## Anyone Means Everyone

Jesus begins his call to follow him with these two words, *If anyone . . .*

*Anyone* is a significant word because it makes it clear whom he is inviting. He is inviting *anyone. Anyone* is an all-inclusive word. *Anyone* means *everyone.* Jesus doesn't begin with a list of pre-qualifications. His invitation to follow is addressed to *Anyone.* Many people don't realize they've been invited to follow. They think, *"Not after what I've done. He wouldn't want me to follow him. I would never make the cut."* They assume they aren't qualified and as a result never take seriously what it means to follow Jesus. After all, what's the point in filling out an application if you know you won't get approved?

■

A few years ago, my wife bought a white love seat to go in the room with the white carpet in our house. I should tell you we didn't put in the white carpet; it was the lovely decision of the childless couple that occupied the residence prior to us. My wife justified buying the white love seat because it was so cheap that it would have been poor stewardship not to buy it. So we had a white couch on white carpet. But my wife laid down the law and made sure that the kids knew they were not allowed in the "White Room." It seemed to be working fine, until one day my wife was straightening up in that room, and she discovered a secret that someone had been keeping. She happened to flip over one of the couch cushions and there was a stain. She called me into the room and showed me the pink fingernail polish blotched on the white cushion. She wasn't happy. We called our girls into the room. She had the cushion flipped back over so you couldn't see the stain. The interrogation was about to begin, but as I reached toward the cushion to expose the stain, my middle daughter Morgan cracked. She turned and ran up the steps.

■

Most of us are hiding some stains. Our worst fear is that someone will flip the cushion over and discover what we've tried to hide. But because Jesus knows about our stains we think that disqualifies us. Surely our stains get our names scratched off the invitation list to be a follower of Christ. He wouldn't want us.

If any of his closest followers felt that way it had to be Matthew. When we are first introduced to Matthew he had stopped trying long ago to

hide his stains. They were significant enough that it's highly probable that his family and friends had written him off. At the very least, he was a massive disappointment to his parents. They had much different plans for their son. We know this because Matthew has another name: Levi. To be given that name meant that your parents expected you to serve the Lord as the Levites of the Old Testament did. From birth, he was set aside to be a spiritual leader for the nation of Israel. Matthew's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were likely all priests who served the Lord. By age twelve, Matthew would have had the first five books of the Bible memorized. It's likely that Matthew tried to become a disciple of one of the rabbis. But if he sent in his application, it was turned down. He didn't make the cut. Matthew had flunked out of rabbi school. He couldn't measure up.

Whatever happened, we know that something had definitely gone wrong. Instead of serving the Lord, he decided to serve himself. He turned his back on his own people and became a tax collector for the Romans. Essentially his job description was to unfairly take money from his people and give it to the occupying Roman government. Even if he'd collected taxes fairly, he was working for the enemy. But in those days there was no such thing as an honest tax collector. They would cheat the people to line their own pockets. A tax collector was seen as a religious and social outcast. He was ceremonially unclean; he wasn't even allowed into the outer court of the tabernacle. His name had been scratched off the membership.

And you and me, we have a lot in common with Matthew. Maybe you're not stealing money from your neighbors, but we've all become disappointments. We haven't measured up; we haven't made the cut. The Bible says in Romans that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We've said things we shouldn't have said. We've done things we wish we wouldn't have done. And as hard as we have scrubbed the stain, it just won't come out.

I can't help but wonder if in an attempt to ignore the stains in his life Matthew had chosen the life of a tax collector. That can happen with poor choices, right? One mistake snowballs into the next and

eventually you think, *"What's the point? Why even try anymore?"* Whatever Matthew's past, he had reached a point where he was no longer even trying to hide it.

Every day Matthew sat at his tax collector booth on a busy street. As a boy growing up he never imagined it would come to this. In moments where he was honest with himself, maybe late at night staring up at the ceiling, he had to be full of guilt and regret. If only he could start over and do things differently. But what could he do now? His stains were set. They were never coming out.

■

Just before I flipped over the cushion, Morgan turned and ran. She headed up the steps and hid. I went after her. I called her name a few times. She didn't answer. I began to check the rooms and eventually found her in her closet with her head buried in her knees. I could hear her crying. She didn't want to look up. I got down in the closet with her and put my hand on her back. I wondered what she thought my response was going to be. Did she think I would get angry? Did she think I would yell? Was she afraid that I wouldn't love her? We went downstairs together and she told her mom and me what happened. She let out the secret she had been keeping for months. She had spilled the fingernail polish, and then she tried to clean it up. She scrubbed and scrubbed, but the stain just got worse.

Eventually, she flipped the cushion over to hide what she had done. She said she had felt sick to her stomach every time we were in that room. She was scared that we would find out. And then she asked a question that melted us. She looked up with her big brown eyes full of tears and asked, "Do you still love me?"

■

My guess is Matthew no longer asked that question. He couldn't imagine that God still wanted him. I'm sure Matthew had heard about a new rabbi on the scene. His name was Jesus and he was doing things differently. And then one day, Matthew is at his tax collector's booth

and Jesus stops by and speaks to him. No one would have predicted what Jesus would say. It was only two words, but these two words changed everything for Matthew. Jesus said, "Follow me." A Jewish rabbi asking a tax collector for the Roman oppressors to be one of his followers? It's hard to overstate how unthinkable that scenario would have been for those close by.

It's important to understand what it meant in that culture for Jesus to be a rabbi. He may have been a homeless, unconventional rabbi, but he was a rabbi nonetheless. And a rabbi was a teacher of God's Word, which, at the time, was the Old Testament. Rabbis had extensive knowledge of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and all of the writings of the prophets.

Rabbis were also special because they had a group of Talmidim (pronounced *tal-mee-deem*). The word *Talmid* translates to "disciple" or "student." So, essentially, every rabbi had a class of students, and this was an incredibly exclusive group. Most people didn't end up as students of rabbis. Those who didn't make the cut most often ended up learning some sort of trade, typically one that was passed down in their family.

For those students wanting to become the Talmid of a particular rabbi, there was an application process. There were hefty pre-requisites before even being considered. These were the equivalent of the GPA and transcript pre-requisites for getting into an elite college or academy. If you want to go to Harvard, you better have a 4.0 GPA, or a 36 on your ACT, or a 2400 SAT score. Without those kinds of stats, you're probably not going to cut it. The same goes for a Talmid applying to join a rabbi's school.

Talmidim had to have an impressive knowledge of Scripture, and a rabbi would quiz prospective Talmid, asking them to recite an entire book. Or they might ask a question like, *"What is the number of times the name of the Lord was used in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus?"* The selection was an intense, painstaking process. But rabbis had to be thorough, because the excellence of the student reflected the excellence of the teacher. The teacher was known for his students. If

a rabbi just let in anyone, it would be clear that he was not a sought after teacher. On the other hand, if a rabbi's group of Talmidim were an especially brilliant and elite group, the rabbi would be respected and admired.

So the rabbis would take applications for followers. But that's not the way rabbi Jesus went about getting followers. Instead of followers applying, Jesus invited followers. This approach of going to someone and inviting him just wasn't done. A rabbi wouldn't humble himself, or extend himself in that way. A rabbi wouldn't risk rejection; a rabbi would do the rejecting. But Jesus takes the initiative. It would have been shocking enough if he had simply allowed Matthew to follow him, but Jesus actually extends the invitation. He says to Matthew, "Follow me."

Anyone hearing this exchange would have been shocked. I'm sure the other disciples would have been offended. *A tax collector?* He's not only a sinner; he sins for a living. Jesus finds Matthew hiding behind this tax collector's booth, and when Jesus comes by Matthew expects a pointed finger and words of rejection. Instead he finds open arms and a gracious invitation.

Morgan asked, "Do you still love me?" My wife knelt down beside her on the floor, and she whispered to our daughter, *"Morgan, you could never make a big enough stain to keep me from loving you."* I wish I could tell you that somehow we were able to get the stain out and make the couch white again ... but that stain is still there. It will always be there. But a funny thing happened. Morgan started telling the story of the stained white couch. She likes to show people the stain and tell them what happened. Why? Because a stain that once represented shame and guilt and fear of rejection, now represents love, grace, and acceptance.

Do you know how we know about Matthew's past as a tax collector? Do you know how we know that his friends were prostitutes, drunkards, and thieves? The reason we know all of that is because Matthew tells us. He calls us into the living room and shows us the stain on a couch and tells us the story of love and grace.

When Jesus invited Matthew to follow, he was making it clear that this is an invitation extended not solely to the religious elite, the morally upright, and those who have their lives together. But it is an invitation to all of us who are hiding some stains. Jesus throws out the elitist application process and gives an open invitation.