

Matthew was a tax collector. Jesus called him out from behind his desk in the tax booth. At Jesus' command to follow him, "[Matthew] got up and followed him".

[ENTER THE BIBLE SLIDE]

And that's it ... Beside that, we know almost **NOTHING** about Matthew. There's an entire gospel named for him. But these **couple of facts** are all that is actually written down.

From context, however – we know some things. When it says that he was a tax collector, that is **not** the New Testament version of an accountant or a modern-day finance professional.

Tax collectors were **despised** at this time. They were seen as cheats & swindlers. Folks who unethically skimmed money for their own pockets when they took taxes. They "were believed to be guilty of **flagrant moral** offenses; counted among those of ill repute."¹

Ok ... so here's what we know. There was a guy named Matthew. He was doing a dishonorable job, and he left that job to follow Jesus.

¹ Cleophus J. LaRue. Second Sunday after Pentecost: Commentary on Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26. WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 6/7/23.

So why did Jesus call him? Matthew was one of the twelve. A top-tier follower of Jesus.

Dr. Matthew Skinner, a New Testament scholar -- light-heartedly said this:

“This is the **best** of all of the calling stories when it comes to disciples. Because Matthew is just minding his own business, doing his job oppressing his neighbors and Jesus comes up and encounters him. Says, ‘follow me.’ He got up and followed him. There’s not a lot of fuss. He doesn’t complain. Matthew just does what he’s told. And then the next thing Matthew does is throw a party. He invites all his tax collector and sinner friends over.”²

Jesus comes to that party full of people of ill-repute & brings the other disciples along with.

[dinner party]

Jesus sits with these people. He listens to their stories. He shares food. He’s present with them. He’s part of the celebration that Matthew hosts – with all the **regular. Imperfect. people**. These ARE folks who the religious leaders find scandalous for Jesus to be spending time with. They essentially ask, “What is Jesus doing eating with those losers?”³

² Matthew Skinner, Sermon Brainwave Podcast. #907. WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 6/8/2023.

³ Matthew Skinner & Joy J. Moore, Sermon Brainwave Podcast. #907. WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 6/8/2023.

What **I LOVE** about this call story – and I think what Professor Skinner is getting at – is there is absolutely nothing special, deserving, or holy about Matthew. He didn't have a respectable job. He likely wasn't living an exceedingly moral or religious life. He didn't have it all together, or surround himself with inspirational OR righteous people. He was just a regular person.

Imperfect AND open.

Broken AND authentic.

And Matthew followed. He didn't ask questions. Or argue. Or run away. He listened & he brought his regular, messy & frail friends with him along on the journey of relationship with this Jesus-guy.

This is a simple and short story. BUT it's a beautiful story of God calling, and Matthew following.

[despair man]

The next story in our reading includes another call story. A leader in the synagogue comes to Jesus in distress. His daughter has died and in desperation, he kneels before Jesus, asking him to come to her & touch her that she might live. This leader calls upon Jesus for help -- in a moment of grief and overwhelm. And Jesus got up and followed him. There's not a lot of fuss. He doesn't complain. He doesn't ask questions. At the call of this man, Jesus follows him right into his family's anguish – as his only hope. And indeed, when Jesus does arrive at the home – and touch the hand of the child, she is raised from the dead.

Now, many of us hear this story and we see a miracle. A healing. An account of extraordinary resurrection. AND it is all of those things. But it is so much more.

This, friends, is the **heart** of the gospel. That Jesus **shows up** with us on our worst days. Comes to us in our moments of greatest anxiety and desperation and despair. Celebrates with us when the world thinks we'll never amount to anything. Loves us anyways when we're regarded as the outcast and a loser.

Beloved, this is **our God**.

Jesus doesn't call the perfect. Jesus calls those the world sees as failures. Jesus calls us.

Jesus doesn't love us when we have our lives together or we've cleaned up the **messes** we've made or we start living on the straight & narrow. Jesus loves us right in the middle of our brokenness. In that space – God LOVES us unconditionally.

God's LOVE follows us. God comes to **be with us** in the worst, the darkest, the most hopeless of circumstances. AND God speaks LIFE into the death that we hold in our clenched fists.

This is the good news of Jesus Christ! We are claimed. And Loved. And Called.

Jesus CALLS US, as he did **his disciples** in BOTH of these stories to follow him. To come with Jesus into the unexpected places, SO in need of God's love and mercy. We are not called to stay neat and clean in the pews of this or any other church. Disciples are called to bring this **relentless love** out into the world. To go with those the world rejects. To share grace with all the **regular. Imperfect. people.** To show up in the places of despair and suffering of our neighbor. To speak life into spaces that seem BEYOND hopeless. To be led by the Spirit, to share God's Grace.

So let us follow.

Like Matthew, let us leave behind that which holds us back – so that we may love our neighbor as Jesus did.

May we, dear church, be a living testament to the love and grace that have taken hold of us in Jesus Christ. **Amen.**