

Let's begin with a question. How would you answer this question?

What does it mean to be a Christian?

There are a lot of good answers and correct answers. I want to spend time over the next few weeks with this answer.

A Christian is a person committed to obeying the call of Jesus when He says, "Follow Me"

We cannot confuse the question with, "How does one become a Christian?"

The chief goal of God for your life isn't that you would trust in Jesus so you can go spend eternity with Him in the Here-After. It's that through trusting Jesus with your life you will follow Him in the Here-and-Now. Let me say it another way. Note: The New Testament emphasizes how to follow Jesus so we can bring Heaven to Earth. It places lesser emphasis on how we need to trust in Jesus so we can escape Earth and get to Heaven.

I want us to wrestle with what it means to follow Jesus.

-To be known for what He was known for

-To be like Him

-To be on mission with Him

Today I want to focus on the first aspect. Note: To truly follow Jesus means we should be known for what He was known for.

(The text today is found in Luke 5:27-31. There is a parallel passage in Matthew 9:9-13)

²⁷ 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. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Let us walk through the text so we can see what it means to walk with Jesus...to follow Him.

*"After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi (Matthew) sitting at his tax booth."
(Luke 5:27)*

After this... Jesus had already started gathering his disciples. Earlier in the chapter we find him calling 3 fishermen. Peter and the brothers James and John. **Now he is calling Matthew, aka, Levi. Matthew is a tax collector.**

Note that: Tax Collectors were...

-Traitors and Thieves

-Forbidden to serve as court witnesses

-Ritually unclean/forbidden from synagogue

They were so despised in Jesus day that the rabbi's taught false vows are permitted to fool tax collectors. (from the Mishnah- Nedarim 3:4)

So, a "real Messiah" would be expected to save the nation FROM people tax collectors. They would not be expected to want to save tax collectors.

So, when Jesus sees Matthew the tax collector what would you expect him to do?

- a) Keep walking
- b) Rebuke Matthew in front of the disciples
- c) say, "Follow Me!"

(If you guessed "c" then you were correct.)

"Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:27b-28)

(If you guessed "c" then you did the exact opposite of what Jesus' other disciples and the people around them expected.)

"Follow me." The words of a rabbi to a worthy student. The words every young Jewish boy hoped to hear. The words that conveyed, "I find you worthy." The words that Matthew had given up on hearing. But, Jesus spoke them to Matthew. He speaks them to you. He is speaking them to the people around you that you think are the least likely.

And Matthew left everything to follow. Matthew couldn't stay a tax-collector and follow Jesus. And, following Jesus will mean change. It will mean letting go.

But note that...

-the call to "follow" was followed by repentance not vice-versa.

-It is the invitation we offer to the world by offering them a space in our world.

Matthew extended the invitation to meet Jesus by inviting his friends to a feast. He didn't invite them to church or a Bible study before he invited them to his home.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. (Luke 5:29)

And it is at this point that the religious folk were determined to question the devotion of Jesus and his followers to God. Note: Jesus' love for God was questioned because of the way He loved people. He loved the wrong kinds of people. And He loved relationships with people created in the image of God more than He loved the rules found in the Word of God. He always got in trouble for this.

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?" (Luke 5:30)

Note: If we are followers of Jesus we will be known for what He is known for. Jesus was known as "A friend of sinners and tax collectors."

Are Christians in America known for this? Is Sierra? Are you? It all starts with you.

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." (Luke 5:31-32)

Note: Everyone in that space was "sick" and a "sinner" and in need of a saving doctor.
Jesus wasn't making the statement as an indictment but an invitation.
Only those who recognized their sinfulness sat at the table with Jesus.
It is our smugness not our "sin" that hinders us from healing and following.

The Pharisees were kept from the feast because they were willing to label everyone a sinner and unwilling to see themselves as sinners. It is impossible to repent of sins you can't even acknowledge. It is easier to make light of our own sin by finding others we deem as more sinful.

Like the Pharisees we love to use labels to identify those who are worse sinners than ourselves.

Note: Labels make love impossible.

Choosing to see people's identifiers as their identity make it impossible to love.

We all bear the image of God. And that Image is marred by sin in us all.

Jesus offers us to sit with Him and feast, but only to the degree we are willing to share the table with other sinners.

We cannot follow Jesus and not love Him. We cannot love Him and hate those He loves. And we cannot expect that the world will take our devotion to Jesus seriously if we insist that they change before we offer them an invitation to our table. That's what Matthew did. Matthew invited his sinner friends to do life with him trusting Jesus could change their lives without requiring that they somehow change first.

I will remind you of the words of Jesus, ***"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35)***

Now...Imagine a church that was not known for the way it labels others and was known for the way it loved others.

Imagine actually having others label us as "friends of sinners" church.

If we refuse to be then it isn't because we are following Jesus too closely. It is because we are not following Him close enough.

What would that require of us/you?

What is your first step?