



## —WEEK TWO— “FOR YOUR GIFTS”

### —CHECK-IN—

**How are you? What’s one cool thing God has done in your life in the last week? And, a common practice is to give something up for the season of Lenten? Did you do that this year? Why or why not? If so... how’s it going? Have the withdrawal symptoms stopped? How many times have you given in? Be honest... you’re among friends.**

### —OPENING PRAYER—

**God of Inclusion, gather us in.  
Help us overcome the things we feel disqualify us from your love.**

## — INTRODUCTION —

Last week, we began our Lenten journey with the tv show, *The Chosen*, diving into the stories of some of the characters, their Biblical references, and what we can learn from them in order to deepen our relationship with Christ as we prepare our hearts for the coming of Easter. The show does a creative and brilliant job of *plausibly* filling in blanks the gospels left in the backstories of the followers of Jesus. As long as it didn't conflict with Scripture, they went with it. Did it actually happen that way? Who knows? But the lives the show brings to life certainly draw you in. Today we'll look at one of the more fascinating characters depicted in *The Chosen* and how his story can give each of us hope for the things with which we struggle. But first...

**Warm-up Question: Have you started watching *The Chosen*? If so, what's your favorite moment from the show so far? If not, what moment from the gospels are you most interested to see how they would bring to life?**

## — THE CHOSEN —

Regardless of your favorite moment, these stories are what make the show and the Biblical narrative so compelling. The writers have powerfully depicted how each character found Jesus, or... how Jesus found them. And in these meetings, we see a common thread, the

thread that is the basis for our entire Lenten series: Jesus's most devoted followers were drawn to him for one reason... in him they found healing for their *brokenness*. And we dive into these characters and their stories, because in them we identify our own brokenness, such that WE might be drawn to Jesus in the same powerful and healing way they were. The first of *The Chosen's* "chosen" for our series is the character that begins the series, season 1, episode 1, and how one sentence from the gospels gave the foundation for her character and a moving encounter with Jesus. Luke's gospel, chapter 8, tells us... "among [Jesus's followers] were...

## MARY MAGDALENE

... *from whom he had cast out 7 demons.*" Whereas that's all we get about how she met Jesus, it paints a dramatic and powerful picture of a tormented and broken life and an incredible miracle that brought her to her savior. Her brokenness was a past defined by shame. But Jesus saw her future, calls her by name, and heals her. It reminded us that despite our "demons," we too are called by name, and chosen, not despite our past, but rather *for our healing*.

Today, we meet a character who gets a little more backstory in the Bible than Mary and whose encounter paints a picture of yet another life drawn to Jesus out of brokenness. Our "chosen" for this week is...

## MATTHEW

Here's what we know. More so than Mary, the gospels give us a full story of how he and Jesus met and how he came to be a follower. In fact, Matthew is mentioned in 3 of the 4 accounts of Jesus's life and is even named as one of the apostles in Acts who, after Jesus's death and resurrection, helped begin the early church. We even believe he wrote the first gospel recounting Jesus's life. So, Matthew was a pretty big deal. We also know he lived in Capernaum, where Jesus began his ministry, which means he was likely one of Jesus's first followers. This is that story.

**Read Mark, chapter 2, verses 13 through 17.**

“Wait, where was Matthew? This was about a guy named Levi.” Same dude, we'll get to that in a minute. These 5 verses are our introduction to, and the most we know about, him. But from this story, we learn so much about his life and the brokenness that drew him to Jesus.

**Question 1: What stands out to you about Matthew (a.k.a. Levi's) story? If you were Matthew, how would you have felt to be asked to follow Jesus in this moment? Would you have said, “yes”? What do you think that dinner of “disreputable sinners” was like? What catches your attention about this Scripture?**

Matthew is a tax collector, which, (a lot like the IRS now,) means he was reviled by his people. See, when Rome conquered a new land, they didn't always enslave the people. It was easier and more

profitable to just install their military and governing officials alongside the existing ruling structure of the native people in order to keep the peace. “Keep your king... but you get our Roman Governor, as well. Enjoy!” Where this system got messy was when the two overlapped... for example, in the collecting of taxes. The Roman officials were required to collect taxes from everyone in their land for Caesar, but they didn’t want the responsibility. It caused too much conflict. And so, they came up with a devilishly smart idea: employ a native person from among the conquered to collect taxes from their own. Diabolical, yet brilliant. And so, in Israel, Tax Collectors were Jews. And as such, they were seen as traitors, working on the side of the oppressors, to rob the people of what little money they had. This was the lucrative but despised role in which we find Matthew. He was a Jew, betraying his people to pay Caesar.

One of the more beautiful character decisions the writers make in *The Chosen* is to portray Matthew as being on the autism spectrum, giving a plausible backstory to this disciple. Now, we don’t know if Matthew actually had something like Aspergers Syndrome. But because he has a child with autism, show creator Dallas Jenkins wanted to depict one of the characters on the spectrum to honor her. And who better than Matthew? Thus, in the show, Matthew takes the job, not because he wanted to betray his people, but simply because he was good with numbers and, to make a living, was a logical choice. He doesn’t fully grasp social cues and why just doing his job causes such ire among his people. And for 7 episodes, they beautifully depict his struggle. It builds to a point where he’s

overwhelmed. His parents disown him. He has a dog as his only friend. He witnesses one of Jesus's miracles, which doesn't fit into his fact- and logic-based world. He is confused. He is tired. He is broken. Did it really happen that way? Who knows? But it would give us a plausible explanation as to why, on that day, as he is sitting in his tax-booth... his world spinning... when Jesus walks by, and asks, "come and follow me, be my disciple," he says, "yes."

**Question 2: Knowing this, how would you have felt if you were one of Jesus's disciples, watching your Teacher invite a reviled tax collector to be one of his followers? Would you have gone to his house for dinner? Do you have compassion for Matthew, or would you have struggled to include him in the group?**

And here's the point. Whether Matthew was a tax-collector because he was on the autism spectrum and it was the logical choice or because he made a conscious decision to take the job for less-than-reputable reasons, Matthew had a condition. He was outcast and despised. He was likely lonely and searching. Remember, in this series, we are investigating how each character was drawn to Jesus out of their brokenness. Whether it was something he couldn't control (like Aspergers) or something he could control (like greed,) this *condition* was the brokenness that drew Matthew to Jesus. He had a situation that he felt disqualified him from being chosen by God. And yet, when Jesus walked by, saw him for who he was at heart rather than his *condition*, he was so moved that he left his incredibly lucrative and secure job and followed this man. And he

didn't just close his tax booth for the day, listen to Jesus preach on the shore, and then get back to the booth by closing time. No, he left the whole thing... left life as he knew it, to follow this man for good. Matthew was chosen...

## DESPITE HIS CONDITION

Thing is, we all have a condition, (or conditions,) that causes us to be put on the outside, something that prevents us from being accepted. We all have something, whether we chose it or it just happened to us, that we feel disqualifies us from being chosen by God. And yet, Jesus chooses us anyway.

**Question 3: What is something in your life, whether chosen (like Matthew's decision to be a tax collector) or not-chosen (something you couldn't control) that you have viewed as a *condition* that disqualifies you from being Chosen by God? What is something that has put you on the outside that you feel keeps you from being worthy of following Christ?**

And yet, the story ends with a party.

<sup>15</sup> **Later, Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. (There were many people of this kind among Jesus' followers.)**

Pastor Mike chose Mark's version of the story for a reason. It's the one with that awesome parenthetical... "there were many people of *this kind* among Jesus's followers." This is the power of Matthew's story. Matthew's inclusion paved the way for so many other outcast people, "disreputable sinners," to find Jesus and find healing for their brokenness. And so, we might say that Matthew wasn't chosen despite his condition. Rather, he was chosen...

## FOR HIS GIFTS

Matthew was driven to succeed. He was logical and calculated. He was good with numbers and plans... probably a whiz with spreadsheets. But most of all, he was connected with other people who needed Jesus. And we see this play out in this beautiful ending... or rather, beginning scene. Jesus has dinner with Matthew and his tax collector buddies, the disreputable, the outcast, the sinners... those "of this kind." How many of those lives were changed because of Jesus calling Matthew and Matthew saying yes? How many were welcomed into the fold because they saw this former tax-collector being chosen? Jesus didn't see Matthew's condition as something that had to be overcome, but rather, Jesus chose Matthew for his gifts. Your condition could be turned around in this same way. You are chosen, not despite your condition, but rather for your gifts.

**Question 4: How could you flip your perspective and view the condition you identified in Question 3 as a gift? Matthew's condition was also a skill set and set of circumstances that made him valuable as a member of Jesus's followers. How can you turn**



**your condition into the unique thing you bring to the group as a follower of Jesus Christ?**

## — CLOSING —

Remember how we talked about Matthew having two names? Well, Levi is a Jewish name. So, maybe he went by Matthew because he was cast out from his people. Or maybe, just maybe, he went by Matthew because the name Matthew means, “Gift of God.” In Matthew’s own gospel... he calls himself Matthew. And I’m sure that’s the name Jesus used, because he was indeed a gift. We strive to be a faith community that embodies this inclusion. We are a family that welcomes in all sorts of “of this kind” people with “conditions” that the world, or even other Christians, say should disqualify them from being chosen by God. You are not disqualified from being loved by God. You are not disqualified from following Jesus. You are not disqualified from being chosen. Jesus looks at your condition, and sees you as he saw Matthew, a gift from God. And to you, Jesus says, “come and follow me.” You are chosen not *despite* your condition, but because you are a gift.

**Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations.**

**Close in prayer.**