

The Gospel today tells of St. Matthew's call to discipleship. It is a somewhat complex and disjointed passage, because it also tells of several healings, stories woven into the primary story – Matthew's call. Matthew's call was precisely the same as those of the other disciples. "Follow me." It was straight forward and to the point. It is precisely the call that our Lord gives to each of us, "Follow me." We must understand that by virtue of baptism, we are called to discipleship. What was different about Matthew is that by his occupation, he was reckoned a notorious sinner. Matthew was a tax collector, working for the Romans. That made him anathema in the eyes of the self-righteous, and this Gospel would have us understand that many of the religious leaders of our Lord's time were quite self-righteous.

Jesus, without doubt, was the most morally correct person in history, yet there was not a self-righteous thing about him. Nor did he worry about his associations. The unconditional love that Jesus held for everyone enabled people to open themselves to him and grow beyond themselves, grow beyond their sin, repent, accept God's forgiveness. Very importantly, experiencing that unconditional love enabled people to forgive themselves. In doing so, they could then live a new and righteousness life, loving God and loving others.

Martin Luther, the great German reformer, explained this in terms of grace through faith. Faith in Jesus allows us to experience his love, love defined by grace. Grace means favor and blessing. The favor and blessing is forgiveness and redemption. Luther stressed the point that good works do not save. Grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone saves. A reality is that those who are self-righteous often will do good in order to draw attention to them and enhance their status within the community. They will shun those that they consider beneath themselves. Jesus had no tolerance for this. "Go and learn what this means," he said. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

If we would be followers of Jesus, we need to understand this. The most important thing that we can do is to obey our Lord's commandment that we love others as he loves us. To do this, we must be merciful, and being merciful and just to others is the beginning of righteous living. The Old Testament prophet, Micah once said that the only thing God requires of us is to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God." We cannot claim to love God and love our neighbor and fail to be just and merciful. Nor can we claim to love God and not approach God with humility and awe. Above all, we can not claim to be honoring our Lord by loving others as he loves us if our relationship with others is based on arrogance and self-righteousness.

This is the lesson for today. This is what we learn from the story of Matthew's call to discipleship. Doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God is the best imitation of Jesus that we can possibly do, for it allows us to be Christ to our neighbor. *Amen.*

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