

“Sinners Anonymous: A Clean Break”

Dear friends, greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Reading again from Luke, chapter five: “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, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.”

And so the calling goes out (from Jesus), to a man named Levi, (also known as Matthew), a tax collector, in a wealthy and a lucrative career. Not an easy decision (for him) to make (to follow Jesus), but one he made in light of the One who had called.

And so the calling goes out to us, with the same (offer being made) and the same commitment being asked, by the same One who called Matthew to walk away from it all. Not an easy decision for us, either, (in a world that doesn't seem to care), but one we are called to make in light of the One who has called.

And so we come to week three in our “Sinner's Anonymous” series. We're getting into the real heart of the matter (this week) and what this calling we have (in Jesus) is all about. It's not a matter of simply adjusting a few things (in our lives) here and there to fit into whatever life we had (prior to) the calling and make it work. Rather, it's a call to a new framework for life, if not to a new life altogether.

In this series we're doing a number of things in parallel. In the first couple of weeks, we set the stage. We're following some of the steps taken in (many of the) support groups for people facing addiction. There's a twelve-step program used in A.A. and N.A. (and some of the others) that helps guide those working toward recovery. We're not hitting on all (twelve steps) in our series, but we're following the same progression.

We're also acknowledging, in doing so, that each of us (just like in those support groups) have a shared addiction with which we struggle. It's one of the reasons we're here each Sunday. It's one of the (main reasons) we come together as we do. It's the addiction of sin. It's the addiction that caused Jesus to go to the cross. And it's the addiction (if we're honest), that left unchecked, can and will destroy our lives.

As a result, during this series, we're turning this sanctuary (for these five weeks) into an S.A. group. We're here because we know we struggle. We're here because we know we can't (break this struggle) on our own. And we're here because we've come to know (and believe) that there is one who can help us with what we face.

Take a look at the front walls for a moment. A quick review of the steps we've taken thus far. If you weren't here in weeks one and two, I'd encourage you to go on-line and listen.

Step One: We admitted we were powerless over sin – that our lives had become unmanageable. The story of the demon-possessed man was an example of how we are all trapped by things in our lives that have taken control and those things that have (taken control) just keep coming back.

Step Two: We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. That same story helped us see that there is one who can break that power (that we can't) and his name is Jesus. We came to believe that.

Step Three: We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him. Last week, it was the apostle Philip and his witness to a man from Ethiopia who didn't know the story of Jesus. Philip told him (the story of Jesus), pointed him to Jesus, and it changed his life. This third step in (turning our will and our lives) over to God is essential in our recovery from sin.

Today we push it a bit further, in these five weeks (in our series) not covering all twelve steps, but following their progression, (this week) we're combining the next four steps (in recovery) into one sermon in our series. Here's where they lead in the twelve-step program. They each have to do with confessing our sin and coming clean.

Step Four: We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. We took a deep and a closer look.

Step Five: We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another person the exact nature of our wrongs. We decided to be honest and to admit (out loud) to someone else where we had failed.

Step Six: We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. This step becomes more than an (exercise of the mind), but a conscious and deliberate action of the will.

And Step Seven: We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings. Knowing that only God can make the required change (in us), we asked him to change us from the inside out.

Those are (some of the) more formalized steps in the recovery from addiction. This is week three (of five) in our series. Today, it's the story of the call of Matthew: "A Clean Break."

Let's talk for a few moments about our story. This story of Levi (or Matthew) and his decision to follow Jesus is quite the story, if you start thinking about what happened. Especially in contrast to the other calling-story (we have) with some of the other disciples.

You think about Peter and Andrew, James and John. That's the other (calling-story) we have in the gospels. In many ways, those two stories are not much different.

In the one today, Matthew was called and (Luke tells us) "He got up, left everything and followed him." In the other one, when those other four were called, it says "They left their boats and their nets (and their father) and followed Jesus."

In both cases, they left what they were doing and followed Christ. In both cases, they immediately (dropped what they were doing) and gave their sole attention to the Lord.

In many ways, the calling (and response) in each of those two stories was the same. There wasn't much in (either story) to distinguish one from the other. At the same time, although the calling was the same and the responses were similar, there are a couple things worth noting that were a bit different.

First of all, in Matthew's case, not only was he called (like those other disciples), but his calling required a step of faith that went a bit further than those other four. With those four fishermen (it says), "They left their nets and their boats (and their father)" and followed Jesus. With (the calling) of Matthew (it says) "He left everything" and followed Christ. He walked away from all he had when he responded to the call. (We'll come back to that in a moment.)

The second thing (worth noting), on the flip side, (based upon what we're told and how he responded), it must have been a calling Matthew welcomed, because the first thing he does (after hearing and responding to the call) is to throw a party.

(It says), "Then Levi (after being called by Jesus) held a banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them."

There's no question (in Matthew's life) this was a big event. His first response to what happened is to celebrate with his friends. For Matthew, this calling was life-changing. It was an event (in his life) worth celebrating. His response to what had (just happened) makes that clear.

And then it says, as somewhat of a (closing note) to the story, almost as if it's the central note, (it says) "the Pharisees and the teachers of the law" who were watching "began questioning Jesus' disciples" about what was happening. They asked, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" What are doing hanging around with these kinds of sin-filled folks?

And that's when Jesus closes the story (by saying), "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Week three in our series: "Sinners Anonymous: A Clean Break." What's going on in this story? What's going on in the life of this former (tax collector) named Matthew? And how does Matthew's story and his "clean break" (from his past) have anything to do with our addiction to sin and what needs to happen in us?

Let's start with Matthew's response. (We said we'd come back to that.) It says, he "left everything" when he followed Jesus. He left everything when he followed Christ.

I don't know how you would define "everything" in your calling (in your life), but that's a big word when it comes to what we have. Everything doesn't leave much left out. In fact, everything includes just about everything: your family, your friends, your future; your security, your stability, your sense of being in control.

If you think about it, that's exactly what Matthew did. He left it all. His job as a tax collector working for the government of Rome...you walk away from that job (as a Jew) for the Romans, and there's no return. It's over. It's done. There's no going back.

If you're a fisherman, like those others were, you can always go back to fishing. Interestingly, after the resurrection, still trying to figure it out, later on in the (gospel stories) that's exactly what they did. They went back to fishing until Jesus (called them again) to walk away.

But for Matthew, it was over. When he walked away from his tax booth, there was no tax-boothing in his future. He was walking away from everything. It was Jesus or nothing. It was something else in life (and not Jesus) – he always had that option - but (in his case) there was no return. He left everything.

Have you ever considered what that would mean (in your life) to “leave everything” in answer to the call? Have you ever thought about what that would take (in your life) to walk away from it all to follow Christ?

That’s what the calling of Jesus is all about, this “clean break” to which we are being called. It’s not a “take what you want” and “leave the rest” calling that he offers. It’s not a pick what you want (for your life) and don’t worry about what’s (left in your life) offer that he extends.

No, he says “Follow me.” He says “No, I need (in your life) to come first: ahead of family, ahead of friends, ahead of your own future.”

Just like (with Matthew), everything means everything. The calling of Jesus (on your life) is to put him first, above others, about yourself, above “everything” in your life that stands in the way. He calls you to “leave everything” in response to the call. He calls you to walk away from everything that is in the way.

Does that mean (if you’re a student) that you stop going to school? You just quit and walk away? No, if you’re a student and that’s where (you are in life), then you need to keep studying. God wants you (as a student) to do your best.

It might mean (however) that (as a student) you need to give God a different place while you’re at school. If he’s first, then he needs to be first. If he’s important (in your life), then he needs to be important in your life.

Keep it going: if you’re working, gainfully employed? Does that mean you quit your job and walk away; enroll in the “following Jesus” track at West Valley and start over in a new career? (Probably not.) I’m not sure such a track exists.

What does exist is a track that calls you to be more open about your relationship with Christ (while you’re at work) and more honest (with yourself) and with others about the part (in your life) he plays, and the need in your life you have for what (only he) can give. It might mean that?

If you’re a husband or a wife, single or not-yet married, a widow or a widower, a mother, a father, a child; if you’re young in the faith and trying to (figure it out), or you’re long in the faith and wondering what’s the next step in your life; whatever you are, (wherever you are), it doesn’t matter.

What matters, in every case, no matter (what the case), it’s all the same. Let go of the things that stand in the way. Confess the things that get in the way. And make a clean break from whatever it is (in your life) that is not allowing Jesus to have his way.

If those things in your life are actual (things in your life), then you need to face them. You need to deal with them. You need to own them for yourself and come clean.

That’s what the calling (of Jesus) is all about. That’s what Matthew did in response to the calling of Jesus when it came to him. He walked away...from the things (in his life) that were standing in the way. He confessed (and made right)...the things (in his life) that were getting in the way. And he made a clean break from (whatever it was) in his life that was not allowing Jesus to have his way.

That’s what he did when the calling of Jesus was offered. That’s how he responded when the calling of Jesus came. And that’s exactly why (when it all happened) that he threw a party and invited his friends.

I hope you understand how this all works. This whole “clean break” idea when it comes to Jesus? It’s not just (breaking clean) from the things that we want to keep. It’s also breaking clean from the things that we wish (in our lives) were not there.

When Matthew got up from his tax collecting booth and walked away, when he “left everything” to follow Christ, there was more to his “leaving everything” than just his job. He left his tax collecting. He left his source of income. He left his future and his fortune and his favoritism in the eyes of Rome.

He also left (on the other side) his not-so-favored reputation among the Jews. He left his cheating. He left his hateful and hated past. He left his guilt. He left his failures. He left whatever it was that enabled him to get ahead. What he gained (in return) was a clear head and a clear conscience, and a right and fully acceptance status (and position) and future, in the eyes of God.

There’s always an “other side” to the story in the calling of Jesus. There’s always an “other side” in your story in the calling of Christ on your life.

Yes, he does call you to leave it all behind and put him first. He does ask you to let it all go and give him his rightful place. (Don't turn this calling of Jesus into something it's not.) There's nothing (not covered) in the call of Christ. There's nothing still left when (everything's left) in response to the call.

But there is an "other side" to the calling. And it's in the (other side) of the calling that there's reason to celebrate. Because, on the other side (when he calls), he also allows you (and enables you) to "leave everything" in your life you wish were not there.

Your regrets and your mistakes in life; you can leave them behind when you follow Jesus. Your anxieties and your fears in life; those are in the past when you respond to move forward (with Jesus) into your future.

Your sin, your failings, your faults; your struggles and worries and everything (in life) that weighs you down; you can let go of them when you follow Jesus. You can let him carry them (give them to him) when you follow Christ.

Yes, there's always an "other side" to the calling, and it's in the other side to the calling that we find life.

Let me close with this. This whole story of Matthew and his calling, walking away from it all and leaving everything, making (in his life) a clean break? I wonder what would have happened to Matthew if he had turned down the calling of Jesus? I wonder if we would even (know about Matthew), be talking about him today, if he had decided not to follow Christ?

All I know is that Matthew's life was changed when he confessed his sin and walked away? All I know is that in his "leaving everything" to follow Jesus, he was able to "leave everything" and find a new start.

What about you? It's week three in our series. Gathering as we are in this S.A. group for five weeks. Honest about our sin, acknowledging to ourselves (and to others) and to God the need in our lives we have.

There are only two weeks left (and then it's) Holy Week. Remembering and celebrating those last events of Jesus' life. He died for you. He died for me. He gave everything for us.

What's left in "your everything" you need to give to him? It's time to let it go...a clean break. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, for your goodness to us, for your willingness to offer (and to give) your life, and for the calling you place on our lives to place our trust in you, we ask for your Holy Spirit to lead us to faith.

Lord, help us to let go of the things that are standing in the way. Convict our hearts to confess the things that are getting in the way. And give us the strength and the courage to allow you to have your way with us. In your name we pray. Amen.