

Mark 2: 13-17

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[0 : 00] Is there a word from God for you at the start of 2016? When I first typed that question in as I was writing up the sermon, it struck me that that was in some ways a very foolish question, and foolish in the sense that even posing the question seems to concede the possibility that there might not be a word from God for you.

And of course, the reality is that there is always a word from God for you. That's why God has given us the Bible.

This is His word. It is a word from God directed to you. And so, yes, there is a word from God for you as we begin this new year.

And this morning, I want us to consider a word from God, a word from God that is voiced for us by Jesus, the eternal Son of God, our Lord and Savior, and a word that seems appropriate at the beginning of a new year.

It's the passage that corresponds for this morning as we make our way through Mark or as we recommence or introduce ourselves to Mark this morning.

[1 : 32] But within this passage, there are two words that Jesus directs to Levi, or as He is more commonly known, Matthew, and throughout the sermon we'll simply refer to Him as Matthew.

Two words directed to Him, but that also are directed to us, directed to you this morning. And the words are there in verse 14, Follow me.

So I want to spend some time thinking about these words that God directs to you at the beginning of this year. Follow me. As you look back on the year that's closed, in the year 2015, did you follow Jesus in this year that has ended?

How closely did you follow Him? What was following Jesus like? What does that even mean? If somebody were to ask you, somebody were to approach you, they perhaps know that you're a Christian, and they say, Well, you say that you're a follower of Jesus.

It's the kind of language that I hear you use. What does that mean? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? If that question was posed to you, how would you answer that question?

[2 : 49] Now, we're only in chapter 2 of Mark's Gospel, but we've already heard Jesus address these words to Simon and Andrew in chapter 1.

And in verse 16, we've already encountered Jesus speaking in this way. There in verse 17 of chapter 1, Rather, come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men.

And now He addresses the same words to Matthew. And as we think about these words, there are two questions that I want to pose and consider and try and answer.

First of all, why did Jesus call Matthew? It's clear that His calling of Matthew generated quite a scandal. And as a result, many were questioning His wisdom that He would call such a man.

So it's an obvious question to pose. Why? Why Matthew? Why did Jesus call Matthew? But then, of course, there's the other side to that, and that is, why did Matthew follow Jesus?

[3 : 56] Because we know that Matthew did respond to the call that was made to Him. So we have these two questions. Why did Jesus call Matthew? And why did Matthew respond to the call?

Why did He follow Jesus? And as we think about these questions and try and give an answer to them, what I would encourage you to do is to pose and answer the same question to yourself.

Why does Jesus call you? Something that He assuredly does do. Why does He call you? And why should you follow Jesus? I think it's important, as I encourage you to think about those questions, to stress that these aren't questions that are relevant only for somebody who has never responded to the call to follow Jesus.

These are questions that are relevant for all of us. Even if you can, by God's grace, look back to maybe many decades of following Jesus, of seeking with His help to follow Him, it remains relevant for you to hear anew the voice of Jesus speaking to you and encouraging you and challenging you to follow Him.

Why then does Jesus call Matthew? Let me suggest a number of interrelated reasons that together, I think, answer the question. I'll mention what they are and then we'll think of them in turn.

[5 : 22] First of all, because He loves Him, but also because He knows Him, because He came for Him, and fourthly, because Jesus has plans for Him.

So, four reasons that all kind of overlap, but we can think of each of them separately. First of all, Jesus calls Matthew because He loves Matthew.

Now, how do we know that? In the reading of the passage, there was not perhaps anything that explicitly declared that that was so. We might say, well, of course, He loved Matthew.

We know that. But that's not really good enough. We need to see, well, where in the passage could we come to that conclusion? Or is that stated for us that Jesus loved Matthew?

What I want to do is draw your attention to what Jesus said on this occasion when He called Matthew, but that isn't recorded for us by Mark. It's the expression that we read in the prophet Hosea, and as we read it, I made mention of the fact that Mark doesn't record Jesus using these words, but Matthew does.

[6 : 34] So, let's just quickly turn to Matthew's gospel and chapter 9, and notice what we read there in verse 13. Matthew chapter 9 at verse 13.

You'll notice that the section there in Matthew that begins in verse 9 is given the title, the calling of Matthew, and it's very, very similar to what we read in Mark.

There's almost no difference. There is just this one difference that Matthew records this one expression that Jesus evidently did use, but that Mark, for whatever reason, chose not to record for us.

We find it there in verse 13. But go and learn what this means. Jesus here is responding to the challenge of the Pharisees.

The question was posed to the disciples, but clearly it's meant for Jesus. What are you doing calling a man like Matthew such a sinner? And in response to that, Jesus says, go and learn what this means.

[7 : 32] I desire mercy, not sacrifice, for I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Especially these words, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

Jesus is quoting from the prophet Hosea, as we've already read. He's quoting the words of God. Now, when God first spoke in these terms, He was addressing Himself to God's people, warning them about the danger of merely external religion.

A meticulous, or sometimes not so meticulous, keeping of rules and rituals, including sacrifices, but forgetting the heart of the matter, namely mercy, or grace, or love.

The actual word that is used in Hosea is a very familiar Hebrew word, significant Hebrew word, *hesed*, sometimes translated a steadfast love.

And what Jesus is saying is what's really important, what's most important, is mercy, it's love, it's grace. Now, when He addressed those words through the prophet, the purpose was to provoke His own people to a change of attitude and behavior.

[8 : 50] But what is Jesus' purpose in quoting these words on this occasion? I think there's a two-fold purpose. I think there's the same purpose that there was when He spoke through Hosea. It is a rebuke to the Pharisees who are scandalized by the fact that Jesus is called Matthew.

And He's saying, you're so keen on rules and regulations and rituals, but where is mercy? Where is love? Where is grace in your conception of the faith?

So it's a rebuke to the Pharisees, just as it had been a rebuke to His people long before. But I think the other reason that Jesus makes use of these words from Hosea is that it serves as a declaration of the principal motivation of Jesus in His call to Matthew.

That's what we're concerned about. Why did He call Matthew? And we're saying that He called Matthew because He loved Matthew. And in these words, Jesus is able to lay stress on how, from His perspective, the most important element is mercy.

It's steadfast love. That is why He calls a sinner like Matthew. Indeed, that's the principal motivation in His call to anybody, in His call to you.

[10 : 12] He is driven by love. He's driven by grace. His impulse is mercy. He's motivated by steadfast love, a love that never lets down and never lets go.

He loves Matthew. Why is Jesus concerned for men like Matthew, for sinners like Matthew, for sinners like you and me? Why? Why this concern to call us, to invite us to be part of His family?

Why does He call sinners like Matthew and you? Well, because He loved Matthew and because He loves you. Why does He call Matthew?

Because He loves Matthew. But I think also we can draw from the passage another part of the answer to the question, and that is that He calls Matthew because He knows Matthew. Now the Pharisees, as we've read, object to the company that Jesus is keeping.

tax collectors and sinners. And chief among His objectionable companions is, of course, Matthew, in whose home this banquet is being enjoyed.

[11 : 29] In verse 15 we read, while Jesus was having dinner at Levi's or Matthew's house, Luke describes the occasion as a great banquet. So the focus of the Pharisees' discontent, though there were many sinners there, of course, many tax collectors, their particular disgust is with Matthew in whose home this banquet is taking place.

And they object because they see Him as a sinner, not worthy company for a good man, a rabbi like Jesus. What does Jesus say about the people that He is hanging out with?

There's this objection. How does He respond? Does He spring to their defense? Does He turn to the Pharisees and say, No, you're wrong. They're not sinners at all. They're good people.

Misunderstood good people. Is that what He do? Does He defend them in that way? Well, no, He doesn't. Jesus acknowledges that His companions, those that He is sharing dinner or the banquet with, are indeed sick.

He acknowledges that they are sinners. And this, of course, includes Matthew. Matthew is one of those so described by Jesus as He responds to the Pharisees that His concern is for the sick that He has come to call sinners.

[12 : 56] sinners. Jesus declares very clearly that He has come to call sinners. And who has He just called? Well, He's just called Matthew.

He knows Matthew. He knows who Matthew is. He knows what Matthew is. He knows that Matthew is spiritually ill. He knows that Matthew is a sinner in need of spiritual healing, in need of the forgiveness that only can be found.

in God and from God. And that is why He calls Him. He calls Him because He loves Him. But He calls Him also because He knows Him. And He knows the needs that He has.

Why does Jesus today call men and women? Why does He call you? Does He call you because you're a good person? or rather, is it because, as He Himself makes clear, because you are a sinner?

It's a common mistake and you wonder why it's a mistake that people make when the Bible seems to be so clear that this is not the case. But nonetheless, it's a common misconception that people have that they're not good enough to follow Jesus.

[14 : 12] I'm not good enough to be a Christian. I'm not good enough to serve God. You wonder how people can come to that notion in the light of the Bible and yet it is so common, so often heard.

The question isn't if you're good enough. The question is if you're bad enough. And be assured, you are. We all are. Jesus came to call sinners and He still calls sinners.

That's why He called Matthew, because He loved him but because He knew him. But then we can also say that the reason He called Matthew is that He came for Matthew.

Notice again what Jesus says in verse 17 when He's explaining His actions, perhaps in a somewhat cryptic way, though not that cryptic really, but explaining His actions to the Pharisees.

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. Just particularly noting this reality that Jesus identifies implicitly that He had come.

[15 : 23] And if we just think about that, think of where He'd come from and what He had come for. He'd come from but He'd come for. He came. Where did He come from?

He obviously came from somewhere. Of course, we know in the light of the big picture of the story that we were told in the Bible of who Jesus is, we know that He came from heaven.

He came from heaven a helpless babe as we sing and as we will sing at the end of the service. He came from the Father. He came into the world.

He was not of the world but He came into the world. He became a man. He came from somewhere to somewhere, from heaven to earth.

But He came for. And this is particularly what He's highlighting. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners. His mission, the reason He came was to call sinners.

[16 : 22] Now we've already established that Jesus knew Matthew. He knew that Matthew was a sinner so it should come as no surprise that He calls Matthew.

If this is His mission then obviously He will call the likes of Matthew. That's why He came. Now I'm sure that Jesus called Matthew principally for Matthew's sake.

This is a very personal call directed to this man called Matthew. Jesus' concern was for Him, for His need of forgiveness, His need of companionship and love.

That is what principally drives Jesus. And yet, I'm sure it's also the case that in the calling of one, namely Matthew, who would have been considered by the Pharisees and many others, not just the Pharisees, by many Jews, considered by many of them as the lowest of the low, as the chief of sinners.

You can imagine many Jews saying, well yes, I'm a sinner but I'm not like Matthew. I may be bad but I'm not that bad. And so when Jesus calls Matthew, yes He does it principally because He loves Matthew but in doing so, He's really announcing to everybody, if Matthew can be my friend, then anybody can be my friend.

[17 : 45] If I can call Matthew, I can call you. Whoever you are, however bad you are or think you are or others think you are, I've called Matthew.

You're welcome also. The invitation extends to you. He came for Matthew. I didn't come to call the righteous, says Jesus. I came to call sinners.

But then finally, in answering the question, why did Jesus call Matthew, we can say this, that He has plans for Matthew. Now what are these plans? Well, they're to be found in seed form in the two words that we announced at the beginning as being at the heart of our concern this morning.

These two words, follow me. Follow me. Just bear with me as we imagine a hypothetical dialogue between Matthew and Jesus.

Imagine Matthew intrigued by the person of Jesus for whatever reason and he approaches Jesus and he says to Jesus, so Jesus, what's the plan? We sometimes do that, don't we, when maybe it's something very trivial, what we're going to do at the weekend, group of friends, what's the plan?

[19 : 01] Matthew comes up to Jesus and he says, so what's the plan? Jesus looks him in the eye and he says, follow me. Matthew looks and he says, okay, I get that, but what's the plan?

Jesus looks him in the eye and he says, follow me. That's the plan. Just you follow me. You don't need all the details, that's enough for now.

You follow me. That's the plan. Matthew is to follow Jesus. But even though we acknowledge that that is the plan, there's not another plan, we can, I think, reasonably dig a little deeper and identify something of what is involved in following Jesus.

And I want us to notice three intertwined elements. I think we find, even in the passage, certainly as discipleship is developed in the course of the gospel.

At the very heart of following Jesus is relationship. The call is to accompany Jesus. Indeed, more than to accompany Jesus, the call is to companionship with Jesus.

[20 : 14] Jesus doesn't give Matthew a manifesto and say to Matthew, follow that. It's all there in the book. It's all there in the document. You read that and it's all there.

All that you need. He doesn't do that. He looks him in the eye and he says, follow me. It's a call to relationship, a call to companionship. Then also, it's a call to what we might call imitation.

To follow Jesus is to go where Jesus goes and to do what Jesus does. We follow in his footsteps and participate in his mission.

Jesus was a fisher of men. The very first time in this gospel that the words follow me are recorded, they're followed by these words. Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.

Jesus was a fisher of men and those who follow him he makes into fishers of men. But of course, it's much more than just imitation.

[21 : 15] We don't just mimic Jesus in some feeble way trying to be a little bit like him. The imitation is merged with a work of transformation on the part of Jesus in our lives.

In following Jesus, we are transformed by Jesus, by the Spirit of God into the image of Jesus. So why does Jesus call Matthew?

Well, he has plans for Matthew to be his friend, to transform him into his likeness, likewise for you. But before moving on, just very quickly pose the question, how does that work or begin for us?

We do acknowledge that our situation isn't exactly the same as that of Matthew. We don't have the option of physically following in the footsteps of Jesus. We can't see him.

We can't say, well, there he is. I'm just going to follow him. We can't do that. Our circumstances are different. He doesn't look us in the eye in that physical way.

[22 : 24] He just doesn't. For us, following Jesus does have a very clear beginning point. It's not just the beginning point, but it is the beginning point, and it's the point of repentance.

It's interesting how what Mark says or what Mark records in verse 17. Right at the end there, I have not come to call the righteous but sinners, is expanded by Luke.

Now, when I say it's expanded by Luke, it's not that Luke added on something, but rather that Luke records in a fuller way what Jesus said on this occasion.

If we look in Luke chapter 5 and in verse 32. So again, it's simply the parallel passage of the same incident, but notice what Luke records.

Luke 5, verse 32. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners, and then notice what Luke adds, or also records, to put it more correctly.

[23 : 23] I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. There's that greater clarity as to what this call is to, what it involves.

It's a call to repentance. To repent is to recognize our need of forgiveness, to turn from our sin to the one who is able to deal with our sin, to forgive our sin.

This is how we begin to follow, and indeed, this is how we continue following, continually acknowledging our condition and our need, continually turning to the one, to Jesus, who is able to forgive us.

This is the plan to follow Jesus. The second question, and we'll deal with it much more briefly, is why does Matthew follow Jesus?

We've asked the question, we've tried to answer the question, why does Jesus call Matthew? But the mirror image of that question is why does Matthew follow Jesus? And the answers also mirror the answers that we've noted for the first question.

[24 : 34] I think we can say the following, we can say that Matthew follows Jesus in the first place because he is drawn by the love of Jesus. Now Matthew, we can be sure, had almost no idea of the depth and breadth and height of Jesus' love for him.

But he could sense something, just something, of the love that was drawing him in an almost inexplicable way to Jesus.

Here was a rabbi, here was a religious man who fixed his attention and his affection on a despised tax collector. That fact alone would have been sufficient to awaken in Matthew this sense, well this man, I don't know why, but this man loves me, he cares for me, I wonder if Matthew had any prior knowledge of Jesus.

He may have done, we simply don't know, but we do know that somehow he was aware that Jesus loved him and this was hugely attractive and drew him from his tax collector's booth into the embrace and care of Jesus.

Why does Matthew follow Jesus? Because he's drawn by the love of Jesus, but also he shared something of the knowledge of Jesus.

[26 : 05] I'm referring here to the knowledge that Jesus had concerning Matthew. Remember what we said, Jesus knew that Matthew was sick, spiritually sick, Jesus knew that he was a sinner.

Well Matthew knew that too. How keenly he was conscious of his own condition, we don't know. How deeply he felt his own sin, we don't know.

How accurately or how acutely was he aware of the gravity of his condition, we don't know. But we do know that he knew enough that if Jesus came to call sinners, that he was one of those to be called.

He was a sinner. And as he heard or overheard explaining, or Jesus explaining to the Pharisees that he had come to call sinners, well Matthew would have been able to identify with that and said, well that's me.

That's why he's called me. He shared something of the knowledge of Jesus. But I think we can also see from his response that he bought in to the mission of Jesus.

[27 : 14] Jesus came to call sinners. He calls Matthew. And what does Matthew do? Does he just listen in quizzical bemusement to this call?

Does he politely decline the invitation? Does he ask for time to consider? And if he had indeed so asked, and if he'd been granted the time to consider, in all likelihood come up with a thousand reasons for not following Jesus.

But he doesn't do any of these things. He just follows. Why does he do so? Because in some way he buys in to the mission of Jesus and is drawn by the evident and surprising authority of the one who calls.

We're struck by the demonstration really of Jesus' authority here. We've seen it already and we'll see it again in these opening chapters of Mark, how Jesus demonstrates his authority over the elements and over sin, over death, and so on.

And here there's this authority as well, maybe not quite so dramatic, but simply in addressing these words, follow me. And what does Matthew do? He follows him. And Matthew could sense this authority in the voice, in the person of the one who was calling him.

[28 : 35] And he buys into this call of Jesus. And finally, in answering that question and, as I say, mirroring what we've already said concerning Jesus, we can say of Matthew is that he trusted in the plans of Jesus.

So far, in answering the question, why did Matthew follow Jesus, we've had to be a little tentative. We just don't know for sure how much Matthew understood of the love of Jesus, of his own sin, of the mission of Jesus.

We can speculate. We can imagine that in a measure he understood, but we can't go further. But we do know for sure that Matthew trusted Jesus.

And we know that because of what he did. We read there in Mark's Gospel, and Matthew got up and followed him. Levi got up and followed him.

Luke, in his account, captures the implications of this simple act. Maybe here Luke was looking back in hindsight at what it all would subsequently involve.

[29 : 52] I don't know. But he captures the implications more fully than Mark because Luke says, he got up, left everything, and followed him.

Matthew left everything to follow Jesus. And you don't do that if you don't trust in the man who is calling you. His trust in Jesus was such that he was prepared to place Jesus at the very center of his life and future.

there was no going back to his tax collector's booth. When you think of the other disciples, the fishermen, at the end of the day, if things hadn't worked out, well, they could go back to the fishing.

We know that some of them did fleetingly. But there was no going back for Matthew. Once he had left that booth, there was no going back. Why does he do that?

Why is he prepared to leave everything and follow Jesus? Because he trusts in Jesus. Again, we might be bemused as to how it was he was able to trust in Jesus in such a way, giving the seemingly fleeting nature of their encounter, but that he did trust is beyond doubt.

[31 : 12] Now, what does that mean for you? If you're going to follow Jesus, does that mean you have to leave everything? Leave your job? Leave your family? Leave behind all your possessions?

Is this what we are to understand? Well, even for Matthew, leaving everything didn't involve abandoning his home, abandoning his family.

In the very passage that we're reading, subsequent to leaving everything and following Jesus, he holds this great banquet for Jesus in his home.

presumably a spacious home with the resources to put on a great banquet. And this is after he has left everything and followed Jesus.

So leaving everything doesn't mean that we have to abandon all that we currently are doing. Rather, the issue is one of priority.

[32 : 10] To leave everything involves placing Jesus at the very center of our lives. He is Lord and He must govern your life.

Why does Matthew follow Jesus? Drawn by the love of Jesus, conscious of his own condition as a sinner in some measure, enthused, excited, buying into the mission of Jesus again in the measure that he understood it.

But very particularly because he trusts in the one who is calling him. Will you follow Jesus in this year that has begun?

This is a question addressed to all of you. Will you follow him? Perhaps for the first time. Maybe for some that is the reality. For the very first time responding to the call that is directed to you.

Jesus addresses this call. Follow me. Will you with Matthew get up and follow him? Leave everything.

[33 : 18] Place him in the center of your life in a way that has never been true before. But to all of us, will we resolve to follow Jesus more closely, more coherently in this year that has begun?

He is calling you because he loves you, because he knows you, because he came for you, because he has plans for you. And he calls you.

He addresses to you these words. Follow me. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for your son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the reality that he did come into this world to be our Savior. He came to call sinners to repentance.

And all of us gathered here this morning, we're all sinners. And so we are all called to repentance. We're all called to recognize and acknowledge our need of forgiveness and to recognize and acknowledge that that forgiveness can be found only in the person of your son, Jesus, who died for us, who bore in his body, the punishment that we were due.

[34 : 37] We thank you for the death that he died. We thank you for the forgiveness that he now offers to us as he calls us to repentance. We pray that by your spirit you would help us to respond as we ought, that we would be drawn by the love of Jesus, that we would be ever more conscious of our need of Jesus, that we would be excited by the mission of Jesus, that we are invited to be part of, and that very particularly we would know what it is to trust in him as the one who is altogether trustworthy.

And these things we pray in his name. Amen.