

Follow

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Mark 2:13-17

I. RUMBLINGS FROM THE “RUMOR MILL”

Have you ever played the game “Telephone?” It’s the one where the first person whispers a few sentences into the ear of the next person. The second person then tries to remember exactly what the first one said and whispers it in the ear of the third person. The third person passes it on the fourth and so on around the room. It’s always entertaining when the last person says out loud what he or she heard from the previous person. The one who initiated the game then reports what he or she said in the beginning. It’s amazing to hear how much the message changes as each participant passes along what he or she understands from the previous whisperer.

That’s why we should always check out the validity of what we hear in the “rumor mill.” Whether it is at school, at work, in our neighborhood, or even at church – what gets passed on from one person to another often gets garbled in the process. And the “rumor mill” isn’t unique to our culture. It’s part of human nature. It goes back to the serpent twisting God’s words about eating the forbidden fruit, and Eve passing along what she had heard to Adam.

So we can safely assume that the “rumor mill” was up and running in town of Capernaum along the shores of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus of Nazareth began his teaching ministry in that area. Imagine what the residents there were hearing about this new rabbi who was attracting huge crowds. He talked about the kingdom of God coming near. What did that mean? Did his message have political overtones against the Roman procurator, Herod Antipas? The word on the street was that he could cast out demons and cure the sick. It was

said that Jesus taught with unusual authority. He didn’t cite the teaching of other rabbis to support what he said. He just put it out there. There was a man going around the area claiming that this Jesus had cured him of leprosy. A group of friends tore off part of the roof of a house to lower their buddy who couldn’t walk down to Jesus. Word around Capernaum was that Jesus had declared the lame man’s sins forgiven and told him to get up and walk – and the man did!

You can believe the “rumor mill” around Capernaum was humming with these stories about the new rabbi from Nazareth. It’s easy to imagine how people’s curiosity was sparked by what they heard. Consequently, many of them took the opportunity to seek out Jesus for themselves to listen to him speak. The stories coming from the “rumor mill” were so “juicy” that they had to find out first hand what this new teacher was all about.

It may well have been that among the curious Galileans listening to Jesus was a man named Levi. He was a tax collector in the employ of the Roman procurator, Herod Antipas. He would have established a set amount of money for Levi to collect – possibly a tariff on the fish that were caught in the Sea of Galilee. Whatever Levi could squeeze out of his fellow citizens above that amount was pure profit. Naturally, people like Levi were not popular with their neighbors. Although the money was good, socially-speaking tax collectors were outcasts. No respectable Jew would associate with one. So Levi would’ve had plenty of interpersonal space if he went to listen to Jesus. No one wanted to be near him. Maybe that’s why the rumblings of the “rumor mill” were so interesting to Levi. He was probably a man with external material comfort and internal hurt. He may have secretly hoped that Jesus’ “good news” was for him.

II. A RADICAL REQUEST

The Bible doesn’t actually tell us whether or not Levi ever heard Jesus teach before their encounter near the Sea of Galilee recorded in our text for this morning.

But it’s possible that the outcast tax collector had been among the crowds who listened to the new rabbi teaching with such authority. It is plausible that the good news Jesus shared, or the way he healed the sick had made a big impression on Levi. It may have led the tax collector to reconsider the direction his life was headed. It may have led him to wonder if his favorable financial situation was worth the social and moral price he was paying.

Any or all these things may have been going on with Levi before Jesus made his radical request. Mark is very brief and very direct in his description, “Jesus went out again by the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’”

A very similar event is reported in the middle of the first chapter of Mark. After Jesus began preaching the good news in the area around Capernaum, he was walking along beside the Sea of Galilee when he made the same radical request to two sets of fishermen brothers: Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John. His invitation was simple and direct, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”

It is also noteworthy what Jesus did NOT say to

these men. He did not say, “Do you go to synagogue regularly?” He did not say, “Do you believe the right things about God?” He did not say, “Can you name the Ten Commandments?” He did not say, “Are you giving the proper amount to religious and charitable causes?” Jesus did not say any of those things. Instead, he invited Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Levi the tax collector into a relationship with him. He made a simple but radical request, “Follow me.”

I am always interested in the way people respond to the question, “Are you a Christian?” Often times folks will answer, “Yes, of course, I attend church regularly.” Or, “Yes, I do my best to live by the Golden Rule of doing unto others as I would want them to do to me.” Or, “Yes, I give my money to the church and other charitable causes.” Or, “Yes, I serve the needy by working with Habitat for Humanity or volunteering in the Food Pantry.” As good and positive as any of those responses are, none of them actually answers the question, “Are you a Christian?” Evangelist Billy Graham put it this way, “If you lived in a garage, that would not make you an automobile. Similarly, going to church does not make you a Christian.”

That’s why Jesus did not ask Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Levi if they were going through the motions of being religious. Instead, the Master

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invited them into a relationship with him. He said, “Follow me.” That is still the foundation of our faith – a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That’s why I like to use the term “Christ-follower” instead of Christian. A Christ-follower is someone who is seeking to know God through Jesus Christ. It is a term that describes a developing relationship, not a set of religious behaviors.

So Jesus extended an invitation to Levi the tax collector: walk away from your tax collector’s table, leave behind the material comfort you have known, and follow me. It was a radical request.

III. A RISKY RESPONSE

It was a radical request to which Levi made a risky response. He did it. Perhaps more than any of the other disciples, Levi’s response was particularly risky. Peter and Andrew, and James and John could always go back to their fishing. But once Levi walked away from his lucrative appointment as a tax collector on the shores of the Sea of Galilee – that was it, he was finished. There was no going back. The Roman procurator did not allow for leaves of absence. Levi burned his professional bridges behind him when he decided to follow Jesus.

How have you responded to Jesus’ radical request to follow him? I’m not asking about your church attendance. I’m not asking about living by the Golden Rule. I’m not asking about how much you put in the offering plate. I’m not asking about doing good deeds. The question is: how have you responded to Jesus’ invitation to follow him?

There may be some of us here who know we have not made the commitment to become Christ-followers. Perhaps the reality of Levi’s response hits a little too close to home for you. You realize that following Jesus is a risky response. It means that you will have to deal with those dark parts of your life that you’ve avoided confronting for too long. It means there are some things you will need to stop thinking and saying

and doing. It means there are different things that you will begin to think and say and do. It means admitting that you’ve been trying to do life apart from a real relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and you don’t want to do it that way any more. Putting your faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior is a risky response. It means big changes. But it is a decision you will never regret. It is one that this family of faith will celebrate with you and walk alongside you as we seek to follow the Master together.

Others of us may already be Christ-followers, but we sense the Lord is calling us to a deeper level of commitment. There may have been previous times in your life when your faith in Jesus was richer and more vibrant. Where there was once a dynamic relationship with the Lord, you find that you are settling for the dull routines of religion. This passage may be a reminder for you that being a Christ-follower is about taking a lifelong journey with Jesus. Or, perhaps, there is an area of your life that you have always held back from God’s control. Through the example of Levi, you see that now is the time to walk away from your tax collector’s table and give it all to the Lord. Or, maybe you’ve been on a plateau in your faith journey, but now you see that there is more to being a follower of Christ than you realized. You are beginning to understand that you need to grow in prayer, or in service, or in study, or in love. Perhaps it’s time for some of us Christ-followers to make the risky response of going deeper in our faith.

It may even be that, for someone here today, the Lord is using Jesus’ call to Levi to show you that your call is to vocational ministry. You may have had someone in your past ask you if you have ever considered being a pastor, or a youth minister, or a children’s ministry director, but you’d almost forgotten their question – until today. You may have had this internal, nagging sense that God intends you to focus more completely on using your time and talents to serve him, but no one has ever invited you to pay attention to that internal voice. Jesus invites you today. He says, “Follow me.” It may not make any sense for you to walk away from

whatever you are doing. You may not be able to see how it could possibly work out. That’s how it must have felt for Levi too. But still Jesus makes his radical request, “Follow me.” Go ahead – make the risky response. Follow Jesus into vocational ministry. Follow Jesus wherever he leads. Friend, follow Jesus. Let us pray.



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January 10, 2016