

INTRODUCTION

Happy Mother's Day to all you moms out there. There are all kinds of stereotypes of different moms. Most of us are familiar with the overbearing Jewish mother. Joel Rosenberg told me a joke about a Jewish son who called his mom. He asked, "How are you doing?" She said, "I'm not doing well." He said, "What's wrong?" She said, "I haven't eaten in 23 days." He said, "Well, have you seen a doctor about your problem?" She said, "I don't need to see a doctor, I know why I haven't eaten in 23 days." He said, "Why haven't you eaten in 23 days?" She said, "Because I didn't want to have food in mouth just in case my son decided to call me." If you can, be sure to call your mother today—she may be waiting on your call.

In this message we're going to be talking about hearing and answering God's call. Most of us live with cell phones and we know what it is to call and hear someone's voice mail message. The standard one is, "I can't answer my phone right now. Leave a message at the beep and I'll get back with you as soon as possible."

However, some people have gotten pretty creative with their voice mail messages. Here are actual messages:

- (1) Hi! John's voice mail is broken. This is his refrigerator. Please speak very slowly, and I'll stick your message to myself with one of those little magnets.
- (2) Hello, this is a telepathic thought-recording device. After the beep, think about your name, your reason for calling, and a number where I can reach you, and I'll think about returning your call.
- (3) I can't answer my phone now because I have amnesia and I feel awkward talking to people I don't remember. Please help me out by leaving my name and telling me something about myself. Thanks.
- (4) You know what I hate about voicemail messages? They go on and on, wasting your time. I mean, all they really need to say is, "We aren't in, leave a message." That's why I've decided to keep mine simple and short. I pledge to you, my caller, that you will never have to suffer through another long answering machine message when you call me.
- (5) No one answers phone calls anymore; send me a text.

As we follow the footsteps of Jesus, He is launching His ministry by building a team of disciples.

Mark 2:13-17. "Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?' On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

I watched part of the NFL draft process this week, and I realized again how football has become our national civic religion. People go crazy about their teams. Johnny Manziel was waiting and waiting. The Cowboys passed on him because they're banking on Tony Romo as the QB of the future. Good luck with that one. Finally the Cleveland Browns chose Johnny Football as the 22nd overall pick.

When Jesus started His ministry He selected twelve team members as His first round of draft picks. Some observers would say He didn't make such good choices. Let's learn three lessons from these early days in His earthly ministry.

1. THE LEVI LESSON: Jesus calls people who seem unqualified

Levi, who was later known as Matthew, was a despised tax collector. He worked for the IRS—not the Israeli Revenue Service, because none of the money went to Israel. He worked for the Infernal Roman Service. He was a servant of the Roman Empire. The Romans were the occupiers of Israel. A tax collector had to deliver a certain amount of revenue to the Romans, and his salary was anything he received above and beyond that amount. He could charge any exorbitant amount he pleased and there were Roman soldiers standing at his tax table to enforce his authority.

To understand how much the Jews hated these tax collectors, compare it to what happened during World War II. The Germans occupied France and some of the French citizens sympathized and worked for the Germans. The French people hated these traitors. After the Allies liberated France, German sympathizers were punished. The women had their hair buzz cut, and the men were ostracized. That's how much the Jews hated tax collectors like Levi. They spat on the ground when they saw them.

One day Jesus approached the tax booth and I can imagine the onlookers thought, "Good! Jesus is going to give that dirty tax collector a piece of his mind!" But to their surprise, Jesus walked up and said only two words, "Follow me."

I love religious art, and my favorite picture of the scene is done by the German artist Hendrick ter Brugghen. There's a dark room with a table littered with coins. There's a couple of young IRS interns. And there's even an old crusty miser who might be Levi's Roman boss. The thing I like about the picture is Levi's look of surprise. He's pointing to himself as if to say, "Who me? Are you sure you've got the right guy?"

The Bible says Levi got up and followed Jesus. The tense of the verb indicates that Matthew did it instantly. He didn't say, "Let me think about it. Let me tie up some loose ends." He left everything and followed Jesus. Well, we know he didn't leave everything. He took something with him. He took his pen. Tax collectors had to be able to read and write. Matthew took His pen and wrote perhaps the most detailed of the four gospel accounts.

Jesus is still calling Levis to follow Him. He's not only calling Levi's, He's calling Wranglers as well. He's calling you, too.

When you think about the makeup of the twelve disciples, you'll discover Jesus had an eclectic group. He had some fishermen and farmers. He also had a disciple called Simon the Zealot—a more literal translation would be Simon the terrorist. He was part of a group of insurgents called Zealots who carried out random acts of violence against the Romans. So he had Levi, a Roman agent and Simon the Zealot on the same team. That would be like having Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern sharing the same radio microphone. In addition, Jesus chose Judas, a wolf in sheep's clothing. He had a lot of variety on His team.

On paper, Levi, Simon, or Judas wouldn't have seemed to be very qualified. But that's the wonderful thing about Jesus. He doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called. Jesus is calling you to follow Him today. Your immediate reaction may be, "Who me?" That's the perfect response.

Let's take a little poll here. How many of you were ever on a dean's list, the National Honor Society or graduated with honors? Raise your hand and keep it up. Great! How many of you ever were named all-city, or all-county; all-district; or all-state in any sport? Raise your hand and keep it up. How many of you were ever named to any kind of who's-who list? Raise your hand and keep it up. Anyone voted most likely to succeed? Raise your hand. How many of you ever received any kind of military medal or civic achievement award? Raise your hand. Good. You guys are pretty special. I've got good news for you. God can still use you, but He's going to have to work a lot harder with you. If you didn't raise your hand for any of that, you're a good candidate for God's first draft pick.

The Bible explains it this way, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Notice it doesn't say not ANY of you were wise, or influential, or noble by human standards. It says not MANY of you. I thank God for every All-American, Hall of Famer, and Phi Beta Kappa who loves Jesus. I thank God for Tim Tebow, Bono, and Bubba Watson who aren't afraid to talk about their faith publically. God can use those super-achievers, but He just has to work a little harder. The Bible says God chooses the lowly and the despised things so that no one may boast before Him.

Years ago I had the honor of being the main speaker at the national FCA camp in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Coach Tom Landry was there. Also, a great NFL pass rusher named Reggie White was there. He was a pro-bowler for 13 seasons, and he still holds the record for the second most career sacks. He's a member of the NFL Hall of Fame. He died of a heart attack at age 43. On the last night, I gave the invitation, and hundreds of young athletes responded to and came forward. I was counseling with one young man. He was a big high school football player. I asked him on which night God had spoken to his heart. He said it was the night that Reggie White gave his testimony. I asked him what Reggie had said that really touched him. He said, "Oh, it wasn't Reggie White. It was the guy who spoke before him. I don't remember his name.

But he was in a wheelchair. He was a quadriplegic who received a spinal injury playing football. When he talked about how much God had blessed him, I figured that if he could feel that way, then I wanted to know that kind of God."

I could hardly hold back my tears. It wasn't the big All-Pro NFL player who had touched his heart. It was the paralyzed guy. But that's the way God works. He delights to use the ordinary and unqualified to express His glory. God is calling you. You may think you're unqualified. Great! You're just the kind of person God is looking for!

A woodpecker was pecking away at a tree in the forest. Suddenly a lightning bolt flashed down and split the tree in two. The stunned woodpecker flew over to some of his buddies, and said, "There it is. Look what I did!" That's like us. We like to take the credit, when God deserves all the credit.

2. THE PARTY PRINCIPLE: Jesus celebrates with people who are outcasts

The first thing Levi did was throw a party and invite Jesus. It is an occasion for celebration when someone follows Jesus. Some people think the Christian life is a somber, solemn, straight-laced experience that is to be endured. Jesus taught that the Christian life is a happy, joyous, abundant experience that is to be enjoyed! In other words, the Christian life is like a FEAST not a FUNERAL. Jesus said, "There is rejoicing in the presence of angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10)

Levi invited his fellow tax collectors and other "sinners" to his party. Matthew hosted a supper for sinners. He wanted to bring his friends into his home so they could meet Jesus. Do you have a burden to introduce your friends to Jesus? You say, "I've tried to bring my friends to church, but they won't come, what can I do?" Why don't you try using your home as a safe place where they can join you for a meal and then you can tell them more about Jesus. I don't recommend you call it a "supper for sinners." You could call it a "Matthew Meal." You don't have to preach to them. You don't have to stand in front of your fireplace and say, "In just a moment I'm going to give the invitation, let's sing 'Just as I Am' and you come!"

You don't have to force the gospel down their throat—try offering some good food instead. It's a lot easier to swallow. Pray before the meal—invite the Lord to be present. In the course of the conversation talk about your love for the church and for the Lord. Be real, be tactful. Have fun—let them know that you can be a Christian and still have fun.

When you read the Gospels carefully, you discover Jesus felt more at home sitting at a table with a bunch of misfits than He did at a table with a bunch of religious snobs. The Pharisees criticized John the Baptist because he was like an ascetic. Then they criticized Jesus because He was just the opposite. He loved to hang out with the misfits and party with them.

Jesus said, "For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" (Luke 7:33-34)

I've made a statement before that has raised a few eyebrows and generated a few emails. But I'm convinced that if Jesus appeared for one day in East Texas He wouldn't show up at Green Acres or Marvin Methodist, or First Presbyterian. I believe we'd find Him down at those joints on the Kilgore Highway near the Country Tavern. Why? Because we already know Him and love Him and He is the kind of Shepherd who leaves the 99 safe sheep and goes after that one lamb that is lost and in danger.

At least one other person agrees with me. In her book *Gospel Medicine*, Barbara Taylor writes: "If Jesus were putting together a 'Sinners' Table' today at the local Denny's it might include a child molester, a garbage collector, a young man with AIDS, a migrant farm worker, a teenage crack addict, a motorcycle gang member and an unmarried woman on welfare with five children by three different fathers. Did I miss anyone? As you picture this, don't forget to put Jesus at the head of the table, asking the young mother to hand him a roll, please." (*Gospel Medicine*, p. 62)

Let's take her quote a little farther. Imagine you're sitting at a neighboring table with a group of clean, well-dressed Christians. You have all joined hands and prayed over your meal and quietly discussed the things of God. However, the noise from that other table makes conversation difficult. Your other friends leave and you notice there's an empty seat at the table of loud sinners. The guy with the beard at the head of the table turns His piercing eyes upon you, pushes out the chair, and says, "Would you like to join us?" What do you do?

"Oh, Pastor, if I knew Jesus was there, of course I'd sit down!" Just remember Jesus has told us, "In as much as you have done it unto the least these, you have done it unto me." Folks, those are the very kind of people Jesus loved. He spent time with them—He ate and drank and talked with them. If we're going to be the Church of the Lord Jesus, we must be willing to be more like Jesus than those religious snobs.

3. THE DOCTOR'S DIAGNOSIS: Jesus challenges people who are self-righteous

Let's crash Matthew's party for a second. There's laughter, music, the smell of great food, and a lot of conversation going on. Jesus is the center of attention and He's telling stories and these publicans and prostitutes are laughing. Meanwhile, outside the door, there's a posse of religious snobs. They are the self-appointed righteousness police who have been following Jesus around and looking for opportunities to criticize Him. These are the same guys who were in the crowded house where the paralytic was lowered who said, "This is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins except God?" Now, they're looking in at this party and they complain to Jesus' disciples that there is no way this man can be the Messiah, because He's eating with tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus indicated that He came to earth for the same reason a doctor spends his time in a hospital. Jesus came to help sinners. There is a disease worse than cancer and more debilitating than MS. It's a spiritual sickness called sin and if we don't receive a cure for this, we don't just die, we die eternally. But the good news is Dr. Jesus has the cure for our sin sickness.

Jesus was full of love and grace in most of the things He said. But there was one particular group that became the target of His barbed sarcasm. These were super hyper-religious Pharisees. They were more concerned with outward goodness than inner righteousness.

Jesus made jokes about them. We don't get the jokes because we don't have a first-century Jewish sense of humor. Humor was generated by hyperbole and sensational caricatures. Here's Jesus' basic stand-up comedy routine: Jesus said, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." (Matthew 23:24-28)

In his classic book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning reminds us: "Jesus comes not for the super-spiritual, but for the wobbly and the weak-kneed who know they don't have it all together, and who are not too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace...Something is radically wrong when the local church rejects a person who is accepted by Jesus...Any church that will not accept that it consists of sinful men and women, and exists for them, implicitly rejects the gospel of grace." (*The Ragamuffin Gospel*, p.27)

Becoming a Christian can be summarized into three words: Admit, submit, and commit. Jesus is a doctor for those of us who are suffering from the fatal sickness of sin. But before you'll ever go to the doctor, you've got to admit that you have a problem. You must admit you are sinner. Then you have to submit to the doctor's care. You must submit your wounded heart to the Healer. Then you've got commit yourself to the doctor's plan. You need to take the medicine every day; or follow the treatment regimen every day. You've got to be committed to the cure. In the same way, you've got to commit to follow Jesus every day.

CONCLUSION

The great British pastor, G. Campbell Morgan, tells a story about a prostitute from the Red Light district of London. She picked up a tract about Jesus and was touched. She wanted to know more, so she showed up at an Anglican church the next Sunday with her two children, the identity of whose fathers she did not know.

She knew she was supposed to dress up, but her silken finery wasn't like what the other women were wearing. When she sat down, it was as if she had the plague and people scampered away. She came the next Sunday and people began to whisper loudly about her reputation. On the third Sunday the pastor met her at the door and said, "Our members have decided that you should not come here anymore. You're upsetting them." With tears in her eyes she asked the pastor this question, "Where can I go where they accept sinners like me?" He didn't have an answer for her. We know about her story because she found the Salvation Army. That's where they accepted her and she accepted Christ and became a great servant of Christ.

There's a great old song that says, "Sinners Jesus will receive; Sound this word of grace to all; Who the heavenly pathway leave, All who linger, all who fall. Sing it over and over again; Christ receiveth sinful men; Make the message clear and plain; Christ receiveth sinful men." And because Jesus receives sinners, we should receive them too!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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