

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Follow Me**

Mark 2:13-17

Jesus doesn't believe that piety should be confined to the human heart or a house of worship. Instead, he takes the good news of God's kingdom to the streets. And one day, he shows up at Levi's place of business. Note that Mark doesn't give us any details about what was in Levi's heart. He doesn't tell us anything about Levi's appearance. He doesn't mention how much money Levi made. Mark simply gives us a bare-bones description of the encounter between these two men. There's no extended dialogue. In fact, the only quote is Jesus' call, "Follow me" (v. 14).

But what a call it is. "Follow me." In that call is divine grace. In that call is a door opening to the future. In that call is a forgiving God who crosses whatever boundaries need to be crossed, and removes whatever barriers need to be removed, between himself and sinners. To a man sitting at his desk, doing the government's business, the call of an even higher authority comes. "Follow me." "And Levi got up and followed him" (v. 14).

The call is so abrupt, and the response so prompt. Jesus summons Levi to take a decisive step onto a different path, and Levi does. There's no trial period. There's no app that Levi can download to explore the principles of God's reign free for 30 days, and then decide whether it's a good fit for him. Jesus doesn't go around handing out flyers announcing that's he's holding an inquirers gathering at the Capernaum Starbucks for those who may be curious about spiritual matters, particularly the kingdom of heaven. No, Levi is just going about his business. Jesus shows up and issues the summons. And boom, Levi starts associating himself with Jesus, with his ministry, and with the community being formed by that ministry.

Todd Skinner was one of the world's most respected rock climbers. His greatest challenge was tackling Trango Tower, the world's highest freestanding spire, with a near-vertical drop. After years of preparation that included organizing a climbing team, planning logistics, and making a rugged cross-country trek to the site, Skinner and his group finally came face to face with Trango Tower. To the team members, some of the best bigwall climbers in the world, the challenge seemed too great. But Skinner realized that there was only one way forward. In his words, they had to "get on the wall" even if they weren't completely prepared. Skinner said,

The final danger in the preparation process of an expedition is the tendency to postpone leaving until every question has been answered, forgetting that the mountain is the only place the answers can definitively be found. . . . No matter how well prepared you are, how honed your climbing skills, how vast your expertise, you cannot climb the mountain if you don't get to it.<sup>1</sup>

After 60 days on the wall, Skinner and his teammates finally reached the summit. Though they had years of preparation and training, much of what they learned about climbing the tower was only learned after they "got on the wall."

No doubt, most of what Levi learned about discipleship was learned after he “got on the wall.” He didn’t follow Jesus because he was the most qualified or the best prepared, or because everything was spelled out in crystal clear terms up front. No, Levi went with Jesus because the call of Jesus claimed him and enabled him to rise up and go to it.

And what does this “it” look like? It looks like what we see in the remaining verses of today’s text. Levi hosts a dinner party, and Jesus is one of the guests. Now at first glance, discipleship and party may not seem to go together. But table fellowship, the sharing of meals, played an important role in the religious and social life of people in that day and time. And Jesus made table fellowship one of the primary features of his ministry. That’s where he ran into trouble with some of the religious leaders. The problem wasn’t that Jesus ate, but with whom he ate. As today’s story indicates, he regularly hung out with a motley crew that included tax collectors, prostitutes, and other disreputable folks in the community. Mark says that many tax collectors and “sinners” were there at Levi’s dinner party, eating with Jesus and his disciples.

The label “sinners” was applied to folks who were perceived as deliberately rejecting or flaunting God’s law. The “righteous,” on the other hand, were those who were sincerely trying to follow the way of life set forth in God’s law. Some of them, in particular the Pharisees, were peering in the doorway and saw Jesus at Levi’s table. So naturally they wanted to know why Jesus and his disciples weren’t being more careful about the people with whom they ate. Remember that the Pharisees functioned in ways similar to what preachers and teachers do today. It was their job to pursue holiness and to promote it among God’s people. But striving to be holy can easily get twisted into being holier-than-thou. So Jesus fires back at the Pharisees, saying, as one person puts it, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually-fit.”<sup>2</sup>

I like to say that Eugene Peterson describes the church when he writes:

The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community.<sup>3</sup>

Part of my responsibility is to stay attentive to the call of Christ, and to help you be attentive to his call. “Follow me.” There’s something about that call that slices through all our doctrines, all our denominational distinctives, all our organizational structure, all our projects, and all our programs in the church. Our life as a congregation doesn’t originate in our ideals or efforts. Our life as a community of disciples goes back to a God who mercifully shows up in this world as Jesus, and starts going around summoning us by name, enlisting us in the redemptive work of his kingdom. What a marvel that a Savior like him wants to be with sinners like us! And what a marvel that as you, like Levi, get up and follow him, and associate yourself with him, and stay on the path with him, you become more like him. You don’t just wear the label of a follower; You demonstrate the life of a follower.

That’s what a disciple, a follower, does. A disciple attaches himself or herself to a particular teacher or leader, participating in what that person is doing and in how they’re doing it. Dallas Willard has likened being a disciple to being an apprentice. He says, “A disciple or apprentice, then, is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is.”<sup>4</sup>

I'm guessing that when people arrived at Levi's house for the dinner party, one of the first things they probably did was ask him for his Wi-Fi password. Soon they were posting messages and selfies on their social media sites, letting friends know that they were hanging out with Jesus. Some of them even pressed Jesus to set up his own Facebook page. After all, what better way to grow his following and generate enthusiasm for his movement. But Jesus was rightly skeptical. Genuine discipleship can't be reduced to pointing and clicking a button that says "Follow." There are billions of "followers" in cyberspace, tracking what's going on with their favorite celebrity, political figure, athlete, organization, or friend. But the kind of attachment, the kind of discipleship, that Jesus is looking for is much deeper and more demanding.

A few years ago, *USA Today* reported on unscrupulous businesses known as "click farms," particularly in Indonesia. In these click farms, low-paid workers sit behind computers creating false Twitter accounts and "following" legitimate ones. One of the businessmen involved said that he could offer 1,000 Twitter followers for \$10 and 1 million followers for \$600. Having more followers boosts a business's public profile. But as one media consultant warned, "The illusion of a massive following is just that—[an illusion]."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is looking for real followers, not the illusion of a massive following. So he shows up in our lives, and summons us, one by one, name by name, to rise up from where we are and what we're doing, and to join him and other followers in a community of people that embodies the life of God's reign. In this community there is forgiveness and freedom. The forgiveness of a holy God who crosses boundaries to be with sinners, and the freedom that comes from knowing that this God claims us and cuts us in on what he's doing to reconcile a lost world and make it new.

Preacher Thomas Long compares the call of Christ to what parents do when they scold their children for unacceptable behavior, saying, "That was uncalled for!" According to Long,

That is a strange phrase, when you think of it, "uncalled for," but it points, I believe, to the source of our restless searching and of our most gripping fear. There is a dread in our hearts deeper than the fear of boredom, greater than the anxiety that we will not forge a satisfying "self," and that is the fear that no one will ever turn to us and say, "Come, I want *you*. I need *you*." This is the fear that who we are, and what we say, and what we do does not matter to anyone else.<sup>6</sup>

But the good news is that who we are and what we do does matter. You aren't own your own. You don't have to make yourself. You don't have to go and find yourself. You've already been found. You've been found by the Son of God. You're not unclaimed. You're not uncalled. Just ask Levi, and Simon, and Andrew, and James, and John, and others who heard and answered the summons to become disciples of the Lord. Just ask the other men and women with whom he ate and drank, who found a place and a purpose in the kingdom Jesus preached and practiced. Just ask other disciples who are sitting here around you in the pews today, who are still walking on a path that began when they heard the Savior say, "Follow me."

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from David Sturt, *Great Work* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2014) 160-63.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 78.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: the Shape of Pastoral Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 1.

<sup>4</sup> This quotation comes from an article adapted from Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy*, reprinted at [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel James Devine, "Fake Followers," *WORLD* magazine (June 14, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Hot Tubs and Fishing Trips." In *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima: CSS, 1987) 80-81.