**Thesis:** As kids, many of us probably had dreams of what we wanted to be when we grew up: A firefighter, a policeman, a famous rockstar. But those dreams don’t always go as planned. Life happens and we find ourselves somewhere very different than we imagined. Sometimes, it may even be worse than we imagined.

But the call of Jesus isn’t about what’s behind us; it’s about what’s ahead.

*Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10 For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

God isn’t surprised by where we find ourselves now, and we can be sure He knows where He wants to take us.

**Introduction:** Welcome back to the Jesus Podcast, stories showcasing the depth of Christ’s love through storytelling and reflection. I’m Zak, your host from Pray.com. In today’s episode, we’ll be reminded that no matter what choices we’ve made throughout life, it’s never too late to follow Jesus.

**Context:** If you’ve ever sighed at the thought of paying your taxes, you have something in common with the Jews of Jesus’ time. Under the heavy hand of Rome’s oppression, it was just another means to keep the people down. The Romans would auction off the role of tax collectors to private individuals, who then made their living by taxing in excess and keeping the profits. You can imagine why Jews serving as tax collectors quickly became despised by their fellow Israelites. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors, adding insult to injury to their already hurting brothers and sisters.

If you chose the life of a tax collector, it made you an outcast from your people. How could someone break free from this lifestyle and return back to their roots?

Follow along as we explore the calling of the tax collector, Matthew, and learn how we can choose change through God’s grace.

**Message:** It’s estimated that the average adult makes about 35,000 choices every single day, from the simple ones like what we’ll eat and wear for the day to bigger ones like which job we’re going to take and where we’re going to live. Over time, these choices bring us to this very moment in our lives. Under these circumstances, it feels as though the possibilities of how our lives will end up are infinite. It can be a daunting thought: “What if I make too many wrong choices? What if my life goes off track?” But what’s so great about the gospel is that our pedigree and CV’s of life don’t reflect what God sees in us.

We can’t take credit for the good in our lives, as all good things come from the Father. Likewise we don’t have to live with the weight of guilt for the bad because Jesus has paid our debt.

When we choose to follow Jesus, He makes us altogether new. Paul talks about this idea in Philippians 3. In verse 4-6, Paul explains that he of all people has the background and pedigree to boast. He was a Pharisee, followed the law to a t, and had more reason to have confidence in the flesh than anyone else. But then he takes a turn in verses 7-11 to show that whatever confidence he did have in himself was nothing once he began following Jesus. He found those things to be garbage compared to the joy of knowing Jesus. Wherever we find ourselves in life, it’s never too late to turn our lives around and begin following Jesus.

Someone like Matthew can build up their life by many earthly standards. Great wealth, stability in work, and favor among those above them in society. But for Matthew, it came at a great cost to his morals. It came at the cost of losing family and friends. And maybe worst of all, it came at the cost of losing himself and his relationship with God.

As he surrounded himself with corruption, it was only a matter of time before that corruption got to him. Just like Matthew, we have to be careful of letting this happen to ourselves.

*The apostle Paul warns us of this in 1 Corinthians 15:33 when he writes “Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”*

What we surround ourselves with will eventually consume us. For Matthew, this created complications he didn’t know how to handle. With one foot in his religious roots and one foot in the Roman empire, his greatest battle was one with himself: “*Who had he become? Where did Levi go?”* Unfortunately, maybe you can relate to Matthew. You find yourself faced with decisions that seem to conflict with your faith. And over time your decisions have pulled you away from God. But when Jesus calls us to follow Him, He calls us to leave our old lives behind. Our choice must be deliberate and determined. We can’t live with one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom of God.

As Matthew records Jesus’ most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, he recollects Jesus' words on making a choice in *Matthew 6 “‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.’”*

Jesus isn’t condemning money or those who possess it. Jesus is challenging our hearts. He’s asking us to consider what is most important to us. Are we choosing to place earthly gain above our heavenly Father? Are we choosing ourselves over our Savior? Are we following our desires or the Spirit? As Matthew wrote out these words, they probably hit a deep place in his heart. A moment of retrospection on the incredible journey Jesus had taken him on throughout his life. For Matthew and for us, it’s a powerful reminder that we’re never too far gone for God to bring us back to Him. We can always choose to return to God.

Nobody grows up expecting to be corrupt and lost. Somewhere down the road, it just happens. And when we choose to come before Christ can be a shocking experience. In the light of His goodness, all of our sins are exposed. We have to come to grips with all of our shortcomings and previous decisions to choose sin.

And, like Matthew, we might not even recognize who we’ve become. But remember that God is full of mercy, choosing to forgive us of our sins, and full of grace to shower us with His abundant and life-giving love. **We shouldn’t let our past hinder our progress in the present**.

At the same time, we shouldn’t ignore it like it never happened. Confess your sins and ask God to help you learn from them. Leverage your past mistakes to give you stepping stones toward a better future. I’m sure Matthew’s past sins gave him an even deeper understanding of Jesus’ grace.

The possibilities of what Christ can do with our lives are limitless. No past failures, mistakes, or shortcomings can change that. When we receive Jesus, we also receive His Spirit. And it’s not in the Spirit’s nature to enter into a place and leave things unchanged. This is especially true in our lives. In mercy, Jesus accepts us as we are. But in love, He calls us to something greater.

Meditate on that today. You are accepted and chosen to follow Jesus despite your past failures or future mistakes. He’s called you to a process, and he knows you’re not a finished product.

The grand narrative of the Bible is all about God bringing glory to His name. What’s more glorious than the reality that God can and will use anyone to spread the good news of Jesus and accomplish His great plan for creation?

Choose God, and He will always choose you. He will never leave you or forsake you. We don’t have to be ashamed of our past as we boldly profess the name of Jesus. We don’t have to worry about what people will think of our past, and we don’t have to be afraid of the people who will question our choice to follow Jesus. The change that will be evident in our lives will speak to the beauty of the gospel. The only thing hindering us from choosing to follow Jesus is ourselves. Perhaps it’s fear, doubt, feelings of worthlessness, or the pull of pride. But Jesus’ offer is loud and clear: *Follow Me.* The choice is yours to make right now. He’s waiting for you with open arms.

In our next episode, we are going to meet someone who may very well be Matthew’ opposite. He’s a ruler of the religious elite, an esteemed rabbi, and well-known Pharisee. But when faced with the reality of Jesus’ words and works, he can’t help but be curious. Join us next time for an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus.

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