

CARE Like Jesus 5/14/17

Summary

As he sat outside his booth on the road to Bethsaida, he noticed that the road seemed dustier than usual today. Looking around he noticed the men working for him seemed to buzz around at their usual pace, glancing up into the sky it was clear, blue, and calm. He couldn't tell why, but something felt distinctly different about today. And he was right, something distinctly different would happen. His life would change all because of an invitation from Jesus of Nazareth.

The famed Renaissance painter Caravaggio was commissioned in 1599 to paint, *The Calling of St. Matthew*. It is a beautiful painting and the piece that put Caravaggio on the map as a world class-artist. Now, I'm not an art expert, but what stands out to me is how the characters are dressed. Caravaggio used anachronism to make a very important point with this painting. He intentionally painted the men in 16th-century garb instead of 1st-century garb, so that those who viewed the painting could understand exactly what was so profoundly going on. And what was going on was, how Jesus' Great Commandment Love was expressed in Great Commission Living through his invitation to Levi to, "follow me".

Levi, also known as Matthew was born into a Jewish family but worked for the Roman government as a tax collector. The word that Luke uses for Levi's occupation is, *telōnēs*. This word literally means, *tax farmer*. And that is a better descriptor of Levi's actual job than what we would understand as a tax collector today. The Romans farmed out their tax collection system. And would employ local men who knew the customs, culture, and religious identity of specific regions to collect taxes. And so, Levi who was Jewish worked for the Roman government to collect taxes in a predominantly Jewish area. The thing about being a "tax farmer" is that Rome was only concerned in getting their portion. They were not concerned with how much you actually collected. So being a tax farmer was a very lucrative vocation, and Levi was a particularly wealthy man. Yet, as you can imagine and probably feel around April 15th each year, no one liked paying taxes, let alone knowing you were getting cheated. It was particularly worse in Jewish areas where an extra healthy serving of disdain for the Romans was

attached to tax farmers like Levi, and they were viewed as traitors or backstabbers. And that is why it is so important to Caravaggio to make sure everyone understood not only the profound invitation for Levi to follow Jesus but the sincere care that is expressed in it.

If we are going to FISH like Jesus, we absolutely must CARE like Jesus.

Caring like Jesus is not something that can happen accidentally. This story forces us to ask ourselves, *Are my relationships intentional or hap-hazard?* Or in other terms do I specifically live in such a way that I routinely and purposefully look for those around me who I can in some specific way, care for? What we almost certainly see with immediate clarity in this story is:

Jesus' relational ministry has scope.

When Jesus strolls up to Levi's tax booth he is living, walking, and caring in a very diverse world. It is diverse economically, socially, politically, and religiously. And in this story, we see that Jesus cares for a wide range of people. Let's look at the cast of characters:

- ◆ **Levi (Matthew):** As we know Levi was a tax collector, or more precisely a tax farmer as he wasn't collecting taxes on a fixed salary. He was also Jewish and despised as a traitor by his religious and patriotic Jewish neighbors. But he himself, he was deeply religious at all. Yet, there is something interesting about him, his response to Jesus' invitation, is immediate. Sure, he would definitely have heard of, most likely seen, and quite possibly even listened to Jesus by this point. He lived and worked in the region where Jesus performed the most miracles. Consider Jesus' own words, **"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes."**¹ – Lk. 10:13 But while he is not deeply religious there is something in him that is indeed soft to God, and he shows it in his response to Jesus' invitation.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2016). (Lk 10:13). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

- ◆ **Tax Collectors (sinners):** These are the men and possibly women that are friends with Levi. They are the ones that Levi so enthusiastically invites over to a party at his house, in order that they too might meet Jesus. This group was most likely just like Levi, Jewish people who because of their work or desire couldn't keep the strict standards of the law, and were ceremonially unclean. This group could also include heretics, openly immoral people, and gentiles. This is a very diverse crew who all have for some reason poor social standing; and, they come to eat at a friend's house and meet Jesus.

- ◆ **The Disciples (follow Jesus):** This is the group of fishermen that have been following Jesus around the Galilean countryside hearing his preaching / teaching and watching him perform miracles. They are good Jewish men, of modest means (after all they can afford to leave work for a while), and are of good social standing.

- ◆ **Scribes (Pharisees):** This group of men are the religious elite. They are learned and make up the ruling class of Jewish society. Simply, they are the ones who enforce the 633 laws that Levi's friends just couldn't keep. They are men of prominence in society, most certainly are of more than modest means, and have power. They are also religiously devout.

Jesus rubs shoulders with all of these folks not just in this story but throughout his entire ministry. And so we must ask, who do I rub shoulders with on a daily or weekly basis? What scope does my relational network have? And, if I want to CARE like Jesus, and I willing to be intentional in that network? Because that is the second thing we see:

Jesus' relational ministry has purpose.

Jesus doesn't just show up to Levi's house to get a free meal and perform some party tricks. No, Jesus goes there with a purposeful intentional to FISH for men. And his motivation for this fishing is great commandment love. Simply, Jesus is **purposefully responsive** to the opportunities that the Father brings his way. And, if we want to CARE like Jesus, we absolutely must do the same! We can clearly and quite quickly see the scope that Jesus' ministry has when we read the gospels. He has **multitudes** following him for food and just one more miracle. He

has **crowds** of people who really do believe that he is something more than just a parlor tricks - side show act, he might even be the Messiah in their eyes. But, it's the 12 that he really pours the most time into, and even of those 12, he has 3 that are really his inner circle. They get the most of him. Jesus' relational ministry has scope, great scope, and I'm willing to bet that when you look at your week, you do too. There is a great number of people that are in your sphere of influence and it is overwhelming to think of let alone try to care for all of them. Yet, we are not called to be all things to everyone around us, we are called to love everyone with great commandment love. But, even Jesus has a small group he invests his life into. And, if you want to CARE like Jesus you should too. Oh, by the way, how did he get the 12? He prayed about it, the Father revealed it to him, and Jesus **purposefully and obediently responds** (Lk. 9:28-29).

So how do we know if we are purposefully responding to the opportunities God is placing in our path? Ask these questions:

- ◆ How worn is my welcome mat?
- ◆ Who shares tough stuff with me?
- ◆ How are my spiritual investments doing? Ie. Are there a couple people I'm pouring into specifically to walk with them in their journey with Jesus?

If you ask these questions and can't tangibly answer them in your life, consider starting with a **prayer triad**. This is where you and two friends get together for 20-30 minutes a week to pray for 3 lost friends in your weekly sphere of influence (that is 3 per person) and commit to sharing the gospel with them. This is a great and simple way to be purposefully responsive to those God has put in your path. Yet, it is not easy. Consider the stakes for Levi, here is how theologian Leon Morris puts it,

"If following Jesus had not worked out for the fisherman, they could have returned to their trade without difficulty. But when Levi walked out of his job he was through. They would surely never take back a man who had simply abandoned his tax office.

His following of Jesus was a final commitment."²

² Luke: Leon Morris (IVP, 1974/ 2008) p. 139-140

If we are going to CARE like Jesus, it is going to cost us something. There is no way around it. Yet, we see one final and probably the most important aspect of Jesus' relational ministry, and that is,

Jesus' relational ministry was bathed in grace.

Grace and truth came perfectly in the incarnation, that is when Jesus came to earth as God. Consider John's words:

“For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”³

The incarnation is the very essence of Jesus' relational ministry, and it was nothing but an act of grace that it happened. We as broken humanity did not and do not deserve God's very intervention in our lives. Yet, that is what is precisely on offer for you and me every day of our lives. And here, at Levi's house grace is offered as the main course. Let's look at the cast of characters again:

- ◆ **Levi (Matthew):** The very invitation, no the very moment Jesus walked up to Levi and had a kind word to say was an act of grace. Do not forget how a tax collector was seen, let alone spoken to on a daily basis. Jesus walking up to Levi and offering a new life in the invitation “follow me” is the very act of grace that is on offer for you and me today. It is what Caravaggio wanted everyone to understand in his painting.

- ◆ **Tax Collectors (sinners):** The act of eating a meal with this motley crew is quite an extension of grace. In the 1st century eating with someone not only symbolized that you liked them, but it gave your tangible approval and acceptance of how they lived their lives. What Jesus picks up a piece of BBQ and eats with them he is accepting them and approving of them in the eyes of all who watch. And when such a religious figure as Jesus eats with you, WOW!!!! That would make quite an impression and would be quite an act of grace.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Jn 1:16–17). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

- ♣ **The Disciples (follow Jesus):** Receive grace from Jesus in the form of the mission. They get to see first-hand what Jesus is all about. What his priorities are and how he lives. Ultimately, they get to see what Jesus is calling them into and to lead in the power of the Holy Spirit after the cross. Jesus doesn't just throw them in the deep end, he gives them swimming lessons along the way.
- ♣ **Scribes (Pharisees):** They were the most outspoken and critical of Jesus. If there was one group at this BBQ that didn't deserve an ounce of grace it was them. Not only did they have open disdain for Jesus, but they spiritually oppressed people into spiritual death. Yet, Jesus extends grace in the form of a question (v. 28) and by quoting Hosea 6:6 which reflects the heart of God. To CARE like Jesus is to give grace to those who REALLY don't deserve it.

When it comes down to it, this BBQ at Levi's house really shows us Jesus' priority on relational ministry. What if God didn't just plopp us into a career or vocation simply because he was an eternal aptitude test? What if he put us there with an opportunity to be purposefully responsive and to spiritually invest into those who are in our relational sphere of influence? What if he really wants us to CARE like Jesus, and like the disciples we get to see the mission lived out in the text? The question still begs to be answered, are my relationships intentional or hap-hazard?

Because Great Commandment love must be expressed through Great Commission living.

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