

Matthew 9:9-13 *As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹²On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

"Pastor, I think you have an agenda!" That accusation was made of me after being here at Northdale for 2 or 3 years. She was pointing her finger at me with a bit of a scowl and that look of satisfaction like she had unearthed some big hidden secret and revealed it for all to see. She wasn't quite prepared for my answer. I looked incredulously at her and replied, "I absolutely have an agenda. I'm just sorry that you thought it was hidden!" I think it's interesting that this text popped up for today's sermon. I've always tried to just preach through the lectionary rotating sermon texts between the first, second and gospel lessons and this text is perfect for today. As we bring our time together to a close, this text gives us one more chance to focus on the mission and work God has given us to do and to remind us what is most important as we part ways today and God takes us to different areas of ministry. I think that by now, you've come to see that I don't hide much. I wear my feelings and emotions on my sleeves (just ask my football players), don't hold many punches when it comes to saying what needs to be said, and seek to be as transparent as possible about what I am doing and why. My mission, my focus, my agenda since the first day I arrived here has never wavered. It has always been to extend the call of Jesus to follow him to as many people as possible and to help you live out that call as you live your lives focused on the eternity that God through Jesus has waiting for you. It has never, ever been about me. It has always been about how can we focus more people on Jesus. What can we do to find more ways to extend Jesus' call to follow him to as many people as possible? God did not send me here to invite people to: "Follow Pastor Vann." He sent me here to direct you to follow him. As Jesus invited Matthew in our text for today: "Follow me!", so we are here to continue this invitation and help people live out this calling in their lives as they look forward to the heaven that awaits. That's our work—to connect people to Jesus. We are here to connect people to Jesus, help them grow in their faith, and help them to express their faith in service as they live in glory to God. Some of you I have had the privilege of being the first to help connect you with Jesus. Others of you I've been able to be part of your journey as you grow in faith and serve your Lord. Others, I had the privilege of accompanying to the end of their journey and seeing them off to eternal life. Whether I am here to lead you or another pastor is here to lead you or God one day takes you to another location, the work and the mission doesn't change. We are here to call sinners to know the forgiveness and life that Jesus has won for them. My encouragement that I leave with you today is simple: **Follow Jesus!**

In this text before us today, we see Jesus carrying out this work both to Matthew and to the Pharisees who were scoffing at him behind his back. The difference between Matthew and the Pharisees is not that one was more sinful than the other, but that one recognized his sinfulness and the others didn't. Matthew was very well aware of his status. He was a social outcast in Jewish circles. To the Jewish people he was a traitor who went to work for the hated Roman government to extort money from the Jewish people. Tax collectors had a bad reputation of being corrupt, crooked and lining their own pockets at the people's expense. They were barred from the synagogue because the religious leaders were afraid they would make the synagogue unclean. They could associate only with thieves, prostitutes and other "sinners" as they were called in our text. What grace that Jesus would come to this man to call him from his sinful life to follow him and know the forgiveness that he alone could give. Jesus' invitation to Matthew led him to see how sick he was spiritually and he readily accepted the invitation to follow him.

The Pharisees were a much different story. They were people who prided themselves on how well they could keep the law of Moses. They appeared to all the people to be perfect people. They were the best of the best religiously. They lived outwardly moral lives and held themselves up as examples for the people to follow. Their theme wasn't as much "Follow God" as it was "Follow us!" They found great pride that they did not associate at all with people who were so unclean as Matthew and his friends. This is why Jesus makes the point to say to them, "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*" They did not think that they were unhealthy spiritually and therefore felt they had no need for a spiritual doctor. Jesus' call to them was an urgent request to take a deep look at themselves to recognize their spiritual sickness so that they could know the forgiveness and life that he alone could give that would heal them. Unfortunately they refused.

Here we see the first step in following Jesus is to recognize our sinfulness and the great need we have for Jesus as a Savior. That's hard to do. It's difficult to admit our own shortcomings. But as one author said, "You don't get to be a saint, unless you first recognize that you are a sinner." The Pharisees didn't think they were sinners. That's why they didn't see a need to follow Jesus. They believed they had no need for what he was offering. The truth is they were sinners, they were just good at hiding their sins—sins of pride, of self-righteousness, of a lack of mercy toward others. They hid their sins deep inside and convinced themselves that they were hidden from God too. Matthew recognized the depths of his sin and saw in Jesus the Savior that he needed. To follow Jesus, we first have to recognize our sins and need for him as a Savior. When we take an x-ray of our lives with the radiation of God's law, we see the depths of our spiritual sickness. When we look at that x-ray picture, we find out too quickly that we are full of masses of sin. Have you always treated your spouse and children in love putting them and their needs first and never once taking for yourself? Have you always shown mercy to people in need? Have you always been patient with your employer or employees or co-workers? Have you ever taken advantage of someone in a

difficult situation? Have you always looked out for your neighbor's best interest in everything? Has every word you've ever spoken always served to build others up and to protect their reputations? We look at the picture of our spiritual lives up against the radiation of God's law and see that we are sinners who deserve death. We are sinners who by ourselves are spiritually sick with a cancer that will kill us eternally.

Yet Jesus came to us at baptism or through a friend or a pastor and he called out to each one of us: Follow Me! Follow me to the life-giving water of my word where you hear about my life, death and resurrection from the grave which will give you life! Follow me to eat of the spiritual food that brings forgiveness for your sins, cleanses you of your guilt and makes you perfect and holy in my sight! Follow me, Jesus says, to the eternal life that I have secured for you and freely given to you in faith! We follow Jesus because he alone can rescue us from our sin and give us eternal life. He is our life. He is our breath. He is our everything! What an invitation from our Savior to follow him and know the peace and hope and joy that only he can give. What I want for you is nothing more than this: Follow Jesus!

You notice, though, that Jesus' invitation to Matthew wasn't just to follow him for forgiveness. What Jesus' invited Matthew to do was life-changing! His invitation to Matthew was to leave his old life behind along with everything in it and completely surrender to him. Jesus invitation to Matthew had radical implications. Think about the lucrative job and luxurious life Matthew was leaving behind to follow Jesus who had no home to lay his head. For three years, Matthew followed Jesus. He sat at his feet and listened to him teach. He followed Jesus in ministry and witnessed everything Jesus did: preaching, teaching, and healing. And after Jesus left this earth, Matthew continued this work by continuing to proclaim the Gospel message of Jesus. You are still benefitting from Matthew's ministry today! He wrote down these words so that you can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, promised from the Old Testament. God is still blessing Matthew's ministry by sending the Holy Spirit through these words to work and strengthen faith in your heart so that you can follow Jesus to the eternal life he has waiting for you. Matthew not only followed Jesus to know the forgiveness and life that Jesus offered, he followed him by holding to his word, obeying his word, witnessing to his Savior, and giving his entire life to the service of his Savior.

Following Jesus still carries the same implications today. Following Jesus is much more than just believing in him as our Savior. It is understanding and holding to his teaching, even when we don't like it. It is obeying his teaching and living it in our lives to the best of our ability. It means completely surrendering our lives to be like Jesus. It means making his will and his mission the top priority of your life. It means recognizing that as his people you are no longer to live for yourselves but for him who died for you. Following Jesus means seeing your life not only as a time for you to come to faith but as a time for you share your faith. This is called discipleship. You have been called to follow Jesus as a disciple. Discipleship is a life-long process that is never complete until we enter into the eternal glory of heaven. Sometimes we think of discipleship as stopping as soon as we come to faith and become members. But that's only the initial phase of discipleship. Discipleship is a life-long process of becoming more and more like Jesus. Like the 12 disciples, that requires an extensive, in-depth study of God's word to know God and what he wants of us. It requires daily and constantly reading the Bible and reflecting on the life and teaching of Jesus to gain a clearer picture and understanding of him. And it means translating this into your life as you live in complete surrender to him.

The hard part is that our sinful nature wants to follow a Jesus that doesn't require anything of us. We want a Savior who died for us and rescued us, but only requires a bare minimum of sacrifice and service to follow him. We try to twist Jesus into a version of our own making that we are much more comfortable with. We want a Jesus who is ok with materialism, fine with nominal devotion that doesn't require any kind of sacrifice, pleased with a brand of faith that requires only frequent attendance on Sundays but no real commitment in our daily lives. Like the Pharisees, we want to look good on the outside and convince ourselves that we are ok. Yet that isn't following Jesus. That is only following our own desire for pride and compliment. Sadly, that puts us in the exact same position as those Pharisees—separated from God because of our sins and destined for an eternity in hell.

What a gracious Savior that he would come to such sinful people as you and I and graciously offer the invitation: Follow me! Though weak and miserable sinners, it was for you and me and all people that Jesus willingly went to the cross to offer his life. He completely surrendered to suffer hell and death to sacrifice his life for us. Without that sacrifice, we would be lost forever. But with that sacrifice Jesus not only brings forgiveness to us but opens heaven for our eternity and gives us the life that we live with him and for him right now. When he invites us to follow him, he wants nothing more than for us to follow his example completely. Because of his sacrifice, this is what makes us willing to submit and surrender ourselves to him, to pattern our lives after him and to place our relationship with him above our own will and desires. This is what leads us to follow him wholeheartedly and to fulfill our purpose and mission of leading more people to him.

I guess there a lot of things I could say to bring our time together to a close. But I'd like to just keep it simple. What I want for you today is what I have wanted for you from the very beginning and it's what I want for you as you continue your lives here on this earth. Follow Jesus. Amen.