

INTRODUCTION

Of course it is impossible for us to fully figure out everything there is to know about God. He is so awesome and complex that He is beyond our understanding. However, Jesus told us we have to become as little children to understand God. Somebody gave me a book by Bill Adler entitled *Children's Letters to God*. I really got a chuckle and a blessing out of some of the simple approaches some children take when they are writing God a letter. Some of my favorites were: (1) Dear God, is it true that my father won't get to heaven if he uses his bowling words in the house? (2) Dear God, in Sunday School they told us what you do. Who does it for you when you are on vacation? (3) Dear God, hugging is a good thing, did you think it up? (4) Dear God, there were no clouds in the sky on Saturday, I think I saw your feet. Did I really? (5) Dear God, I think about you sometimes, even when I'm not praying.

I love that simple approach. Knowing God is not all that complicated. We are going to see in the passage of scripture that Jesus is going to give us the simple yet profound reason why He came to visit planet earth. Let's look in Luke 5: 27-32: After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belong to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

From this passage, we can learn lessons first from Levi (or Matthew), the Scribes and Pharisees, and finally, from Jesus.

I. LESSONS FROM A TAX COLLECTOR (27-29)

Levi was a tax collector in Capernaum. You might say he worked for the IRS (In Rome's Service). The word literally means he collected the tribute or the toll as people passed into the Galilee region. He would have had a nice tax booth set up on the major highway. Herod Antipas, the procurator of Galilee, demanded a certain amount of tribute from which he would send a portion to Rome. The amount Levi and the other tax collectors charged was at their own discretion. Tax collectors often charged twice the required amount and pocket the difference. Matthew probably had access to Roman soldiers who enforced the payment of this tribute (for a fee). Levi had it made with this lucrative civil service job. His favorite song was probably "Deep in the Heart of Taxes!"

Tax collectors were hated and despised by the ordinary Jewish people, and particularly by the religious leaders. They were considered traitors and turncoats because they worked for the hated Romans. Tax collectors were considered on the same level as swine and were barred from attending synagogue. They were considered the worst of the worst sinners.

Matthew had certainly heard of Jesus who had been preaching and healing in that area for several months. One day as Jesus was walking by Matthew's booth; He gave him this simple two-word command, "Follow me." Jesus spoke those words and then kept walking along. Matthew had to

make an important decision. He looked at his money and he looked at the back of the Lord and he made the greatest choice of his life. He left it all to follow Jesus. He didn't leave his pen, however, because later he wrote an entire account of the life and ministry of Jesus.

When Jesus calls you to follow Him, you don't often have the privilege of singing fifty verses of "Just As I am." He says, "Follow me" and we must decide. To everyone reading these words, Jesus has given the same command. I've said before the entire Christian life can be summarized in the three commands of Jesus when He said, (1) "Come unto me." (2) "Follow me." And (3) Abide in me.

Although Matthew, the terrible tax-collector-sinner seems like an unlikely candidate, that's who Jesus called. He is calling you today, even if you think you don't qualify.

Have you accepted the call of Jesus to "Follow me?" If you don't know whether you are following Jesus or not, there are some marks of discipleship that we see in Matthew's example. Let's look at three of them.

When you are following Jesus:

1. He becomes the center of your life

Before Levi started following Jesus, his life revolved around his job. He was going to make a boatload of money because he was fixed for life in this lucrative occupation. When Jesus called him, he had to choose whether his life would revolve around making money or around pleasing and obeying Jesus. Let me ask you today: What or who is at the center of your life?

Let's consider our solar system as an example. You know a huge sun is the center of our solar system. Did you know the sun is so large it comprises 99% of the mass of our solar system? It is huge. The planet Jupiter is 300 times larger than earth but the sun is 1,000 times larger than Jupiter. The gravitational pull of the sun keeps all the planets in orbit.

Think of your life as the solar system. Think of Jesus as the sun that is central to your life. Allow all the planets to represent something in your life. Think of Mercury as money, possessions, houses and land. Let Venus represent romantic love. Earth can be your personal feelings and desires. Let Mars represent food, like a Mars Bar. Neptune can be work, success or your job. Jupiter can symbolize the big events like weddings or anniversaries. Saturn can represent leisure time, travel or entertainment. Uranus can be art, good books or the theater. Finally, Pluto can symbolize sports, recreation and hobbies.

All of those are good things in your life but if one of those planets ever moves into the center of your solar system, your life is going to be seriously out of balance. That may be why your life seems out of control right now—you don't have Jesus at the center. Can you imagine what would happen if the enormous sun tried to orbit around a planet or two? It would be so out of sync the entire solar system would tilt and spin out of control. For the same reason, we need something (or Someone) stable and powerful at the center of our lives to keep everything in balance. That Someone is the Lord Jesus Christ. After all, He made you and He knows you.

When you truly follow Jesus, He becomes the *center* that gives you balance and you will find all the areas of your life will orbit smoothly around the *Son*. Discipleship means Jesus is in control of every area of your life. Everything revolves around Him, not you. Matthew had to make that decision and he chose to let his life revolve around Jesus. He got up, left everything and followed Him.

Next, if you are truly following Jesus:

2. You will invite Him into your home

The first thing Levi did was to 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 joy in the presence of angels over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10)

Sadly, too many people are unwilling to invite Jesus into their homes and families. They make their religion something confined to the church building for an hour on Sunday. It's like the guy who rushed home after church, ripped off his tie and said with relief, "Boy, I'm glad that's over with for another week!" If you are truly following Jesus, He will be recognized in your home. You will allow Him to rule over your marriage and family. You will talk to Him when you gather with your family. He will be unseen guest at every family meal. He will be consulted before you make family decisions.

If you are the kind of person who thinks you can leave Jesus at church on Sundays, then you need to think again. Following Jesus is a 24/7/365 experience. Third, if you are truly following Jesus:

3. You will want your friends to meet Jesus, too

Not only did Matthew invite Jesus and His disciples to this party, he also invited his fellow tax collectors. Why? Because he obviously wanted his friends to know Jesus as well. That's a great mark that you are truly a disciple of Jesus, if you have a burden to introduce Him to all your friends.

Last week, we saw four friends who cared enough to carry their friend to Jesus. That's a good example for the rest of us. In this passage we see Matthew expressing the same burden but in a different way. He invites Jesus to his home and then invites his friends. He has a supper for sinners—but he doesn't call it that. He is just inviting people into his home so that they can discover what he has found.

That's a great idea! You say, "Well, 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? There is a great opportunity to use

hospitality as a means of personal evangelism. Some of you have such beautiful homes and you are wonderful hosts and hostesses; why don't you invite some of your unchurched friends to your house for a party?

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 throats. 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 conversation, talk about your love for the church and for the Lord. Be real. Be tactful. Have fun. Let them know you can be a Christian and still have fun.

George Barna is the most respected religious researcher in America. He says there are 78 million unchurched people in America. He has interviewed thousands of these unchurched people. His study reveals that of those unchurched people, 58% of them said they would gladly attend a church or synagogue if a friend invited them to join them.

Dr. Barna writes: "The most effective means of getting people to experience what a church has to offer is having someone they know who belongs to the church simply invite them to try it. Call it whatever you wish: word-of-mouth, personal invitation, friendship evangelism, this is indisputably the most effective means of reaching people."

That's what we can learn about following Jesus from Levi. Now, let's consider some

II. LESSONS FROM RELIGIOUS SNOBS (30)

In verse 30, these religious snobs begin to criticize Jesus. Get used to this group. They were the ones who silently accused Jesus of blasphemy when He forgave the paralyzed man's sins. They are going to keep following Jesus around because they don't like Him and they are looking for a reason to criticize Him. Last week I called them the religious mafia. I have often thought of them as the "S & Ps" (that stands for Scribes and Pharisees). There were at least 500 of them so Jesus really had to keep His eye on the S&P 500! These were the religious elite of the day but they were a bunch of snobs. There was no way they would be caught dead going into the house of a tax collector—much less eating with one! They shuddered with revulsion at the very thought of gathering a bunch of these "dirty, rotten, sinners" together. They were guilty of what I call the religious sins. Notice the twin sins of the S & P's:

- 1. Spiritual pride and**
- 2. Social prejudice**

Long before Jane Austen wrote her classic novel, *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, these two sins have plagued the human race. These two sins are deadly because they are invisible. You can hold pride and prejudice in your heart unseen until it manifests itself in ugly ways. These men were proud of who they were, good Jews. They were prejudiced against the crowd eating with Jesus. They didn't know those people personally; they just knew about their type. Prejudice is when you form a conviction about someone's worth and value before you take the time to get to know them. You "pre-judge" them.

Who were these "S & Ps?" They were the church crowd. They were religious leaders who embraced a holier-than-thou attitude toward anyone who wasn't as squeaky clean as they were. I can picture these religious snobs standing outside on the porch of Levi's luxurious house. Can't you hear the music and laughter? The smell of good food filled the air. The members of this holy huddle look in and shake their heads at such terrible sin. Some of Jesus' disciples are near the door so they disguise their disgust in a question: "Why do you (plural) eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

The most insidious kind of criticism is that which is spoken *about* a person not *to* that person. It's called character assassination, slander, or gossip. A good rule to follow is: Don't talk about a person until you have talked to that person. Never talk against a person until you have talked with that person.

This religious snobbery is a *sindrome* (intended spelling) that still exists today. Sometimes, nice respectable church people don't want anything to do with the wicked sinners of our culture. There is an important lesson to be learned: Jesus loved and accepted sinners—but He didn't approve their sin. There is an old hymn that says, "Sing it o'er and o'er again, Christ receiveth sinful men." Because Jesus was willing to spend time with sinners, we need to repent of our religious snobbery and cultivate honest friendships with people who don't know Jesus. I'm not talking about tax collectors today, either.

In her book, *Gospel Medicine*, Barbara Taylor writes: "If Jesus were putting together a 'Sinner's Table' today at the local Denny's it might include an abortion doctor, a child molester, a garbage collector, a young man with AIDS, a migrant farm worker, a teenaged 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, and offering the doctor a second cup of coffee before she goes back to work."

Now imagine you are 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 is an empty seat at the table of weirdos. The guy with the beard at the head of the table turns His piercing eyes upon you and pushes out the chair, "Hey, come and join us." What do you do? "Oh, Pastor, if I knew Jesus was there, of course I'd sit down!" He said, "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. We can't miss his example.

Several weeks ago, I mentioned I am coming to realize one of the real problems of being a long-time Christian is that the only friends we develop are with other Christians just like us. And the longer we are saved, the fewer friendships we have with people who desperately need forgiveness. Imagine the Christian life as walking through a door. When you are saved you walk through the door and the longer you are saved the further you progress until you are no longer

near the door. You learn how to quote scripture, you memorize the words to the songs, you develop all of your neat brothers and sisters but you tend to forget the others outside the door.

Sam Shoemaker wrote a poem about this. It's not a poem that has rhyme, meter, or rhythm. It just says what I'm trying to say better than I can say it:

I stand by the door. I neither go too far in , nor stay outside.
The "door" is the most important door in the world.
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.
There's no use for me to go way inside, and stay there
when there are so many outside, and they, as much as I,
crave to know where the door is.
All that many ever find is the wall where a door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like blind men and women, with outstretched, groping hands,
feeling for a door, knowing there MUST be a door,
Yet they never find it.
So I stand by the door. . .
I admire the people who go way in
But I wish they would not forget how it was before they got in.
You can go in too deeply, and stay in too long, and forget the people outside the door.
So I shall take my old accustomed place:
Near enough to God to know Him and to hear Him,
But not so far from people so as to hear them and remember . . .
that they are outside the door.
Thousands of them . . . millions of them
but more important to me
one or two of them—ten of them whose hands I am intended to put on the latch.
So I shall stand by the door and wait for those who seek it.
For "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God . . ."
So I stand by the door.

How many people do you think have come looking for the door to God and instead run up against the wall of religious pride and prejudice? We must be willing to love and accept all kinds of people and love them to God. That's what Jesus did. He accepted people without approving their sinful behavior. If we expect people to "clean up their lives" *before* they come to our church, we have violated Jesus' intention.

When I was at a conference several years ago, I heard a woman who shared her testimony. Years earlier her life was a mess. She was a drug addict, living with a man who was not her husband who was the father of her young child. She didn't know Christ and she became desperate for help. She had heard about a women's Bible study at a local church. She didn't even own a Bible but she had heard that there might be something in the Bible that would help her so she showed up, with her baby on her hip. Unfortunately, the women in this group were of the "religious snob" persuasion. When they found she was living with a man who was not her husband, they glanced at each other with reservation. Within the next two days, the pastor of the church visited this lady in her apartment with one on the ladies from the Bible study. They asked her not to

return to the Bible study until she stopped “living in sin.” The religious lady said she was afraid the young woman’s presence would scare off their regular attendees.

Her heart was broken, and at a particularly desperate time she called the suicide hotline at a local Baptist Church. She told her sad story to the counselor and tearfully asked the phone counselor, “I KNOW I’M A SINNER. ISN’T THERE SOME PLACE A SINNER CAN GO?” This church opened their arms and accepted her as a sinner and loved her to Jesus. Today, she is a vibrant, growing believer.

I believe our church is the same kind of church. Our belief is that the *only* person who can come to our church is a sinner. You see, the church is not a showcase for saints; it is a hospital for sinners!

That leads right into our next point. Now, we are going to answer the question: Why did Jesus come to planet Earth?

III. LESSONS FROM THE HEAVENLY DOCTOR (31-32)

In verses 31 and 32 Jesus makes a summary statement about His mission to planet earth. He responds to the criticism of the religious snobs by saying, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” He uses the metaphor of a doctor to communicate His purpose. That’s why Jesus is often called the Great Physician. Two occupations I deeply respect are carpenters and doctors because Jesus practiced both. Let’s learn three important things about His mission.

1. Jesus came to heal sin-sick people

Jesus indicated He came to earth for the same reason a doctor spends his time in a hospital. Jesus came to help sinners. He was talking about those tax collectors and sinners but He was also talking about the religious snobs and us, too. Here is God’s official diagnosis of each one of us: Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness. (Isaiah 1:5-6)

Dr. Paul Brand who was both a missionary preacher and a physician wrote:

“We suffer from the universally infectious disease that we call sin-itis, iniquity-osis, or fallen fever. It is a condition of the heart, the soul, the body and the mind. It is a degenerative disease that slowly robs us of our joy in life. It is also a progressive disease that ultimately effects and infects our entire bodies. There is no part of us that is immune to the debilitating effects of fallen fever. Much like cholesterol does to our arteries, sin-itis has a tendency to harden the heart. It creates an impenetrable barrier around it, ultimately preventing it from experiencing life’s joys or sorrows. But probably the most discouraging news about this disease is that we are all born with it. There is no preventative or inoculation against it. It is in our blood stream from the moment we are conceived. And there is nothing we can do about it.... But there is something that God can do about it. Jesus, the Great Physician has come to seek out the sick to call those whose lives have been afflicted and to bring healing where there was only hurt.”

2. Jesus can't help you until you admit you have a need

It is the universal tendency of each of us to deny that we are sin-sick. It is not natural to admit you have a need. When Jesus said He came to call the "sinners" to repentance He wasn't just referring to the tax collectors at the party. He was talking about the religious snobs as well. The problem was that Levi and the other tax collectors admitted they were sinners, the snobs wouldn't. They insisted they were pure and righteous.

Later in Luke Jesus is going to touch on this subject again when he compares two guys who go to church. (Luke 18:10) He talks about a Pharisee and a tax collector who show up at the same time. The Pharisee lifts up his voice to God and brags about how good he is. He prays, "God I thank you that I'm not like other men – robbers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector." In contrast the tax collector was so humble he couldn't even look up into heaven, he just pounded his chest and cried, "God, have mercy on me a sinner." Jesus said, "The second guy is the one who went home justified before God." It wasn't long after that these religious snobs plotted to kill Him.

Several years ago, I saw a girl wearing a t-shirt at the beach with a message printed on it. It was supposed to be funny, but I thought it was sad beyond words. It said something like this: I don't have a drinking problem. I drink. I get drunk. I fall down – so what's the problem? That's the attitude of too many people. They want to say: I don't have a sin problem. I stumble. I sin. So does everyone – what's the problem?

Sin is a serious problem and you can never get help with any problem until you *admit* you have a need. Some people have been blinded by their own sense of self-righteousness. The Old Testament says that compared to God's holiness, even the most righteous things we can ever do are like dirty, filthy, stinking rags. (Isaiah 64:4)

When some people read verse 32, they wonder if Jesus was saying that some people are naturally righteous and others are sinners. No. Jesus was employing sarcasm because the self-righteous attitude of the religious snobs. Romans 3: 10-11 says, "As it is written, 'there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.'" Jesus came to planet earth to call all of us repentance. But you must admit you are sinner before He can heal you. Third,

3. Jesus requires repentance before His treatment begins

The call to us is one of repentance. You must admit you are sinner, and then you've got to be willing to turn from your sin. Then you've got to be willing to surrender to Jesus. To employ Jesus' metaphor of a physician, you must *admit* you are sick before a doctor can help you. But then you must interrupt your daily lifestyle and go see the doctor. Your walk into the doctor's office is like repentance because you are willing to renounce your sickness in order to be healed. You aren't well yet, but you are turning to the doctor for help. Then you must surrender to the expertise and the treatment of that doctor. The entire sequence of salvation begins with repentance. Acts 3:19 says "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out,

that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." Repentance doesn't mean you have to totally clean up your act before you come to Jesus. No, you simply turn from your sin and turn to Jesus for help. Then you submit to the Great Physician and follow His orders. Will you turn aside from your messed up life and turn to the Great Physician? He is waiting for you right now.

CONCLUSION

What is the message God has for you? For some of you, Jesus is calling you to follow Him today, like he called Levi. Will you make Him the *center* of your life? Or you may be one who claims to follow Jesus. Well, have you invited Him into your home? Do you have a burden for your friends to know Jesus? Some of you need to see you are close to being a religious snob and you need to make an intentional effort to get to know people who religious snobs consider "dirty, rotten, sinners." If Jesus spent time with these "sinners," then so should we.

We need to lift the message far and wide that because Jesus accepts sinners so do we. We must communicate to East Texas that you *don't* have to clean up your act and put on a coat and tie before we will let you come to our church. Our arms are open wide to anyone who seeks God. Like the song says, "Every day they pass me by. I can see it in their eyes. Empty people filled with care; headed who knows where?" The chorus says, "People need the Lord, people need the Lord; at the end of broken dreams, He's the open door . . . When will we realize that people need the Lord?" ("People Need the Lord," Greg Nelson, 1983)

Before you can find Jesus you must admit He is your only hope. But some of you are ready to admit He is the only hope for your broken dreams but you may think you have gone too far. Your problem is not that you won't admit it; your problem is that you think you are too sinful for God to help you. Here's a true story for you:

Ed had a restored MG sports car he dearly loved. He had painstakingly restored it to showroom condition. He loved it and pampered it. He fussed over it like a mother hen. One day, his wife Beth had to run an errand and her car wouldn't start, so she reluctantly took the MG. She tried to be super-careful, because Ed didn't want anyone else driving his car.

Only a couple of miles from home, the unthinkable happened. Another car ran a stop sign and crashed broadside into her. Beth wasn't seriously hurt, but the entire right side of the MG was mangled. Beth burst into tears. When the police arrived she opened the glove box for the insurance papers. When she found them, she saw there was a plain envelope with her name on it placed within the insurance papers. When her shaking hands opened the envelope, she found these words: "Dear Beth: If you are reading this, you have probably been in an accident. Don't worry about the car. I pray that you are all right because, remember, it you that I love—not the car. Ed

Here's my message of hope for you: No matter how you may think you have wrecked and ruined your life. Regardless of whatever terrible things you have done in the past. God has written a love letter to you and it says, "Remember, it's you that I love." Won't you come to Christ today?

OUTLINE

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes