotation to the description of their lifestyle, both what Jesus is calling them from and what he is calling them to.

At his funeral, dozens of former prostitutes wept. Each testified that she owed her soul to Vitalis who had come to her room, handed her all the money he had, and said, "Here's your money. I want to buy you one night without sin." Then he would pray with her and for her, read Scripture to her, and offer to help her find another place to stay and another line of work.

- You are not defined by your sin. Your value is determined by God himself who loved you enough to pay the ultimate price of his own death to redeem you.

2. Familiar Opponents (v.11-12)

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."

Who Are the Pharisees?: The Pharisees are some of Jesus' most consistent theological sparring partners in the gospels. A religious group (not officially connected to the Temple or Temple leadership); pride themselves on their holiness. Defined by separation from other Jews. Focus on two things, **Torah** and **Tradition**. Their main focus is on the first five books of the Bible (Torah, Pentateuch, Books of Moses, etc.). They interpret it primarily as a five-part book of commandments (e.g., *mitzvot*). This interpretation is handed down through oral tradition and the interpretation of that tradition is elevated to the level of the Torah itself. **Their interpretation is the only interpretation and it is a very rigid interpretation.**

- Historically, they are the forerunners of Rabbinic Judaism which is what we have inherited in modern Judaism (in its multiple iterations). We have a lot of wonderful Jewish neighbors so I feel it is helpful to disabuse you of this idea that Judaism as we have it today is the same as the Judaism at the time of Jesus. Essentially we have the Judaism that survived or "won out" after the fall of the temple.
- Jesus and the Pharisees are having somewhat of an intra-mural Jewish debate. The Pharisees are not the only Jewish interpretation of the day. Many Jews understood the Hebrew Bible, prophecy, holiness, and the plan of God differently (e.g., Essenes, Sadducees, etc.). There is a historical separation of Christianity from Judaism but no Biblical or theological separation. Jesus came to "fulfill" rather than "abolish" the law. The whole point of the New Testament is to show how the promises of the Hebrew Bible find their answer and fulfillment in Jesus!
- A primary interpretive difference between Jesus and the Pharisees concerns the nature of the Torah. There are commands in the Torah but it is not primarily a religious lawbook but a story, a narrative, of God and his relationship with the world.

Jesus and the Pharisees: He has friendly contact with some pharisees. He had agreements with the pharisees. This idea that Pharisee *by definition* means hypocrite is a little historically overdrawn. The Pharisees wanted to keep God's law (as they interpreted it) and Jesus kept the "law and the prophets."

- It might even be their similarities (e.g., love of God's law, obedience to God's commands, Rabbi, etc.) that set the tone for the disagreement. We tend to be harsher to our own (e.g., my example of SBC).
- It wasn't the source (e.g., OT) but the interpretation that was the difference (e.g., everyone uses Scripture).
 - "To refer to Celtic monks and fundamentalist lobbyists, Origen and Obama, St. Augustine and Justin Bieber, Dante and Kanye, St. Francis and the "Prosperity Gospel" preachers, Martin Luther and Jimmy Swaggart, John Calvin and George W. Bush, all as 'Christian' stretches the word so thin its meaning vanishes." At that point we're so far off-base we're eating popcorn in the stands. (David James Duncan, *God Laughs and Plays*, adapted).
 - And all of these, for the most part, are arguing that their principles and practices are derived from the authority of Scripture.
- Jesus, through his teaching and ministry, definitely shows that the Pharisees have missed the point of the Hebrew Bible. They've started with the wrong premise and taken that path **away from**, rather than **toward** God.

Christ is the Key: What Jesus is saying and demonstrating has been there *all along* in the OT but for some reason they missed it (e.g., suffering servant). Jesus Christ himself serves as an interpretive key, a lens through which we can see and understand the plan of God in its full design.

- "12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. 14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:12-18).

Jesus' Purpose: But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. The Pharisees **don't understand the mission of Jesus, the method of salvation** (i.e., grace not works), or the **reality of their own wickedness**.

- We see this today in some churches and Christian (so-called) groups (e.g., legalism, isolation, separation). See it today in modern legalism where external rules, not Biblical or even theological in nature, are used to separate "Christians" from the world. But these "manmade" rules end up separating from everybody. You end up with a church of one where no one but you measures up (e.g., they will always turn on themselves).
- It's easy to be disappointed at the impurity of sinners rather than being amazed at their newfound purity when they come to Jesus. Jesus isn't excusing their sin, he's forgiving it and calling them to follow him (e.g., don't clean the fish before you catch 'em).

- The Pharisees missed that Jesus' whole goal was to save sinners! He's not here to preserve some idealized version of moralism but to find those who are lost and bring them into the fold.

Pharisaical Self-Delusion: The Pharisees problem was not a concern for holiness but the fact that they viewed others as sinners and not themselves. They didn't understand they were sick. They saw themselves as righteous (i.e., **self-righteous**).

- The **self-righteous** can't help anybody. We are not saviors stooping to our neighbors but sinners pointing to our Savior.
- Jesus is using the term "well" (and, by analogue, "righteous") ironically because we know that none are "well," none are "righteous."
 - "They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (Ps 14:3)
 - "For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one'" (Rom 3:9-10).
- Self-righteousness and self-delusion are tricky things. Self-justification knows no set form (hyper-religiosity, open rebellion, etc.). There are many ways to be spiritually sick. Remember, religious hypocrisy is an easy target (and maybe more dangerous because it tries to justify sin with the veneer of God) but all of us our sinners. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to repent and believe as well! He wasn't a "Pharisee" about Pharisees (as Keller points out).
- Here's the thing, if you don't admit your sick, you can't get the help you need. If you don't admit you're a sinner, then you'll never get better.
 - Your sin is destroying your life and killing your soul. Sin will take you farther than you want to go and cost you more than you want to pay.
- The doctor analogy that Jesus uses is particularly helpful. Young men are famous for not going to the doctor because they "assume" they're healthy. Some carry that attitude into later life, they ignore symptoms of sickness and refuse to go to the doctor thinking that "ignorance is bliss." The result is the disease spreads and, if they're not careful, it could be too late by the time they actually go (e.g., Ben's dad).

3. Difficult Lesson (v. 13)

¹³ Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Quoting the OT: Jesus "teaches" these teachers of the law. "Go and study this again!" Basically, he's saying (as he often does), "It's been there all along." He then quotes Hos 6:6: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." In Hosea, the people of God are shown to be "sick" in their sin." They are doing the religious rituals but they are far from God. Hosea sees the problem of sin and he doesn't just want to bring religious duty or social reform, he wants people to gain "the loving and compassionate heart that comes from a transformational life with God" (Garrett).

- It's not that sacrifice or obedience is wrong but it's meaningless apart from heartfelt repentance.
- Let's bring it into modern spiritual disciplines (e.g., Bible Study, quiet time, corporate worship, singing songs, evangelizing, etc.). You can do all those things and be far from God if your heart is not devoted to God, if you're doing them to earn God's favor or blessings, or if you think that by doing them you're tipping the salvific scales in your favor. But the solution is not to stop doing the things God commands but to do them with the right attitude and heart.
- **This is one of my great fears, that you can come to church, hear the word, and even care about some types of obedience, *but* miss your savior.**

Conclusion

God-Esteem: The Pharisees saw Jesus call Matthew, a tax collector, despised by his countrymen and the religious elite of his culture. The Pharisees couldn't imagine that Jesus would call him. But **Jesus calls sinners to follow him.**

- This should bring joy and relief to us. God calls unlikely sinners like us to follow him!
- In this crowd of people (attracted by the miracles of Jesus), Jesus chose the most despised to be his disciple.
 - This should humble and encourage us. Matthew is a disciple simply because of God's grace. God has done all the work, it's his victory.
 - This is very different from the kind of "self-esteem" that we preach (e.g., "all you need is inside of you" *a la* Beach Body, or "believe in yourself," etc.). I don't want to build your self-esteem, your self-belief, I want to push you toward complete belief and trust in God.

Check Your Heart: This story should also cause us to examine our own hearts and behavior. The Pharisees are not as healthy as they think, in fact they are *sick*. Are you spiritually sick? The Pharisees misunderstood the mission of God, the means of salvation, and their own motives.

- Are you trying to earn God's acceptance? That's Pharisaical legalism and works righteousness. Jesus is inviting you to follow him, not asking you to get it together first. As you submit yourself to him he conforms you to his image, sanctifying your heart and your actions.
- This affects how we treat others and how we treat ourselves!
- Have you repented of your sin and followed Jesus? Today is the day.
- Is your self-esteem built around your external behavior or your acceptance before God?