



We're in a series to start the year where we are looking at some of the significant events of Jesus' life – teachings, miracles, conversations, and so forth – and through them seeing the depth of Jesus' life and what it means for us. And I don't think there's any doubt that the most important people in Jesus' life were the 12 men he invited to follow him...to be his initial band of disciples. He poured into each one of them: teaching, training, discipling, and so forth. And today we see Jesus assembling his team, inviting people to a life of discipleship, following Him.

Now, there are a few background things that are helpful to understanding the depth of this passage. The first is that **Matthew was certainly Jewish**. It's the English rendition of the Jewish name, "Matthios". This is important to understand and remember as we'll see in a moment.

Second, it's highly unlikely that this is the first time Jesus and Matthew came in contact. There was probably some kind of relationship before. They may or may not have previously had a *private conversation*...but there was *some* connection. Perhaps Matthew had heard Jesus teach on some previous occasions. Perhaps he had witnessed a miracle or two. Maybe Jesus had seen Matthew standing at the edge of a crowd, observing and listening, open to Jesus' teaching. People don't just up and leave their career and their home to physically follow a wandering itinerant teacher without some kind of prior knowledge of the guy. I mean, if someone whom you had never met before walked up to you and said, "Hey, come follow me," there is no way on God's green earth you're going to get up and follow that person like Matthew does here. Usually, in today's culture, if someone *does* do something like this, it doesn't end well. There had to have been some kind of connection, or awareness by Matthew of Jesus.

Third of all, we need to remember that in their day, tax collectors were on the lowest level of society – just above pond scum. Tax collectors were known to be cheats. They were free-lance middle-men between the tax payer and the government, and they got very wealthy by taking advantage of their

place in the system. They gave to the government what the government expected to receive in a certain geographic region; but the collectors would collect more than what they passed along to the government – and they would keep that extra. On one hand, they were just trying to make a living like anyone else. But on the other hand, they lived very well. They abused their position and relationship to the Roman Government to essentially extort money from people. And because of that, they were essentially considered thieves. And since Matthew is Jewish – which we noted earlier – he’d also be considered a traitor by his fellow Jews.

So Jesus invites Matthew to be a part of His ministry team, the 12 Disciples. And: **This is how Jesus builds his team.** Each of the 12 probably got invited in essentially the same way – we *know* some of them did because a few of these conversations are recorded for us in the Gospels. And what we see is an invitation to Discipleship... to following Jesus...to becoming what most of the world calls “being a Christian.” And as you know, it’s not just for Matthew, or just for the 12, or for some other select group: it’s for everyone, with a special emphasis on those who are spiritually sick. As Jesus says in verses 12 and 13, it’s not those who are healthy who need a doctor, but those who are sick. Jesus hasn’t come for those who are righteous, but for sinners. Matthew, as a traitor tax collector, would have been considered the president of the unrighteous sinners’ club. And Jesus puts him on his team, which undoubtedly created for some interesting dynamics with the others.

So the key to all of this is “following Jesus.” And although for the original 12 disciples there was a physical and geographic element to this following as they moved from town to town, the main focus of being a follower of Jesus has much more to do with how we live, not where we live. Even more importantly, it has to do with our relationship with Jesus. It’s following Jesus so that we might be more like him – spiritually, relationally, morally, and so forth...and ultimately so that we might follow him eternally. There are a few things that this discipleship means.

The first point is that: **Jesus sees in Matthew what he *could* be, rather than what he is.** Jesus doesn’t see a scum-bag cheater and religious hypocrite. He sees someone who has the potential to be a faithful disciple, who could carry

forth the Good News that Jesus came to proclaim. This may be the most important facet of this passage, and of the Gospel. Matthew is “exhibit A” of the transformation and new life that can come from following Jesus Christ. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” Jesus knows that a person’s past does not have to predict their future. And in Matthew he sees someone with the possibility of becoming a new creation, of being set free from living one way, to living in a new way that glorifies God and would help the Kingdom of God grow. Fortunately, Jesus sees this in all of us, which is really good news.

Second of all, discipleship is a growing process. I want to spend the rest of the message on this one point, because Discipleship is important. Our growth in relationship with Jesus matters. Discipleship is more akin to cooking in an old-school crock-pot rather than a new-school insta-pot pressure cooker. Discipleship to Jesus is not a sprint, it’s a marathon. In fact, it’s not just the marathon race...it’s all the training that goes into the marathon. And if a marathoner is going to keep running, they have to stay in shape. This is true in a lot of aspects of life, of course: music, dance, other sports, hobbies, etc. The great cellist Pablo Casals, when he was in his 80’s or early 90’s was interviewed by a reporter. The reporter asked him how many hours a day he practiced. Pablo replied that he still practiced some 5 hours a day. The reporter was stunned. Why would he still be practicing so many hours a day, at his age? And his response was, “Because I think I am making progress.” So: **How’s our progress in our discipleship to Jesus?** Are you growing in becoming more Christ-like? Are the things that mark Jesus’ life the things that mark your life?

At our last Session meeting, the Elders went through a segment of a devotional put out by our denomination that we’ve been going through over the last several months. And this last time, we were invited to assess where our church is, as a whole, in discipleship to Jesus. Where are we in this discipleship marathon? There were six areas of discipleship we looked at, and the idea is that over time a church grows and progresses through these stages, though we might cycle back around through them at different times, too. And these 6 things apply to individuals as well. So with Matthew’s

invitation to follow Jesus as a springboard to this topic of discipleship...of following Jesus...I want to go through these 6 marks of a disciple, and ask you to consider where you might be on this list. You may want to write these down so you can reflect on them later.

The first is that: **A disciple of Jesus finds his/her identity in Jesus. Jesus really is Savior *and Lord* of his or her life.** This is the first step, and without it the rest will not happen. Matthew exhibits this for us when he leaves his tax collection business to follow Jesus. He no longer identifies as a tax-collector, but as a follower of Jesus. Now, it may be that *other* people wanted to keep identifying him as a tax collector – or traitor, or cheat, and so forth. But his identity is now found in Jesus. And it needs to be said that if we never truly get this one, we will never get to the ones that follow. You cannot be a disciple of Jesus if you don't find your identity in Him.

Knowing that God loves us...trusting Him and his promises and his word...Believing that Jesus' life death and resurrection actually mean something...Believing that God's Spirit is active and moving in our lives and in this world...All of this stems from finding our identity in Christ, and sets us free to live into the rest of these stages of discipleship. We'll never get it perfectly...in fact, that's true for all of these stages of discipleship, and we can't let that stop us from moving forward...but if your identity is found in popularity, or money, or your stuff, or your relationships – even your spouse if you're married or kids if you have them – or in your work...if your identity is ultimately wrapped up in any of those, and *not* in the love of God in Jesus, *the rest of these won't come to fruition*. Your discipleship will always remain in its infancy if Jesus is not your Savior and your Lord...

Second is that a disciple of Jesus is not afraid to take risks for the sake of following Jesus. The story is told of a ship at sea that became engulfed by a large and violent storm. As the storm raged, the captain realized his ship was sinking fast. He called out, "Anyone here know how to pray?" One man stepped forward. "Aye, Captain, I know how to pray." "Good," said the captain, "you pray while the rest of us put on our life jackets - we're one short." Following Jesus is risky.

Matthew shows us this one as well in the leaving of his business. I don't care how much interaction he may have had with Jesus before this, or how much knowledge he had about Jesus, this was a risk. Also, his reputation as a tax-collector meant that as a follower of Jesus he was going to have people look at him with skepticism – including in all likelihood most of the other 12 disciples. They were probably shocked to hear that Jesus invited a tax collector to join them. Imagine if the WSU Cougars had announced a week ago or so that their new coach was Chris Petersen, the recently-retired head coach of the UW. It would be shocking...it would be like a traitor. Same if Mike Leach had come to the UW to fill Coach Petersen's shoes. That's how people would view him. So following Jesus was risky. (Risky for Jesus, too, but that's another sermon.)

Before going on to the next one, let me just say that I think: **“Taking risks for God” is probably the biggest hurdle for Christians to get over in their discipleship to Jesus.** In some ways, it even prevents them from really living into the first one – finding our identity in Jesus and not in whatever else we might be tempted to. Becoming a disciple of Jesus is a risk, and living it out is a risk. The reason this “risk step” is so tough is because safety, the opposite of risk, is always a temptation. Safety always beckons us and entices us and looks SO attractive. We don't want to add a ministry commitment because it might jeopardize our schedule; we don't want to give too much financially because it might jeopardize our budget; we don't want to be too public with our faith because it might jeopardize our relationships. The fact is, there are *always* new risks that God is calling us to take for the sake of the Gospel message, and so “safety” is always there knocking at the door as well. But Jesus has not invited us to follow him on a couch or lazy-boy recliner. Following Jesus is a life of adventure, of abundance, of dependence on God, of joining together in community for the sake of the gospel. It inherently has risks, and God gives us many opportunities to step out in faith and take those risks. My guess is that if we are honest with ourselves, a lot of us are at this stage in some way, shape, or form. We're like Peter being invited by Jesus to get out of the boat and walk on water (Matthew 14:22-33). Are we going to take that step, or are we going to stay in the boat with the other 11?

Third is that a disciple of Jesus lives out a “sent” life. Disciples of Jesus

bring their faith – and Jesus – to the world. If we haven't grown in our faith enough to accept the risk of following Jesus, we will never actually do this one. It is modeled on what Jesus himself did in the incarnation – Jesus is God come to us in the flesh. He initiated this. He took that step. He was intentional. For Jesus' disciples, this is usually called incarnational living. A disciple of Jesus intentionally engages with the world, and intentionally seeks to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world around us. It's this intentionality and sense of initiative for the cause of Christ that marks this level of discipleship.

Fourth is that a disciple of Jesus makes more disciples of Jesus. And no, this is not speaking about hopping in bed with your spouse to make disciples through procreation. This means mentoring others in the ways of Jesus. It means sharing your faith. This could be a result of living an incarnational life and intentionally representing Jesus so well that somebody, or a few somebodies, want to know more about Jesus; this could be teaching a “Christianity 101” type class at church, or a new members class, or any setting where you are helping to form the faith of other people. It can happen in the home, in the community, in the church. But the point is that Jesus expects his disciples to make more disciples. For instance, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commands his disciples to “make disciples of all nations.” That's the main point of his last words to them. Are you and I making more disciples? Who are you discipling?

Those first four are especially relevant to the lives of individual Christians. The last two are as well, but perhaps are even more geared toward a congregation as a whole. But we can still think of these last two in our own lives as well:

Fifth is that a disciple of Jesus develops Christian leaders and sets them free to lead according to the gifts God has given them. In other words, a person who does this is helping to shape, encourage, and send Christians into leadership positions – within the church, in the mission field, and so forth. About a year ago, one of my own kids started a Christian club at her school. This is a public, LWSD school. She had certain hoops to jump through that the school has established for any club that meets after school, and she

jumped through every one of them on her own. Now, every Friday, she's leading this Christian club at her school. It's happened because she's been developed as a Christian leader – Gwen, me, Paul, others of you here at church, other people in her life – who have developed her into that kind of Christian leader. We are called to develop new Christian leaders, and Jesus models this for us himself as he pours into the 12 disciples. They become the leaders of the early church. In Acts, Peter is most prominent, perhaps...but others, too. They led the early church.

Sixth is that a disciple of Jesus helps develop new Christian community. The apostle Paul is maybe the best Biblical example of this. He helped start a number of churches in a wide variety of cities and communities. At the congregational level, it means a church is helping to plant new churches – either in financial resources or with a group of people who start as the beginning of the new church, or in some other way. As a congregation here, we have essentially done this in the last few years with the 9:30 service. Although we're all one church, it's like a church plant within a church. It's a new Christian community – with some people who were here before, but reaching a lot who weren't. So it was an intentional starting of a new kind of Christian community that didn't previously exist here.

Note that none of these things has to do with Bible knowledge or theological understanding or titles in the church or anything like that. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you are called to grow along a path like described in these 6 points. We see it happening in Scripture all the time – including Jesus and his development of the 12 disciples – and we see it lived out today in the church as well.

So to wrap this up, I want to ask you a couple questions. First (and I asked this one already), where are you in your discipleship to Jesus? Are you like Matthew is in this passage: just beginning? Or are you somewhere further along the way? Second, and: **Most importantly: How is God challenging and encouraging you to move forward in your discipleship in 2020? What is your next step so that you might flourish as a disciple of Jesus Christ?** My general sense of things is that as a congregation...on the whole...we are kind of stuck at numbers 3 and 4 – intentionally living a

“sent” life to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world, and being a church filled with disciples who are making disciples: introducing people to Jesus, bringing them to church, mentoring them in the faith, and so forth. (We’ve taken some risks – new service, new denomination, new leadership structure, but probably a lot of those didn’t feel real risky for most of us...so maybe “taking risks for Jesus” is where we are some as a congregation, too.) But individually, there’s a wide variety here at Rose Hill from the first stage to the last – though most are somewhere in the middle, I suspect. Where are you? How is God leading you to grow in faith, and what is that next step, that next opportunity that He is giving you to move forward in faith? Whatever it is, I hope you’ll take that step this year, and that collectively as a church we’d take some steps forward as well as Jesus continues to build His team here at Rose Hill. Let’s pray...Amen.