

Sunday August 25, 2024 / September 1, 2024 / September 22, 2024

Lesson 3: Follow Me – The Calling of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32)

The third recorded instance in the Gospels where Jesus uttered the words “Follow Me” as a command can be found in Matthew 9:9-13 (Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32). This is the instance often referred to as the calling of the future apostle named Matthew.

This instance follows the previous instance where the focus was on the various types of followers that were drawn to Jesus in His early Galilean ministry (see Lesson 2). In this instance, however, the focus is on the various reactions or attitudes towards Jesus in the manner He ministered to those followers. In the previous instance, Jesus spoke to His followers. In this instance, Jesus speaks to the ones questioning His ministry methodologies.

Again, we begin by tracking the activities of Jesus leading into this instance.

Timeline – Tracking the Public Ministry of Jesus

Picking up from the end of lesson 2, Jesus and His disciples landed in the countryside of Gadara, where they encountered two men possessed by a legion of demons; one of whom appears to have been possessed by a more powerful demon among the legion, giving him supernatural strength (Mk 5:1-5). Continuing to follow Jesus from this location:

- [A] – Jesus cast the legion of demons from two demon-possessed men into a herd of pigs, which caused the pigs to go mad and rushed to their death. This happened in the countryside of Gadara (Matt 8:28-34; Mk 5:1-17; Lk 8:26-39)
- [B] – The crowd from Gadara pleaded with Jesus to leave (Matt 8:34), so Jesus and his disciples got into the boat and crossed over to his own town (Matt 9:1). Mark informed us that they crossed over to Capernaum (Mk 2:1).
- [C] – In the Capernaum area:
 - Jesus healed a paralyzed man and was questioned by the Scribes (Matt 9:1-8; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-26)
 - Jesus sits with tax collectors and other sinners, and was questioned by the Pharisees (Matt 9:9-13; Mk 2:13-17; Lk 5:27-32)
 - Jesus was questioned by the disciples of John the Baptist for not observing fasting protocols (Matt 9:14-17; Mk 2:18-22; Lk 5:33-39)

The calling of Matthew and the ministry principles surrounding this “Follow Me” instance all happened in and around Capernaum. Mark informed us that the healing of the paralyzed man incident occurred at somebody’s home (Mk 2:1), possibly the Capernaum home of Peter. Mark also informed us that the calling of Matthew took place near the lake (Mk 2:13), possibly the same area where Jesus called his first disciples (Matt 4:18-22) so that taxes can be collected for the daily catch.

The context for this third “Follow Me” instance leads to four biblical principles identified by the three reactions or three attitudes towards the way Jesus’ ministers to His followers; namely, the attitudes of the scribes, the Pharisees, and the disciples of John the Baptist.

Context – The healing of the paralyzed man

The Gospel of Matthew provided very little details for the background to this incident, giving readers the impression that Jesus came upon this paralyzed man lying on a mat who was brought to Him by his friends; after which He told the man that his sins are forgiven by their faith. Of itself, Jesus’ response may be hard to comprehend – what was the faith that was exercised (Matt 9:2)?

The Gospels of Mark and Luke provided more details to help better understand what Jesus saw, and why He responded the way He did. Luke provided context to the background of the crowd, citing that they had come from all over Galilee and Judea, from as far away as Jerusalem, and that they were there to listen to His teaching and be healed from sickness (Lk 5:17). Mark then provided context to the size of the crowd – so large that there was no room left, not even outside the door (Mk 2:2).

From these accounts, we learned that this was not just another encounter with someone needing to be healed. Because of the size of the crowd and the conditions of the gathering, friends of the paralyzed man

were unable to bring him to Jesus through normal means (Mk 2:4). This man's friends were so desperate to help him – and so certain that Jesus could heal him, they decided to carry him onto the roof over where Jesus was sitting and drop him down to Jesus. This was what Jesus saw, and it was this faith of his friends – not the man himself – that prompted Jesus to speak to the paralyzed man (Matt 9:2). Unlike the two previous faith testimonies documented by Matthew (Matt 8:1-13), the paralyzed man did not himself address Jesus and request to be healed. Thus, Jesus responded by speaking to his spiritual need: "Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven" (Matt 9:2). This statement is more of a comfort / encouragement than one of healing.

This response prompted the scribes in the room to criticize Jesus, proclaiming that Jesus is blaspheming (Matt 9:3). Blaspheming is an act where we insult the honor of God, or misuses the name of God. The Gospel of Mark provided more details concerning their claim – citing how only God alone has the authority to forgive sins (Mk 2:7). These scribes do not acknowledge Jesus as God or someone with authority to act on behalf of God in any way. They see Jesus primarily as a good teacher (cf Matt 8:19), a mere human who doesn't even have the authority to declare people as clean (cf Matt 8:4). What they are inferring through their criticism is that Jesus lacked the authority to make such declaration. In other words, Jesus is not qualified.

The problem with this mentality – and why Jesus was critical of their thoughts, calling it 'evil' (Matt 9:4) – is that these individuals were more concerned about what Jesus had the authority to do or not to do than about helping the man who needs help. This was evidenced by their reaction after Jesus told the paralyzed man to "get up and walk" (Matt 9:5). Matthew documents that they were awestruck, that they glorified God who had given such authority to men (Matt 9:8). The 'evil' nature demonstrated by these scribes is that they have a misplaced priority in the ministry context. It was more important to follow established authority structure than to help a man in need.

Jesus' rebuke to these scribes not only defended his identity as God (with the authority to declare someone to be sinless), He also provided insights into the nature of humanity and the focus of His ministry. In Matt 9:5-6, He showed the audience in the room that there is no difference between saying 'Your sins are forgiven' and 'Get up and walk.' In effect, what Jesus is saying is that our spiritual needs and our physical needs are joined together, and that His ministry priority is more on the spiritual than the physical. Jesus recognized that the man had a spiritual problem that impacted his physical recovery. The man himself did not seem eager to ask for help probably because his spiritual condition had caused him to give up hope. It was his friends who had the hope and faith for his healing.

A sick soul (spiritual) can often have a devastating impact on the body (physical), but not necessarily the other way around (Ex: it is far more likely for a person in depression – a sick soul – to think about suicide than it is for a person who broke his/her arm – a sick body – to think about suicide). What Jesus demonstrated with this act is that He isn't interested in just helping people with their physical needs. Every physical need has a spiritual component. The spiritual component heals our soul while the physical component heals our body. Jesus is more focused on the spiritual (soul) aspect. This leads to the first biblical principle that we can observe from this interaction:

Following Jesus – in doing ministry – puts the focus and emphasis on the spiritual needs before the physical needs of the individual.

Context – Jesus sits with tax collectors and sinners

Following the incident with the paralyzed man, Matthew records that Jesus approached him, and invited him to follow (Matt 9:9). A common misunderstanding about this incident is that this was an invitation to Matthew alone, rather than an invitation to various tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:10). Matthew was singled out likely because he was one of the many disciples who hang out with Jesus before his public ministry began (cf Mk 2:13-14 – he was known to Jesus).

Tax collectors in those days were viewed upon in the same degraded manner as sinners due to the nature of their work. They earn much of their living by collecting in excess of the minimum required tax dictated by the Roman government. It's effectively a form of commission in our modern day correlation except that, unlike commissions for goods purchased, taxes are not optional. Moreover, there weren't any checks-and-balance system in place, as the Roman government does not care much on how much in excess is collected as long

as they get their minimum. As a result, greedy tax collectors could effectively collect an unreasonable amount. However, given that tax collectors were low in spirit and able to relate more with sinners, it is likely that they themselves do not necessarily like what they do. It was out of necessity that they collect in excess of the minimum required to feed their own family.

Matthew – along with other Jews like him serving as tax collectors, were despised even more by the Jewish community because they are collecting taxes for the Roman government against their own people. These two conditions collectively contributed to their low in spirit nature.

After calling on Matthew to follow, Mark 2:15 tells us that they all went to Matthew’s house, and Jesus sat with them (tax collectors and sinners). Then, the Pharisees showed up (Matt 9:11) and effectively complained to Jesus’ disciples regarding the choice of audience that Jesus chose to associate with. Their attitude and their mentality were evidently a reflection of the norm at that time, which is that righteous people do not associate with sinners. They expected Jesus to sit with them – the righteous – as proper protocol.

Much like the scribes in the previous encounter with the paralyzed man, the Pharisees in this instance also have misplaced priorities, prioritizing their protocols and their societal norms over the goals of the ministry program – which was to help and reach those in need. In their practice, pursuing righteousness through spiritual disciplines is to achieve a status, effectively becoming part of a “country club” for those who achieved this status. What they failed to understand is that Jesus did not come to join their “country club.” He came to help those who sought after Him.

Hearing this, Jesus rebuked their attitude, saying that “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick (Matt 9:12). But the main lesson is found in verse 13: **“Now go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, rather than sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

Correlating this principle in our modern-day context, the purpose and goals for any Christian ministry is not to achieve a status, or to create a class structure between the righteous vs the sinners (or Christians vs non-Christians). Christian ministry is not about creating “a club” for the righteous to join. Christian ministry is about reaching those who needs Jesus.

- Matt 9:12 – it is not those who are healthy (spiritually healthy Christians) who needs a physician (that the ministry is targeting). But those who are sick (spiritually sick).
- Matt 9:13a – I desire compassion (ministry is identified by empathy), rather than sacrifice (not identified by spiritual disciplines or ministry protocols).
- Matt 9:13b – I did not come to call the righteous (ministry program’s target is not on Christians), but sinners (but non-Christians).

This is why Jesus responded to these Pharisees in this manner, saying in effect that His ministry’s focus is on those who needs Him (the sinners). Jesus teaches us here in this incident that a Christian ministry’s target audience is always on the spiritually sick or the spiritually dead. Again, “... go and learn what this means...” (Matt 9:13a)

This leads to another biblical principle that we can observe based on this interaction:

Following Jesus – in doing ministry – puts the focus and emphasis on those who are spiritually lost or spiritually sick before the needs of the spiritually healthy.

This does not mean that we don’t provide compassion and care to the Christians within the church who are healthy. Christians can also stumble and struggle through life’s challenges and become spiritually sick. The issue is not about those in the church (i.e.. the “country club”) vs those who are not; but about those who need Jesus in their current spiritual state vs those who are in a better state. Jesus did not come to appease the healthy and to congratulate them for their well-being, He came to help those who are sick. Christian ministry is not about being awarded for achieving spiritual maturity. Christian ministry is about reaching the lost.

Context – The Disciples of John the Baptist and fasting

Finally, we get to a group of people who were the disciples of John the Baptist. Even though John the Baptist has already pointed his disciples to follow Jesus (cf John 3:22-36), evidently not all listened. The Apostle Paul would encounter more of these disciples of John a few decades later during his third missionary journey (cf Acts 19:1-3). Given that John himself instructed his disciples to follow Jesus, the fact that these disciples opted not to do so indicates that they are more followers of religious practices than believers of Christ.

In this particular incident, these disciples of John challenged Jesus about not following the proper spiritual protocols set in place by the religious leaders at that time as part of many so-called “traditions of the elders” (cf Mark 7:3). Specifically, following this tradition, the Pharisees had adopted a rule to fast twice a week, and many Jews – including many of John’s disciples – evidently followed this rule religiously. Fasting in those Ancient Near East culture was typically done as a somber / solemn sign of repentance and mourning, characterized by sorrow and distress (cf. 2 Samuel 12:16 – David, when he fasted for being caught in sin of adultery and sought forgiveness). People do not fast unless there is something to fast for, as the practice was not intended to be done ritualistically, which is what the Pharisees have promoted.

Like the scribes and Pharisees in the previous two encounters, these disciples of John also had misplaced priorities, prioritizing religious rules for living over the principles behind those rules. In effect, they were legalist in our modern day correlation. Responding to these disciples, Jesus first addressed the practical nature of fasting at this time, then the ritualistic / legalistic nature as promoted by the Pharisees.

Regarding the practical nature, Jesus used a wedding feast illustration (Matt 9:15) to communicate the message that there is a time for every occasion. A wedding feast is characterized by joy and celebration. As such, nobody brings their sorrow and distress to a joyous celebratory event. What Jesus is saying is that, we mourn when there is something to mourn about, we laugh when there is something to laugh about, and we sing when there is something to sing about. There is a time for every occasion and now – with Jesus being among them – is not a time to mourn or be in distress. But a time will come when Jesus will no longer be among them, that’s when they can fast (Matt 9:15b). Note – the theology behind this wedding metaphor where Jesus is the bridegroom and His church is the bride will be expounded more in later NT writings.

Regarding the ritualistic / legalistic nature of fasting as a practice, Jesus used two illustrations – the garment and the wineskin – to highlight the fallacy of trying to hybrid the existing religious systems of living with the goals of His ministry. The ritualistic practice of fasting at that time is part of the “old garment” and “old wineskins” that is characterized by a system of rules and traditions. The nature of old garments and old wineskins is that they have already been stretched during its normal wear and tear usage, and are no longer flexible to adjust to the shrinking nature of a new cloth, or the expanding nature of new wine. What Jesus is saying is that the old religious practices have outlived its use. He did not come to “patch up” the old system – with its old original purposes and goals – to make it work with His agenda. He came to encourage a new system to achieve the original Kingdom goals (cf Matt 5:17), one that parts ways with the old practices.

In our modern day correlation, the old garment and old wineskins could be attributed to spiritual disciplines or ministry procedures that were developed at a time where it may have made sense and helpful, but have outlived its use. When it outlived its purpose or became a burden to ministry, a completely new system ought to be entertained with minimal regard to traditions. Ministry programs must evolve as needed to meet the ministry target / goals.

This leads to the final biblical principle that we can observed from this lesson:

Following Jesus – in doing ministry – puts the focus and emphasis on the ministry goals, not the religious rules.

Analysis and Application: Following Jesus and Doing Ministry

The three reactions to the manner by which Jesus conducted himself in ministry can equally be viewed upon as three resistances to doing effective ministry in our modern day context, where 'effective ministry' is defined as one that has shared goals and agendas with Christ as they relate to the Great Commission mandate. Jesus was new to the scene, and He is the one with the plan for all of His ministry goals and ministry mandates. However, His plans and actions were not in sync with the existing worldly norms and practices for religion at that time. Given this context,

- The scribes were effectively telling Jesus that He was not respecting proper authority as established by the religious structures.
- The Pharisees were effectively telling Jesus that He was not observing proper protocols as established by religious and societal norms.
- The disciples of John were effectively telling Jesus that He was not observing proper spiritual disciplines (practices) as established by the religious leaderships.

In our modern day ministry or church context, we often encounter these types of resistances to effective ministry. More importantly, if we're not careful, we could inadvertently be one of these resistances to effective ministry. At the core of these attitudes is a failure to recognize that our ministry priorities are misplaced in favor of alignment to the norms or alignment to preferences, losing focus on the goals of ministry. When this happens – even if our intentions are noble – we might find ourselves becoming these resistances.

With this understanding, the following application principles can be observed:

- **Effective Ministry puts the emphasis on the Spiritual** – Dwight L Moody was famously known for his social evangelistic approach where he would go to a poor sinner with the Bible in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other. The idea was to use the loaf of bread to draw them in for Bible lessons. In practice, however, he (allegedly) lamented that many would take the bread and leave without the Bible lessons. Thus, he modified his approach to push the Bible lessons before giving the bread. This story highlights the issue for Christian ministries that lacked the courage to break protocols, often choosing to support the physical needs while diminishing – or eliminating – the spiritual (i.e.. feed the homeless, but afraid to bring out the Bible lessons). Every physical need has a spiritual component that can be ministered to, and effective ministry finds a way to target that spiritual component as the priority, even if the physical need cannot be met. Jesus reminds us in this encounter with the scribes that when we address the spiritual, the physical will take care of itself.
- **Effective Ministry is defined by extending compassion and empathy** – When people join a ministry program because they are experiencing life challenges, a ministry's immediate response ought not be to put them on a prayer list – because that is procedure. The immediate response before all else is compassion and empathy. In other words, "read the room." Sometimes, people just need a hug or an ear, or just to be with someone. This is Jesus' point about compassion and sacrifice. The tax collectors and sinners in the room just needed Jesus (or a spiritual leader) to sit with them. Prayers and all other ministry activities can take place behind the scenes, but the visible aspect of a Christian ministry to those in need is compassion and empathy.
- **Effective Ministry evolves to maintain relevance** – Jesus' encounter with the disciples of John teaches us that ministry is not defined by following a set of rules for living. Whatever rules or procedures that were developed in the past may have made sense at some point in the past, but if they no longer make sense in the present, they need to be abolished. Moreover, as our ministry evolves in time, our ministry methodology will need to evolve. As an example, we don't lead a church of 1000 members using the same programs and procedures for 100, and vice versa. A new set of ministry protocols must replace the old ones to adapt to the changing reality. Don't try to hybrid old practices with new realities (new patch on old garment; new wine in old wineskins).

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read Matthew 9:1-17; Mark 2:1-22; Luke 5:17-39.

1. Cross reference the different accounts for each of the three topics discussed in this lesson from among the three gospels. What were the same / similar vs differences? How do the differences impact your understanding of what might have actually happened? Try to formulate your own understanding – your own presentation – for what might have happened (the Who-What-When-Where's for each encounter).
2. How do the differences between the Gospels help us understand the approach by Matthew, Peter, and Luke to the target audience for each of the gospels (See Lesson Series Introduction)?

Reflecting Upon Our World

Our world today has been spiritually influenced by supernatural forces that made evangelism very difficult. Even in the United States, advocates for the Constitutional “Separation of Church and State” would choose to interpret this First Amendment right to mean using the authority of government to prevent gospel sharing, as opposed to a no government involvement approach at all to religion. These are examples of resistance that can impact ministries in the local church.

1. In what way have you observed worldly attitudes towards religion in general (or Christianity specifically) influence ministry opportunities by the local church? How does your church respond to worldly positions or protocols? (ex: ministry only within your church? Stealth ministry approach? etc.).
2. When churches work with the local government in community social service opportunities (ex: World Changers / Habitat for Humanity, Homeless Shelters, University Student Ministries, etc.), were churches allowed to promote a spiritual component to the social services alongside the physical (i.e.. were churches allowed to have Bible lessons)? How has this changed over the past 50 years?
3. When your church promotes outreach events to reach the lost in the community (ex: sports ministry, VBS / AWANA, Senior Home ministries, missions, etc.), does your church target the Christians or non-Christians in the community (spiritually healthy or spiritually lost)? Does your program include both a spiritual component and the physical component? Does your program promote the spiritual over the physical? How might your church creatively make the spiritual the focus?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

The three reactions in this study can be viewed as obstacles or resistances to church ministries. Reflect on your own spiritual journey to see if you've ever intentionally or inadvertently played a role in each of these resistances to church ministries – even if your intentions were noble. Consider as an example that a new pastor or minister just joined your church. Document your reflection in testimonial form by considering these points:

1. Did you ever experience acting like “the scribes” in ministry where you sought to make sure the new pastor or minister observe and respect the authorities of various committees and traditions as they try to do and lead ministry programs (ex: why doesn't he check with {fill in the blank} before he acted)?
2. Did you ever experience acting like “the pharisees” in ministry where you question the ministry practices of the new pastor or minister as it relates to the target audience (ex: why doesn't he spend more time with church members)?
3. Did you ever experience acting like the “disciples of John” in ministry where you question or challenge any changes to existing ministry approach for doing ministry?

These experiences that you may (or may not) have are not meant to be viewed upon negatively. In certain circumstances, they can be positive experiences. These are part of our spiritual walk that allows us to reflect and ponder over how we might handle things differently as we grow. Be prepared to share your testimony as the Holy Spirit guides you in your walk.



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