

This morning, I am in the sixth week of a sermon series that I've entitled "Meeting Jesus." I am making my way through Luke's account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. This morning, we are going to be in Luke 5, looking at Jesus' calling the first of his disciples, Simon Peter and Levi, also known as Matthew, in order to understand what is involved in the call of God on our lives.

Luke 5:1–11 - One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. ² He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people **from the boat**. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." ⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they **began to sink**. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Luke 5:27–32 - 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. 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?**" ³¹ Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Four things that God's call involves:

1) God's call involves an experience of His holiness and our sinfulness

Luke 5:8-10 - When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken,¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Quick recap: Jesus is teaching the people by the Lake of Gennesaret, and asks Simon Peter if he can teach from his boat, so that the crowd will better hear him. After he is done teaching, he tells Peter to put out the net into the water to catch some fish. Peter, a fisherman by trade, tries to explain to this teacher that they have unsuccessfully fished all night, and that it would not make sense to try again in the day time, when fish are less likely to be caught. But he reluctantly does what Jesus tells him, and catches such a large number of fish that their nets begin to break and they need to enlist help from another boat. Faced with the reality of who this Jesus is, His clear power over nature and His evident supernatural wisdom, Simon Peter responds in horror and humility: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" He sees clearly both his own sin and the holiness of Jesus.

The call of God includes both an experience of His holiness and our sinfulness. It does not necessarily happen right up front like it did for Simon Peter in this passage. Levi's story does not give us the same level of details. Perhaps he had the same experience of Jesus' holiness and his own sinfulness, or maybe he just was tired of the tax collector life and was intrigued by the invitation to something better. We don't know. Levi, also known as Matthew, the author of the first gospel, was a tax collector, collecting customs on the goods transported on the road from Acre to Damascus, a hated collaborator with Rome, the lowest of the low as far as the Jews were concerned, and yet when met with Jesus' invitation, he leaves it all behind to follow Him.

For some people, they are drawn by the love of God, or they are fascinated by Jesus, or they come because of their own need for help or forgiveness. But at some point, the call of God is going to include an experience of the holiness of God and an awareness of our own sinfulness.

What is the holiness of God? The word holy, or holiness, is used in different ways throughout Scripture. At times it is describing *purity or sinlessness*, at other times it emphasizes *separateness or otherness* and at other times it is about *transcendence*, that God or something is a different class of being or object.

A good summary would be that God's holiness means that **God is transcendentally separate from us in His perfection**. He is not like us. He is perfect in every way, on

a whole other level. When Simon Peter experiences Jesus' authority over nature, he realizes that this man is a whole other class of being, and his own mortality and imperfections are exposed.

The reaction that Simon Peter has upon experiencing the holiness of Jesus is a common experience in the Bible. Think of Job, pleading for an audience with God, and once he finally experiences God in his holiness, responds by saying:

Job 42:5–6 - My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.
⁶Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Or Isaiah, coming undone upon receiving a vision of God in His throne room:

Isaiah 6:5 - “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Think about it. How many people talk about experiencing God like they are in the presence of something beautiful and wonderful that just makes them feel all warm and fuzzy? And how many people think that what we need is a God who just accepts and welcomes everyone just the way they are? But the true God is so much more than that. He is holy, and in His presence, our unholiness, our sinfulness, our utter unworthiness, is exposed, like a high-definition camera revealing all our flaws. God is a holy God, and the closer we get to Him, the more aware we become of not only our sin, but that we deserve to be struck down and annihilated by this holy God.

As R.C. Sproul put it in “The Holiness of God”:

“[A]s fearsome as death is, it is nothing compared with meeting a holy God. When we encounter Him, the totality of our creatureliness breaks upon us and shatters the myth that we have believed about ourselves, the myth that we are demigods, junior-grade deities who will try to live forever. ... When we meet the Absolute, we know immediately that we are not absolute. When we meet the Infinite, we become acutely conscious that we are finite. When we meet the Eternal, we know we are temporal. To meet God is a powerful study in contrasts.”

Simon Peter is in horror at his guilt, ashamed at his pride, terrified by what this Jesus deserves to do to him. And all he can say is “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.” At some point, the call of God on your life must result in an

experience of His holiness and of your own sinfulness. It took a few years for me to truly start to grasp this about God and myself, that it wasn't that God was lucky to have me on His team, but that He loved me in spite of myself, in spite of my own sin and rebellion. And even today, I continually have experiences like this, where I say to God, "You know you could do better than me, right? What are you doing with me?"

Have you met this holy God? Or have you only experienced some vague religious nice feelings?

2) God's call involves a grace that cannot be earned but will cost us everything

Luke 5:10-11 - Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Luke 5:27-28 - 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.

Simon Peter, and Levi, both deserve death. They are sinful men who have experienced the holy God of the universe. Simon Peter even pleads with Jesus to go away from him, for he knows that he does not deserve to be in the same boat with this man. And yet he is met not with punishment, but with grace, with forgiveness, the undeserved favor of Jesus. Jesus calls him to follow Him, to trade in fishing for fish for fishing for men. And Levi is invited to follow Jesus as well. They have not earned this favor; it is freely given by Jesus to two undeserving men.

We have to know that God's call is a call of grace, and that is what saves us.

Ephesians 2:8-10 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

We are not saved by our good works, but by the undeserved gift of God's grace in Jesus' death on the cross for us. But while this grace is completely free, it is also very true that responding to the call will cost them everything. They have to be

willing to leave all and follow Jesus. Simon Peter will leave not only fishing but apparently the miraculous catch of fish that he just obtained. And Levi will leave his lucrative position as a tax collector to follow Jesus. As Jesus said:

Luke 9:23–25 - Then [Jesus] said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. ²⁵ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”

It may not be all at once as it was for Simon Peter and Levi, but once we have submitted our lives to the Lordship of Jesus, there is nothing that is off limits. He will want every part of us. The words that we speak. The friends that we have. Our money and resources. Our sexuality and romantic relationships. Our time. Our talents. It is all His.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20 - Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

You are saved by grace, but to follow Him will mean submitting it all to Him. But do not forget: He created you, and He loves you so much that He gave His life for you, and the incredible thing is that as you submit these things to Him, you will always find that there is nothing that you can give up that He will not replace with something better, with more of His presence and power.

God is a God of grace, who saves us not by what we have done but by the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins. But he also demands our whole lives. Once again, so many people believe we just need a God and a religion that just welcomes and accepts everyone as they are, that makes no demands on anyone. And yet, the true God is holy, and before Him, we are all exposed as sinners, and unworthy. But to all who confess this unworthiness, to all who acknowledge their spiritual poverty, to all who climb down off of His throne and enthrone Him as Savior and Lord, He gives grace. He forgives completely. And He loves perfectly.

Romans 5:6–8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

THAT is the love of God – not some mushy Barney the purple dinosaur kind of love that just loves you because you’re so special, but a love that found you when you were powerless, ungodly, and a sinner, and gave His life for you, to take away your guilt and shame and transform you into the person God created you to be.

Hebrews 10:10 - And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Why does understanding the holiness of God, our sinfulness, and God’s grace towards us matter so much? Why not just believe that God is more like Barney, loving and accepting everyone as they are because we’re all so special? Think about the dilemma we so often face in our relationships. We long to be seen, to be known fully, and to be completely loved for who we are. But we are afraid that if people truly knew who we were – our past, our thoughts, our behaviors – they would reject us. And so we are forced to choose between sharing only part of ourselves and living with a love that doesn’t truly cover and accept the worst parts of us, or sharing everything and risking rejection.

This is the plot of so many romantic movies. Girl meets guy. They fall in love. But girl has a secret. She’s not really a princess, or her interest in him is part of a dare, or she has something else that she is hoping the boy does not find out. And things are really great for a while. But eventually he finds out. And it seems that everything is falling apart and the relationship is over. But then he realizes that he does love her, even with her secret, and tells her of his unconditional love for her. And they both live happily ever after.

Now think carefully. There is a reason that plotline is used so often, because it touches on something very true about us. I think it tells us that we have a deep-seated fear that if people really knew us, if the truth about us were exposed, they would reject us. If they really knew what we thought, what we desire, what we have done, then they would be horrified and run screaming from us. I think it tells us that one of our deepest desires is that someone perfect and beautiful would know us completely, including all our faults and flaws, and still choose to love us and forgive us and never reject us. But we are afraid that is impossible. And so most of us hide our faults and flaws. And although we may get someone to love us, deep down we know that they don’t love the real us, just the parts that we are brave enough to share. Or, maybe we are completely honest, and in the process we scare people away. I mean, just think about social media. We criticize it for being a place

where people present curated versions of themselves, only putting forward the best parts. But when someone is brutally honest, it tends to be really awkward.

As Tim Keller put it in *The Meaning of Marriage*:

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.”

I think the movies we love tell us something true, that we long for someone perfect and beautiful to see us and know us completely, with all our faults and brokenness, and to not reject us but to choose us, to love us, to show us unending grace, and by their love to purify us, cleanse us, transform us into someone better, to empower us to live life with meaning and purpose. But outside of the movies, no human being can perfectly do that. But there is a story that these stories point to, there is one who perfectly fulfills that desire of our heart. There is one who is perfect and beautiful in every way. And He does know us completely, with all our faults and brokenness, better than we even know ourselves. And in the light of His holiness, in His presence, we come undone like Simon Peter, as we recognize ourselves for the frauds we are, the pretenders, the broken and hopeless sinners who can not redeem themselves. But in His presence, as we confess our unworthiness to Him, we find the forgiving and cleansing and empowering love that our hearts have been longing for. As Simon Peter found out when he told Jesus to go away from him, Jesus’ grace is enough to cover over his sins, and he calls him, and us, to a life of purpose alongside him.

As Jesus promised:

Matthew 5:3 – “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Many of us think we want someone who thinks we are perfect just the way we are. But what our hearts truly need and long for is to be known completely and loved perfectly, with a love that not only accepts all of our flaws and weaknesses and fears and anxieties but heals them as they are brought into the light and met not with rejection but with grace. Think about it: what would it look like to truly confess all of your stuff to someone you love and to be met with grace, with love, with forgiveness, with commitment and loyalty and an “I am with you and I am for

you”? It would liberate us from fear and pretense. We don’t need to pretend to be better than we are. It would humble us out of our self-righteousness. We don’t need to justify ourselves in order to feel okay. We don’t need to look down on others to feel better about ourselves. We can be completely honest and transparent about my weaknesses and sins, because honesty and ceasing self-justification is the way to true healing and peace, thanks to the death of Jesus.

1 John 4:18 - There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

To be fully known and fully loved is what our hearts long for. **This life-transforming grace does not say “you’re perfect just the way you are, don’t ever change” but “you are far from perfect, but you are loved with a perfect love that can perfect you and give your life meaning.”**

3) God’s call involves trusting and obeying Him even when we don’t understand Him

Luke 5:4-6 - When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”⁵ Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.

Now, remember that Peter was a fisherman, and Jesus was a carpenter. It made no sense to Simon Peter what Jesus was telling him to do, and yet he did it anyways, even though it was very reluctantly. In God’s call on your life, I can guarantee you that you will not understand all that He wants you to do or to give up. But you are called not to understand, but to trust Him, to obey Him, to believe that the one who loved you so much that He gave His life for you knows what is best for you. He has authority over everything. And so there is nothing you can give up that He won’t replace with something better, with more of Himself.

What if he does call you to a life of singleness and celibacy? What if he calls you to leave a lucrative job for something more service-oriented? Or what if he calls you to stay in your job but to do it ethically, to not cut corners, to not take advantage of people, but to use your talents to serve others, for the good of the community? What if God calls you to serve in Children’s Church, or to step up to lead a community group, or to share the gospel with your neighbor or family member? Would you trust and obey Him even when you don’t understand Him?

Or what if God allows sickness or disability or relational brokenness or financial struggle into your life? **Would you still trust and obey Him, even when you don't understand why He has not answered your prayer?**

John 10:10 - The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Believe that He is good and that He loves you. He proved that at the cross. You will not understand everything that He does, but you can trust that whatever happens, He loves you.

Proverbs 3:5-6 - Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

4) God's call involves a greater purpose than earthly work

Luke 5:10-11 - Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Jesus not only forgives Simon Peter, but calls him to a greater purpose; not just to fish for fish, but to catch men, to save them, to rescue them, alongside of him. And he calls Levi to follow him as well. God's call will not necessarily mean leaving your job the way it did for Simon Peter and for Levi, but it will mean living for a purpose greater than making money, feeding your family, or making a contribution to your field or to society. It will mean being on mission with God to save the world from sin and death, to be a part of bringing God's kingdom of love, peace, and justice to this world.

Luke 5:29-31 - 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?**" ³¹ Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Again, Jesus uses a work metaphor – doctors and patients – to make a point about the deeper, more purposeful work that He has come to do and to which He is

calling his followers. And notice that Levi does not abandon his friend, but brings Jesus to them. The Pharisees had a big issue with this, because they were separatists. They believed that by sharing a meal with these sinners, that Jesus was endorsing their behavior and being soft on sin. But Jesus tells them that he has come like a doctor for the sick, and like a prophet calling sinners to repentance. And so he will not separate from them, but will seek them out.

Responding to the call of Jesus is not a call to retreat from the world, to live in your own safe little bubble. It is a call to separate from sin, yet, but not from people who need Jesus. Do not abandon your friends, your coworkers, and surround yourself only with Christians. Bring Jesus to them. Do not forget Jesus' commission to us:

Matthew 28:18–20 - Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Acts 1:8 – “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

God's call involves an experience of His holiness and our sinfulness. God's call involves a grace that cannot be earned but will cost us everything. God's call involves trusting and obeying Him even when we don't understand Him. And God's call involves a greater purpose than earthly work

We have an epidemic of meaninglessness. God calls you to be a part of the purpose for which you were created. To join him in saving people from hell, from death, to bring them back to God and help them become the people God created them to be. To join Jesus in bringing His kingdom of love, peace, and justice to this world. How is God calling you to respond to Him today?