

Follow Me!

Mark 2:13-22 (ESV)

July 28, 2002

“Follow me.” More than an invitation, this is a command. “Follow me.” More than a command, this is grace and salvation. “Follow me.” Why? Because Jesus said so, and because to follow him is to live; to follow him is the only good reason to live, the only good reason to work, to breathe, to hope, to love, and to strive against the darkness. “Follow me.” These are words of life. Could it be, could it possibly be that Jesus says this even to us down through the centuries?

“I came...to call...sinners.” Yes, thank you. This clarifies the scope of the invitation. It was not only for Levi. It was not only for the first disciples. It was not only for tax collectors. It is for *sinners*. And that, my friends, means us. Thanks be to God!

Jesus Christ came to call sinners to follow him. This is good news for us yet today. Jesus Christ came to earth to call sinners to follow him. From all the distractions, from all the misdirection, from all the gonewrongness, from all the self-importance of our lives, from all the defeat, from all the pain, from all the loss, we are called to this: life with Jesus Christ. And when he calls us, he makes us his very own.

Jesus “went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him.” When Jesus taught, he taught with authority so that his teachings were marked with miracles, healings, and exorcisms. So it is in today’s reading. “As he passed by,” Jesus said to Levi, “Follow me.” And Levi “rose and followed” Jesus. Just like that! Levi “rose and followed” Jesus. He walked away from his job, he walked away from his past, and he followed Jesus. And that is not only a geographical reference. It is a technical term for discipleship. He became a follower. He became a believer. He became a Christian. His life was turned around so that it was no longer simply his own but belonged instead to Jesus Christ.

Do you think Levi was capable of that conversion on his own? He was a sinner among sinners. He was a tax collector for the Roman Empire, a traitor to his people, cooperating with the enemy, and undoubtedly crooked and corrupt. Levi could not have chosen the good on his own. His faith and obedience, his rising and following Christ, were the work of Jesus Christ, a miracle as wonderful as any healing. And Jesus accomplished this by the power of his word, his invitation and

command, his grace and salvation, “Follow me.” You see, this is not a story about how good Levi was before or after his conversion. That would be a short and tedious story, of little interest to us. This is a story about how good and powerful Jesus Christ was, is, and evermore shall be. And if Jesus could use poor, lost Levi, there may be hope even for us.

In case we missed the point, Mark goes over it again, making it even more explicit about who Levi was and who we are. As Jesus “reclined at table in his house, *many* tax collectors and *sinner*s were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were *many* who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with *sinner*s and tax collectors, said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and *sinner*s?’ And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but *sinner*s.’” Count yourself righteous if you wish, but beware of counting yourself right out of the grace of God. Beware of excluding yourself from the invitation. Beware of attempting to set yourself outside the reach of the work of Christ. That is not where you want to be.

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but *sinner*s.” Here we have grace upon grace. First we have the diagnosis, then we have salvation. People who are well do not need any help. There was no need for Jesus to eat with, socialize with, work with, or redeem those people whose lives were in order, whose faith was intact, whose families were perfect, whose prayers were continuous, whose walk was unwavering, and whose relationship with God was whole, complete, full, perfect, and wanting in nothing. He did not say there were a lot of those people around, but whoever they were, they were not the ones he came for. Thank God, he came for all the rest of us, miserable *sinner*s that we are.

I suppose that is the catch. We do have to realize and to admit that we are *sinner*s in order to realize and to accept that the invitation is for us. That may not be any fun, but the rewards are incalculable. We do not seek help from the doctor without first realizing that we are sick. The realization becomes the first step toward healing. So it is here. The table in the house of Jesus is set for *sinner*s. They are the guests of honor. They are the ones whom he invites and calls. They are the ones with whom he associates and with whom he eats. If we want to come to his table, we come as hungry *sinner*s. If we are full and self-satisfied, we need not come at all. But if we are hungry, if we are empty and aching inside, if we are poor and needy, if we have exhausted our own resources, if we have used our own mind and strength but found them lacking, we have come to the right place. Jesus came for *sinner*s.

It is always more than some good religious people can stand. The enemies of Jesus thought he could do better. Eating with *sinner*s, after all. Eating at all, in fact!

How worldly. “Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, ‘Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.’” The presence of Jesus Christ is the occasion for great rejoicing. The presence of Jesus Christ in the flesh or in the word and spirit, as yet today, is the occasion for great rejoicing. The presence of Jesus Christ, the healing work of Jesus Christ, the miraculous and effective calling of Jesus Christ, is the time of joy, life, and salvation.

Of course, this salvation is a tremendous change. This new life is all or nothing. There is no room for half old and half new. We cannot look back and look forward at the same time. Levi did not keep up his crooked tax collecting and follow Christ on the side. That would not have been possible. Levi is not named again in this gospel. We are not told whether or not he entered full time Christian work as a minister or evangelist. Perhaps he entered some other line of honest and honorable work. We do know that if he did so, he did so as a full time Christian, honoring God in all his work and all his life. As Jesus said, “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.”

The renewing grace of God creates a new reality. It gives us a new life. It calls us forth, lifts us up, turns us around, and makes us new and whole. This has nothing to do with our old, self-centered selves. This has nothing to do with how hard we try to be good or try to be bad. It is not about us, initially, so it is about us, finally. It has to do with the power of God to work within us something new, fresh, different, and exciting. God calls us his own, and so we are. Jesus calls us to follow him, and so we do. Christ forgives our sin, and so the power of sin over us is broken. Jesus loves us, so that we love him and one another. God has broken the power of death, so now we live with an eye to eternity. This new wine is poured into fresh skins.

This new life is not without its risks. Just before the call of Levi, Jesus had been accused of a capital crime. The shadow of the cross had already fallen across his ministry. In today’s reading the criticisms were extended to his disciples. The forces of sin, death, and evil have always opposed the light and always will. It is important to know this. It is important to know what is involved. Jesus does not call us to be admirers from a distance. It is not enough to acknowledge him as a good teacher, a moral instructor, or a shining example. Instead, Jesus calls us to be

followers, up close, personal, and involved. We are to acknowledge him as Lord, follow him as master, and worship him as God. This involves us heart, soul, mind, and strength, all that we are and all that we have. It engages us in the depths of our being, to the breadth of our vision, and to the heights of our aspirations.

How shall we respond? What are we to do? What shall we make of all of this? Levi “rose and followed” Jesus. That is, he believed and he obeyed. He trusted Jesus Christ and his call, and he acted on that faith without hesitation. His life was changed instantly and totally. Again, this was not his own doing but the work of God within him. May God grant us the grace yet today to believe and to obey, to rise and to follow.

Jesus was not content with one such disciple. Soon he had a house full of tax collectors like Levi, along with an assortment of other known and obvious sinners, “for there were many who followed him.” That many sinners followed him means that he called many sinners, for without his call they would not and could not have followed. Thank God that this “many” extends all the way to us. It also means that we are in this together. We do not get to choose whom God calls. We do not get to choose whom Christ gathers. Jesus calls many known and obvious sinners, even today, gathers them together, and forms them into his church. As a part of our faith and obedience, part of our response is our being gathered together into the church of Jesus Christ, a motley crew though it be. Ours is to welcome all who are called, all who come in faith and obedience, all who worship God and Christ.

And as we gather, it is not a time for long faces, sad songs, or worrying. Instead, it is a time for feasting, a time for rejoicing, a time for celebrating the wedding feast of the Lord. The Christian life is a life of great joy sung in our hymns, voiced in our prayers, poured out in our offerings, lived in our fellowship and our mission.

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*Thanks and glory be to God and to his Christ
forever and ever! Amen.*

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