

Leaving Everything Behind to Follow Jesus

in a series on – Jesus' Way Is Like No Other Way
Texts from NIV-2010 unless otherwise noted
Matthew 9:9-13, Luke 5:27-31, Mark 2:13-17, Luke 19:1-10

Intro – Although most of the sermons in this series will focus on the one-to-one interactions between Jesus and all sorts of people along the way as John tells the story. Today we look at 2 people that John does not mention at all...

This is the story about a man, Matthew (aka Levi) who . . .

Got Up Left Everything Followed Jesus

Later, another man from his same profession, Zacchaeus... did the same thing.

Both of them knew better than almost everybody else the COST of discipleship.

They were tax men and knew numbers very well.
They could probably calculate in their heads better than most people could do it on paper.

Oscar Wilde offered a sad commentary about a the kind of person Matthew and Zacchaeus were in his famous aphorism about a cynic as one...

“who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

BEFORE: Matthew and Zacchaeus focused themselves on knowing the price of things and how much tax to charge.

AFTER: they changed the entire focus of their lives...

to realize the value of some things is far greater than anything else or everything else.

Matthew (Levi) Called to Be Jesus' Disciple –

Matthew 9:9-13

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.’ [Hosea 6:6] For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

That is the way Matthew tells his own story.

But Mark and Luke give a few more details that Matthew (in humility) left out.

Luke 5:27-31 [Mark 2:13-17 nearly identical, w/ a few dif. details]

27 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, 28 and Levi got up, **left everything** and followed him.

The 4 fishermen (brothers Peter & Andrew and James & John) were loyal and dedicated to Jesus and when asked to follow (leave their businesses) they did. But they could always go back to their old ways if things did not work out. After Jesus' death, that is just what they did.

For Matthew, however, that option would forever be closed.

Tax collecting in the Roman Empire was colonialism at work... the Empire needed to suck up resources from all over the world to fuel its high level of society. They did this in various ways, notably with slavery, by encouraging certain entrepreneurial types with favorable taxes and by enticing collaborators from all the far away provinces to bring in the wealth through taxation franchises.

Matthew was required to collect the amount of taxes demanded by Rome PLUS he was entitled to take a cut for his efforts, and the Romans did not much care how big a cut the taxman took.

There were plenty of people like Matthew who were willing to “get ahead” by “going along” with the Romans.

But in all the provinces, the general population deeply resented the Romans and their iron-fisted and often brutal ways of enforcing their will.

And no provinces were more radically opposed than the Judeans.

Today’s Egyptians, the common people, understand very well how this works. After years of brutal enforcement by a dictator, it is relatively safe to be in the streets. But they fear they must get Mubarek to leave before they go back to their normal routines or else he will again unleash his secret police and they will soon be brutally beaten or worse, tortured to death.

Josephus, the Jewish-born historian who lived in the 1st century and was granted Roman citizenship described how the Roman’s led by Gen. Titus, totally destroyed Jerusalem. He mentions there were two primary elements most active in the resistance: The dagger men and the zealots.

Jesus had at least one disciple from each of these elements. Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot (*now believed to be the description of the “dagger men”*)

Along with all the other more common types of regular people to whom Jesus had given the invitation, “follow me,” Matthew’s courage and dedication must be realized.

But for Matthew, he already had a highly prized position (for the ‘get ahead, go getter type’ of personality).

He knew that once he let it go, he would not get it back.

Most of us try to avoid situations that are strictly: go – no go. We want ‘options’ or a safety net.

Notice also, Matthew’s humility –

he omits the “left everything” part – but not Mark and Luke. They both realize how serious Matthew was about becoming Jesus’ follower. They and not Matthew point out the fact there was no going back for this disciple.

To highlight the point even further, Mark and Luke, v.29, also inform us that Matthew pointedly held a special banquet to announce his decision to his buddies (and others). Matthew down-plays that aspect, too.

29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

[cf. Matthew 9:11 & Mark 2:16 - When the (Pharisees) teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he (your teacher) eat with tax collectors and sinners?”]

31 Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. *[Matthew 9:13a inserts here Jesus pointed rejoinder to go and learn the scripture he quotes to them from Hosea.]* 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Matthew records more of Jesus parables than any other gospel. Chapter 13 is all parables, several of which are only found in Matthew. Two of those are these:

44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

An interesting sidebar is the later similarity of another taxman’s decision to follow the Master, Zacchaeus. Only Luke (19:1-10) gives that account.

When I noticed that Matthew does not give this account, at first I wondered why.

I have decided it was Matthew's humility...

His own earlier example very likely inspired Zacchaeus, but Matthew hesitates calling attention to his own heroic choice.

Zacchaeus the Tax Collector – Luke 19:1-10

1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Was Zacchaeus more greedy as a taxman than Matthew had been? Or was he less so and thus able to pay back 4times? Of course, he said he was giving half of what he had to the poor. *(Presumably all along he had lived very well and spent much of what he gained. So now he plans to give half of what remains AFTER he had already spent a lot on himself.)*

Maybe, since Matthew omits this account, he wasn't so sure of Zacchaeus' follow through.

But the idea of making heroic choices

is deeply embedded everywhere in the Bible..

Certainly it is the core concept of becoming followers of Jesus.

Nobody among the 1st Century Christians was more outspoken about that than Paul.

E.g., "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain."

And how people think about their possessions is central.

As he instructs Timothy to preach in his place *(which Paul could not do due to his imprisonment)*

I Timothy 6:17 - 19

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

To the church at the edge of the Roman military hold, Philippi, Paul gives his own personal credo...

Philippians 3:12-14

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

I can only imagine Matthew would heartily agree that is how he views his life, too.

The study for this sermon has given me a whole new outlook about Matthew, and why Jesus asked him to follow.

Of all the 12 men chosen, Matthew along with John, are the only ones to WRITE an account of the ministry of Jesus.

I believe Matthew must have had a meticulous manner because nobody records more of the words of Jesus.

I imagine he was a habitual note taker a trait that worked well as a taxman.

But for the 12 disciples, he was NOT the money man the treasurer. That role was handled by Judas..

Jesus must have encouraged Matthew to become the note taker for the group.

This was a very different application of his natural talent for details.

Now he changes focus from money to ideas for eternity, words to live by.

If it were not for Matthew we would not have three large chapters of the Sermon on the Mount, only smaller parts from others.

Matthew records a number of parables not written by any other gospel writer.

If any of us had lived 2000 years ago, we might have been able to personally meet Jesus in that 3-year time slot.

I like to think I would have been a follower. Maybe even one of the 120 who closely followed him all along.

But it would have been a stretch, a long stretch, for me to imagine I might have been one of the TWELVE.

Not that those 12 were such noble or outstanding people, either.

But they DID make the sort of commitment that relatively few people, still today, will make.

Matthew's story is the story about a man who

Got Up

Left Everything

Followed Jesus

Jesus loves every single one of us just as much as he ever loved Matthew or any of the other followers.

We KNOW that is true because

Matthew records the words and events that prove it.

As we sing, "Jesus Loves Even Me"

hear the call he extends to all of US, "follow me."