

“Follow me! Or not.” Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today for our meditations we have the call of Matthew, the former tax collector, for us better known as the author of the first book in the New Testament, the Gospel according to Matthew. What will we do today?

I invite you to reflect on these topics. Who did Jesus call to follow Him and how did He call them? Then we will reflect on another gospel that we hear too often these days. Then we will once again return to the question of who and how Jesus calls.

I have to warn you. This probably is going to hurt. And I am not sorry about that. I could only be sorry for not preaching about this more. And it's going to be a long one too. So, let us begin with **who Jesus called to follow Him**.

There is this widespread notion that Christians are or at least are supposed to be somehow better than others. That the Church is this social club where good and morally superior people gather together.

Many outside the Church have this idea. Sadly, there are enough people in the Church who think that way too. But did Jesus really call the most moral and virtuous members of the society to follow Him?

The Gospel accounts and the rest of the New Testament is quite clear about who He called. Everyone! Everyone who responded to His invitation. He called tax collectors, generally despised and looked down on by everyone.

He called prostitutes, He called all sorts of sinners, He called Pharisees, He called business people and people in high positions within the government. Whoever was willing to respond to His invitation.

In Paul's letter to Corinthians, we learn what was the makeup of that congregation: “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. **And such were some of you.** But you were washed and you were sanctified.” (1 Cor 6:9-10)

Quite a company! See, what great news this is for us, for everyone. You don't need to match certain standards to be called by God. It doesn't matter how far you have wandered from the Father's house. Only one thing matters – that you want to turn back to God, and as soon you do, He is there to embrace you.

Consider this picture. Some may be gone so far from the Father's house, long, long way away, drowning in their sins. Others may be only a little bit away. In their outwardly actions, good and moral people, exemplary members of society.

What matters is not how far away you are, but whether you want to turn towards the Triune God who calls you. You may be miles and decades away, but as soon as you turn around, He is right there, welcoming you. You are back home. Immediately.

Or you may be seemingly nearby, but stubbornly refusing to turn around, for you don't feel a need, and then you are as far from God's grace and forgiveness as anyone could be. For you have rejected Him. Remember the older son in Luke 15!

Now, let's reflect a little bit on **how Jesus called those whom He called**. The picture we get is clear. Repent and believe in the Gospel! There is a cost involved. There is a change involved. Meaning, we have to change our direction, our lives.

"Follow me! If you love someone or something more than me, you are not worthy to be my disciple! ... Enter by the narrow gate... For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Mat 7:13-14)

Do you see? When God calls us, He Himself helps us to leave our old life, our old ways, our old allegiances. Because to those who dare to follow Him, God gives something incomparably better. He brings us out of darkness into the Kingdom of His Son, He redeems and frees us from our slavery to sin, death and devil.

He gives us a new life. Listen to this: "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life." (Mat 19:29)

So much in this life already! But... this is not only about new and restored life here in this age. It is about new life, eternal life, true life that never runs out, about life that flows from God's Son and which He so generously shares with us – when He sends His Spirit to us, when He feeds us in His Holy Meal, when He speaks to us His life-giving Word. Again, how great news this is for us as well!

But the enemy is quick to confuse us, and he has created this image that following Jesus means giving up on all the fun and enjoyable things in this life and stepping on that boring and joyless road. Who would want that?!

But nothing can be further from the truth than these lies. As if remaining unrepentant captives of our idols and our sinful passions could be considered good and enjoyable. But that's what these lies are about.

We can call these lies **another gospel. Yes, that's our next topic. Another gospel.** As Paul the apostle wrote, there really is no another gospel: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ." (Gal 1:6-7)

What is that another gospel?

It is very dangerous. It sounds Biblical and it actually doesn't require anything from us. "We need to love others, we need to accept people as they are, we shouldn't judge anyone, accept everyone as Jesus did, for God is love and He has liberated us from all the burdens of laws and regulations. We are free to be authentic selves."

I am sure that you have heard it is one way or another, for this message is all around us these days. Except... it is no gospel at all, as Paul warned us. The Biblical story is clear. God the Creator brings into existence this beautiful creation and entrusts us to care for it, we are deceived, turn away and rebel against our Creator.

Sin and death come into the world. But our God doesn't give up on us and on His creations. He promises to restore what our rebellion had broken, to rescue us from the captivity of our slave masters, sin and death, and eventually to restore the entire creation so that He can dwell with us as He designed it from the very beginning. That's the Biblical story.

With this another gospel the only sin is when you judge others, and don't accept them as they are. There is no repentance, instead, there is remaining. You aren't invited to turn God; you are simply endorsed to remain on the same trajectory.

There is no believing in the Gospel either. For there is no need for forgiveness in this other gospel. Instead, there are lies that we don't need any forgiveness. "You are good as you are, that's how God created you, you don't need to change."

Just for the sake of making fun of this other gospel, imagine! Jesus meets the adulterous woman: "Hey, I accept you, go on, stick to your guns!" Jesus meets prostitutes: "Hey, Gals, I accept you, good on you, be empowered, show them!"

Jesus meets tax collectors: "Hey Guys, I accept you, you are good, go get them Tigers!" Jesus meets Saul the persecutor of the Church: "Hey man, I accept you, I love you, have fun with those bigots in Damascus!"

"Sinners, Pharisees, everyone... I accept you; I love you, Guys, keep doing the good work, be yourself!" Yes, that's our Jesus... or not! "Follow me! Deny yourself! Take your cross! Crucify the passions of the flesh! For you are created for good works!" That's the real Jesus.

For those who bring this another gospel, according to Jesus "it would be better for them to have a great millstone fastened around their neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Mat 18:6) However, today this other gospel is much more widespread than the true Gospel.

And, surely, it is easier to see it elsewhere, examples abound. Lesbian bishop in the Lutheran Church of Sweden, who is not sure which way is better, Jesus or Mohammed. Transgender bishop in Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, whose pronouns are “they/them”. Churches that remove crosses not to offend Muslims. Churches that wave rainbow flags, wanting to accept what the world tells them.

It is easier to point fingers at others. But what about our church? Do you think that we have not embraced this other gospel? Think twice! Lutheran Care encourages adoption by same sex couples. “Who needs a mother and a father?!”

Lutheran Education SA, NT & WA prepares a policy for respecting and valuing gender diversity, but refuses to include in that policy any reference to Biblical teaching on marriage and sexuality.

It is in our church where a group of pastors and laypeople under the loving name of “Accept” works towards further acceptance without repentance. We could continue this list... How would you answer if someone asked you: “So you too belong to that church that does all these things?” What would you say?

“We don’t do that, no! We only fund others to do that.” And, please, notice, I am not saying that we are better and those people are worse sinners. Many of them are lovely people, caring, loving, most of them with much better past records than I have. But that is another gospel that they have embraced and now promote.

But now, let’s turn to us. This is usually the least pleasant part. Have we embraced this other gospel? Have we been shaped by it? What do you think? You see, examples that we listed are the fruits of that other gospel.

But it didn’t start with fruits. It starts with us. Really? How, you may wonder? This is how. When we don’t expect ourselves and our members to repent and believe in the Gospel. When we don’t expect ourselves and our members to strive to lead new and holy lives as the Word of God instructs us.

When we don’t expect them to listen to God’s Word, when we don’t expect them to participate in the Great Commission, when we don’t expect them to support the Gospel with their time and means and prayers.

When we just accept them as they are. “You don’t really need to follow Jesus, you can believe whatever suits you, as long as you say that you think you are a Christian, we are good. And if you ever show up in our congregation, we are ready to bend backwards to please you. For we accept you as you are.”

It starts when we just baptize and do not expect to see them again. When we just confirm and do not expect to see them again. When we just marry and do not expect to see them again. When we close our eyes to sin and pretend that there is no need for repentance and forgiveness.

Sure, it is pleasant to our sinful ears to hear that we are okay, that we are accepted as we are, no need to change, no need for that new life in Christ, no need to follow

Him, to imitate Him, no need to deny ourselves, no need to take our crosses, just relax as the cultural current gently carries you to the hell. See, how terrifying this is!

From time to time some pastors are crazy enough and try to remain faithful, then there are stories how they are haunted by their own “loving and faithful” members, how instead of supporting their pastors their own congregations turn against them.

“We have to accept, we shouldn’t judge!” Yes, yes, we should accept and shouldn’t judge anyone who repents and wants to believe the Gospel. Amen! But as for those who want to call themselves Christians, but on their own terms, Paul instructs us:

“But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of [Christian] brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.” (1 Cor 5:11)

We all are guilty. I am guilty for not preaching and teaching and explaining this more often. I am guilty for not taking a firmer stand. I am guilty of fearing what others will think and how they will react, instead of trying to uphold what the Lord of the Church expects. I am guilty. Father, forgive me!

What about you? You can examine yourselves... How much have you been shaped by this other gospel? That’s up to you. Our God knows all of this. He knows. And His grace is manifested as He still continues to call us to Himself.

This brings us back to who and how Jesus calls to follow Him. Remember, the Triune God calls everyone. It is still His voice that calls us, that calls you: “Repent and believe in the Gospel! You, yes, you! Come to me!”

Jesus keeps calling us, He keeps calling you, even if we have let Him down, even as we have been infected with this other gospel. Still, that’s His voice calling: “Come, follow me!” His loving heart just doesn’t give up on us. No matter what!

That is His healing Word that helps us to see how things really are, how far this cancer of another gospel has spread. We need to hear this, we need to see our situation in the light of God’s Word, so that we can turn away from our sins and back into the embrace of our gracious Lord Jesus Christ.

If we do listen to Him, He speaks to us His grace and forgiveness: “I forgive you for your ignorance! I forgive you for your fear of what others may think! I forgive you for your little faith in me! I forgive you for your indifference! I forgive you! Come to me!”

Isn’t He amazing, our God! We can’t scare Him away! He calls us and sticks with us! He calls and sticks with you! He wants to bless you with new life, He wants you to follow Him, through the narrow gate straight into the life to come.

Please, O Lord, help us in our weakness! Father, help us to be faithful! Give us courage and wisdom, give us strength and joy to follow and imitate Your Son Jesus, even when it costs us dearly. Have mercy, O Lord, help us!

Amen.