

Matthew 9:9-13 (1984 NIV)
Following Jesus, Drawing Men

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Introduction

Verse 9: "As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth."

There were two classes of religious people in Jerusalem during Jesus' time. There were the orthodox and they followed the Law and all its legalistic instructions. And there were the unorthodox and they did not observe the Law and all its legalistic instructions.

The orthodox would not go on a journey with the other camp, not do any business with them, not give anything to them, not receive anything from them, not entertain them as guests, or to be guests in their homes. These orthodox ones were the Pharisees in Jesus' time.

A Pharisee would be aghast to know that Jesus (supposedly an esteemed teacher) would call Matthew as His disciple. Why? It is because Matthew was a tax collector. Tax collectors had a reputation for being crooked agents of the pagan Roman government. But Jesus would call Matthew to follow Him.

But what did following Jesus mean to Matthew?

I. First, following Jesus to Matthew meant that he had to turn away from his life of greed and dishonesty as a tax collector and walk the way of Jesus.

It meant he had to reset his priorities and pursuits and realign these with Jesus' bigger purpose for him.

What need to be reset and realigned in order to follow Jesus may not be the same for everyone. But the need to obey Jesus' bigger purpose remains. The

worse failure occurs when we succeed in an area, but that success keeps us from pursuing Jesus' bigger purpose for our lives.

The Sunday Times on 21 Nov 2010 featured a report that paid tribute to Dr Tan Lai Yong. It was titled "A Rare Singaporean".

When Dr Tan was studying medicine on a government bursary at the National University of Singapore, he knew he would be a Christian missionary doctor and serve the poor in a remote, impoverished part of the world. That was how, after having served his eight-year bond in government hospitals, he ended up in Yunnan's rural south, tending to the sick and training local farmers so that they could become "barefoot doctors".

He was accompanied by his brave wife, who gave up her job as an accountancy lecturer at the Nanyang Technological University, and their 16-month-old daughter. They would have a son three years into his stint in Yunnan.

By a typically Singaporean measure, Dr Tan and his wife had paid a huge opportunity cost to have spent those years in Yunnan. They were in the prime of their lives, and if they had pursued their respective careers here, they would be living a very comfortable life. Also, Dr Tan did not come from a wealthy family. The youngest of seven children, he grew up in a two-room Housing Board flat. His father was an unlicensed taxi driver.

While in Yunnan, the family led a simple life, with funds provided largely by their church in Singapore.

The people in Yunnan were much blessed by his ministry among them. Over the years, he grew to be treated like a VIP wherever he went and had to dine often with the local officials. He said, "This is dangerous for my soul."

After 14 years, Dr Tan felt it was time to come back to Singapore. He was already 49 when he returned and stepped on home soil again with his family.

Certainly, few Singaporeans can be like Dr Tan. But in their headlong rush to achieve material success, Singaporeans could do well to pause and reflect on his inspiring story. He has led a richer life than most precisely because he has chosen not to chase after material wealth.

Dr Tan's riches are of the soul because he has aligned himself with the Lord's bigger purpose for his life.

II. Second, following Jesus to Matthew meant he had to draw others to the Jesus' way as well because he himself had tasted the grace and goodness of Jesus.

That's why we see in v. 10 that Matthew's old "buddies"—tax collectors and sinners—were in his house. Notice that the word "sinners" in vv. 10 and 11 is in quotation marks in the NIV. This signifies that these guests of Matthew were not necessarily wicked in God's sight, but only viewed as "sinners" according to the Pharisees' judgment of them.

The other disciples of Jesus were there too. Not only that, Jesus was there too.

Some Pharisees passed by and saw this unholy gathering in Matthew's house. They questioned, "Why does Jesus eat with these sinful people when light and darkness do not mix?" To them, Jesus should have known better.

Doesn't Jesus know how it looks to be seen with people like that? Hasn't anyone tell Him that being around these people will drag you down into worldliness?

But Jesus isn't afraid to be seen with sinners. In fact, he was drawn to them in our text today. This dinner at Matthew's house was probably Jesus' idea!

Jesus said to Matthew, "Hey Matt, I want to meet your friends. Let's have dinner together at your house tonight!" In the culture of Hebrew hospitality, the best expression of accepting another person is to invite him to eat with you.

This isn't Jesus stepping over a line drawn in the sand. This isn't Jesus proving what great courage we can have in the Spirit. This isn't Jesus showing us that we can tolerate the presence of evil and survive.

Jesus was not crossing the line. He erased it! He erased it and then said to all those folks on the other side, "Now, what's keeping you from coming over here and joining me?"

So, He responded to the question of the Pharisees, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus quoted from Hosea 6:6 where God told His people, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Hosea 6:6 does not reject sacrifice or ritual, but elevates right relationship with God and right treatment of the poor, the oppressed and the outcasts above sacrifice and ritual.

In Hosea's time, the people came to God to offer their sacrifices to atone for their sins. Then they went away and back to their way of sinning. The next time around, they did the same thing—offered their sacrifices to atone for their sins and then back to their old sinning way. They sinned against God and did evil things to others in a selfish, arrogant and cruel manner.

Jesus was telling the Pharisees that in so despising the people at Matthew's party, they were in fact sinning against God and doing evil to others. All their religious piety would amount to nothing before God. They would do well to try mercy.

Mercy is compassion in action. One sincere act of compassion will kill the root of a sin. One sincere act of compassion will destroy the seed of dissension.

In essence, Jesus was saying to the Pharisees in vv. 12 & 13: "You are not spiritually healthy but spiritually sick and you need a spiritual doctor because you have no mercy. You are not righteous but sinning and you need me."

So we are charged this morning with a two-fold challenge:

- To care enough about others who are without saving grace.
- To share Jesus with them by way of a godly, loving, Spirit-filled life.

Sin is a sickness that's destroying our society:

- Leading us to act selfishly and to be self serving.
- Making choices that benefit us, even if it costs others severely.

As Christians, we are called to combat the effects of sin with the gospel of grace.

Let's consider some things we can do to help us be like Matthew in his Christlikeness—being a friend of tax collectors and sinners (i.e. people who need God's saving grace in their lives).

III Think B.L.T.

B - Build relationships with non-Christians.

This is where all evangelism begins. It doesn't start with someone receiving Christ. That's the end. And it doesn't start with inviting someone to church. That's the middle. Evangelism begins simply by making friends with non-Christians. Specifically, this means starting with the people you already know—family members, friends, neighbours, people you meet, co-workers at the office.

Some suggestions to build bridges with non-Christians are:

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- Ask your neighbour for advice or help on something.
- Invite your neighbour or co-worker over for a meal. Hospitality breaks down barriers and builds new friendships.
- Greet people who walk by. Or simply make it a point to go over and chat with them.
- Be sensitive to their needs, especially in times like sickness, death, marital or parenting problems.
- Take an interest in their interests (e.g. music, movies, sports, nature, hobbies, leisure, food, travel). If they like to fish, talk about fishing. If they like to cook, talk about cooking.

Notice how practical these are. Everything is do-able. Also, there is nothing religious or churchy about them.

L - Look for opportunities to talk to people about Jesus.

There are a lot of ways this might happen. Your friend might ask you a leading question or you might have a chance to share the Gospel or use a tract.

You start by building relationships. And then—in the context of a friendship—you look for natural opportunities to share your faith.

You may want to begin each day by praying that God will send you at least one person each day and to whom you can say a good word for the Lord. After you pray that prayer, just start looking for opportunities to say a good word for the Lord. Just look for openings to slip the Lord into your conversations with people in a natural manner.

Some spiritual conversation starters are:

- “I am curious to know if you have ever been interested in religious things.”
- “What is your religious background?”
- “Have you ever wondered if there’s life in the hereafter?”
- “What is Jesus Christ to you?”

T - Take people to non-threatening events where they can hear the gospel.

This is where the whole church comes in. The church can plan and provide a wide variety of events during the year that you can use as platforms for outreach. The church plans and provides opportunities for you to invite seekers you know. Some are directly evangelistic; others are sowing the seeds; yet others are meant to help you build relationships.

Notice I haven’t said a word about the Sunday service. Do they not count for evangelism? Sure they do. They play a big part simply because they provide a context in which the un-churched can come in and begin to figure out who we are and what we are all about. But the Sunday service is often not the best

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place to begin. Sometimes it's just too overwhelming or too threatening at first. But as the Holy Spirit begins to draw your friends to Christ, Sunday service will begin to seem more inviting to them.

Conclusion

The year 2003 was a very anxious time for my family. It was the year when SARS hit Singapore. Tan Tock Seng Hospital was designated as the centre for treatment of SARS patients. My wife was working there at the Travellers' Clinic. At the height of the battle with SARS, she was told that should the situation deteriorate, she would be called to the frontline. It was a time when the commitment of every health care professional to save human lives was put to the test.

One of them was Dr Alex Chao, a consultant vascular surgeon at the Singapore General Hospital. While attending to a SARS patient, he fell sick with fever one day. He isolated himself away from his family to make sure that they didn't get sick as well. He moved to his god-brother's home, remained isolated with his meals sent to his room. He wore mask whenever he left the house.

On 15 April 2003, he was admitted to the hospital when his condition didn't improve. He wanted to see his two little girls, and was given special permission to do so. He drove by his house, stayed in his car, and waved to them. That was the last time these little girls saw their father.

He was treated for dengue fever. He had no problems with his lungs. But along the way, he developed rashes, back pains, and a drop in his platelet count—all consistent with dengue fever.

A week later, Dr Alex Chao died of SARS at the age of 39.

You might say Dr Chao was true to his calling to save human lives as a doctor. Before he was ill, he fought to save the lives of people from SARS. When he was ill, he fought to shield the lives of his own family from SARS. As Paul would have said it, he had fought the good fight.

(<http://www.angelfire.com/pro/chinese-paradise/chao>)

The Lord had called Matthew (and his fellow disciples) to follow Him. He has called you and me to follow Him as well. What does it mean for you and me to follow Jesus today?

- Like Matthew, it means for us to grow to be Christlike people and follow the Lord's way.
- Like Matthew, it means for us to go to Christless people and point them to the Lord's way.

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How can we be better witnesses for Christ? Four suggestions as I close:

- One, ask God to give us a burden for a few people who need to be saved, and begin praying for them.
- Two, live a consistent Christian life, letting others see the hope within us.
- Three, be ready when asked to give a reason for our hope in Jesus Christ, sharing our testimonies and faith stories.
- Four, seize opportunities to invite seekers to special events and trusting the Lord to lead some to come, and even some to be saved.

Pray that the Lord will help us follow Him and draw others to Him as well.

Amen!