

No matter what you believe,
No matter how you behave,

Jesus invites you to . . .

Follow

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Session 1

JESUS SAYS

Jesus extended an invitation to follow to every single kind of person imaginable—rich people, poor people, people who were spiritual, people who weren't spiritual. He didn't place a bunch of conditions on his offer. He just invited them to follow.

One account of Jesus inviting someone to follow him is found in the gospel written by Matthew. Matthew was one of Jesus' followers. In this part of his gospel, he tells a story about himself. The story introduces us to the profound but simple idea of following Jesus. Here is what Matthew wrote:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

Matthew 9:9

Simple, right? But in Jesus' culture, tax collectors were the lowest of the low. They were Jewish people collecting Roman taxes from other Jews. They were hated. They were outcasts. They couldn't go to the temple. They couldn't be a part of society. They could

only hang out with other tax collectors because even sinners didn't want to be around them.

Jesus could have walked up to Matthew and said sarcastically, "I bet your mother is really proud you!" Jesus was considered a rabbi. All of the harsh and disapproving things he could have or should have said to Matthew would have been justified as far as the culture around them was concerned. But Jesus looked at Matthew the tax collector and said, "Follow me."

The crowd surrounding Jesus and Matthew probably thought they'd misheard Jesus. They must have been confused. Surely he didn't say, "Follow me." But that's exactly what Jesus said. And Matthew would never forget it. Those two words, spoken by Jesus, changed his life forever.

How radical was Jesus' call to Matthew? When all eyes were on the Son of God, he chose to reach out to a tax collector. Was he approving of Matthew's life? Was he saying, even indirectly, that sin didn't matter?

DISCUSSION STARTER

Talk about one of your favorite bosses, coaches, or teachers. What made it easy for you to follow that person?

VIDEO OVERVIEW

For Session 1 of the DVD

Jesus was extraordinarily comfortable with people who weren't anything like him. Based on what we read in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, people who were nothing like Jesus were extraordinarily comfortable with him too. Have you ever met someone who is so comfortable with himself, he makes everyone else comfortable? Jesus was like that ... a hundredfold. That's a big deal because Jesus was God in a body. He wasn't obligated to make everyone around him feel comfortable. Based on all the sin in the world, he would have been entirely justified in making everyone feel *uncomfortable*.

But Jesus was so comfortable in his own skin that he didn't hesitate to hang out with sinners, outcasts, lowlifes, and even tax collectors like Matthew. Most of us avoid people like that because we worry about what other people—"better" people—will think if they see us. If I hang around with the broken and dysfunctional, people will assume I'm broken and dysfunctional, too, right?

In fact, that's exactly what the Pharisees—the religious leaders of Jesus' day—wondered about Jesus. The Bible records their response:

When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Matthew 1:11

It's easy to dismiss the Pharisees as being small-minded and intolerant, but put in the same situation, we'd all be tempted to ask the same question. After all, Jesus was like them. He was a rabbi and they were rabbis. He was a law-keeper and they were law-keepers. He was holy and they were holy. So, why would Jesus choose to hang out with people who were nothing like him—people who were far from God—instead of hanging out with people who believed in the same religious rules and traditions?

Here's how Jesus answered their question:

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."

Matthew 9:12

Now, imagine that Matthew was sitting right there when Jesus responded to the Pharisees. He heard what Jesus said. A guest in his home, at his dinner table, called him and his friends "the sick." Maybe Matthew was offended. Or maybe, because he was a tax collector, he already knew he was sick.

The truth is, when it comes to sin, we're all sick. We're not even consistent at keeping the rules we set for ourselves, let alone keeping God's rules. If you're a parent, you probably set rules for your kids that you don't even keep. All parents do that. No one is perfect. Deep down, we all know that if our relationship with God depends on how we keep his rules, we're in trouble.

Jesus changed all that. He shared meals with sinners. He didn't pretend they were okay. He made it clear that he knew *they* were sinners and he knew they knew they were sinners. But he was so comfortable in his own skin that he didn't worry about what the Pharisees or anyone else thought about the company he chose to keep. This is what he told the Pharisees next:

"But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:13

Jesus didn't worry that others would think less of him. Instead, he invited those who were far from God to experience God's love ... by following him. He wasn't content to just be with people who believed all the right things or behaved in all the right ways. He wanted to join with the people who believed all the right things and behaved in all the right ways in order to call those who didn't.

This is important because it means the church all over the world can't become a place that is content to gather together and believe the right things and behave in the right ways and stop there. If we do, we'll find ourselves outside the room Jesus inhabits when he comes to call the sick and the sinners who need a Savior.

It's not enough to believe right. It's not enough to behave right. Christians who are content with that eventually become Pharisees. They become judgmental. They become the ones who demand that others change before they can begin to follow Jesus.

But Jesus called sinners and unbelievers to follow him. He didn't demand that they change first. He didn't even demand that they believe he was the Son of God. He knew that if they just followed, if they just took a step in his direction, it would change them.

VIDEO NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did you grow up in a church that emphasized doing what Jesus says over following him? Or if you didn't grow up going to church, did you assume that's what Christianity was all about? How has the "Jesus says" mindset affected your spiritual journey so far?

2. Jesus was extraordinarily comfortable with people who were nothing like him. How might your community, your nation, and the world be different if the church treated people the way Jesus did?

3. In Jesus' culture, tax collectors were considered the lowest of the low. What kinds of people occupy that position in our culture? Is it challenging for you to believe that Jesus would extend an offer to those people to follow him? Why or why not?

4. How comforting is the idea that Jesus wants everyone to follow him regardless of what they believe or how they behave? How is it challenging?
5. What are some things that make it difficult for you to follow Jesus?
6. What is one thing you can do this week to begin to follow Jesus or to follow him more closely? What can this group do to support you?

MOVING FORWARD

Jesus' invitation to follow is for you.

Being a sinner doesn't disqualify you; it's a prerequisite. Being an unbeliever doesn't disqualify you. The invitation to follow is purely an invitation to relationship. It's not an invitation to obedience. It's an invitation to a relationship with your Father in heaven.

CHANGING YOUR MIND

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Mark 8:34

PREPARATION FOR SESSION 2

To prepare for Session 2, use these devotions during the week leading up to your small group meeting.

DAY ONE

Read Romans 2:1-2. Consider our tendency to judge one another. What does faith look like when we let God judge others instead of doing so ourselves?

DAY TWO

Read Romans 2:1-4. Have you ever considered our tendency to judge others as contempt for God's kindness, forbearance, and patience? In what ways has God's kindness led you to repentance?

DAY THREE

Read Luke 5:1-5. Have you ever felt God's call for you to do something that didn't make sense? If so, what happened? How did that experience change your faith?

DAY FOUR

Read Luke 5:1-8. Like Simon Peter in verse 8, no one's faith can match God's abundance. When have you experienced this principle?

DAY FIVE

Read Luke 5:1-11. Letting down their nets was a single step that led to a lifetime of growing faith for Simon Peter, James, and John. What was your first step of faith?