



# *The Westminster Pulpit*

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church  
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

## **“Life Lessons” Sermon on Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26**

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### *Matthew 9: 9-13, 18-26*

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner\* in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting\* with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’ But when he heard this, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, ‘My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.’ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.’ Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, ‘Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, ‘Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Life can be measured in days; someone surely has a birthday today. How many years? That’s life.

Life can be measured in the awareness of a day. My dog reminds me of that when I take her on her morning walk. There’s a trail in our neighborhood that runs alongside a

creek. Woods and water, and a park bench, and there she sits down and tells me to sit right beside her. My dog understands lots of commands: "sit, come, lie down, shake," but the one I like best in her repertoire is, "Be still and know that I am God." When my dog is done praying, she turns and smiles at me, and says, "Good boy!" And that's life.

We all know that life gets a grade. Words are often said at the end of life. Words like, "She lived a good life" or "He had a full life." What does that mean? How do we judge? I think we who attend church in the summertime know best how to judge.

We judge life with the eyes of God. "She lived a good life because of how she cared for us and cared for others." "He lived a full life because he was the glue that held us together." "If you ever needed anything, she was there." "He never said a negative word." "He was a saint, stars in his crown, an A+ in the life department."

For those of us who know that we were born on third base and know our scripture, we are haunted by something Jesus says. He tucks it at the end of a parable, a parable that I fail to understand, but this line I understand. Jesus says, "To whom much is given, much is expected." Spend a moment and think about how much you were given! To be born where you are, who you are, the breaks you received, tally it all up... to whom much is given.... much is expected. How do you begin to pay that back? That's life.

This reminds me of the end of the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, the movie about the band of brothers who sacrificed their lives to save the one. The movie closes with Private Ryan, now, an old man, standing in a sea of crosses on the Normandy Coast. He is kneeling at a cross and says to it, "I remember what you told me, all those years ago." And then he turns to his wife and says, "Tell me I've led a good life. Tell me I'm a good man."

Once upon a time, Jesus walked up to a bad man. We'll call him "Matthew." Matthew was a Jew, but he worked for the occupying force, the unclean, the Romans. He collected taxes from his own people to give to the oppressor. These tax collectors have a history of charging more than was owed to line their own pockets. Now some folks seem quite comfortable in the snakeskin. They lie and steal and cheat and it doesn't seem to bother them at all. They are their own god.

Others, however, have in their life a mirror. And every so often, they take a hard look in the mirror and hate what they see. They have sold their souls. Morals are sacrificed because they have to feed their family, and make a living, though there are things worse than death. Maybe life without a friend.

Jesus walked up to Matthew, the tax collector, and said, "Follow me." Matthew got up and followed him. Let me pause here.

There's a traditional view that this tax collector, Matthew, is the same Mathew who wrote the gospel. I don't know if that's true. If it were true, I would have liked Matthew to tell me a little more about the experience of being called by Jesus.

"This man came up to me and said, 'Follow me' and I did because I had a feeling he was the Christ. Because I just knew he was God! Because I believed! Because he looked at me with the eyes of a friend!"

"Tell me I'm a good man."

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost and now am found. I was blind, and now I see!”

Life has this dividing line between the sacred and the profane. “Wretch,” on one side of the line, and “saved” on the other. There’s a clear distinction. “Blind” on one side of the line, those who can “see” on the other! Dividing line.

Some people stay lost! Some people will never see. Dividing line.

Once upon a time, some Pharisees believed in the line. And what bothered them was that they believed Jesus crossed the line. Do you believe in the line? You have to draw the line somewhere. Where do you draw the line? That’s life.

I think it is safe to say that Jesus didn’t believe in the line. He’s the great physician.

Yesterday I conducted a wedding for Ellie Moore, Rusty and Beth Moore’s daughter. I was enchanted by this bride. Beautiful young woman with lots of life! Lots of personality, and yesterday she got married to some guy. I don’t remember his name. Grant Drury. Great guy! Steady! He has to be steady; he’s married to Ellie.

She has a free spirit. She’s bright, beautiful, and full of life. She has made it her career to work with children who have special needs. As a teenager, she went to Haiti and worked with My Life Speaks, an organization that cares for Haitian children with severe disabilities. There is in that culture a belief that some have that those children are filled with some dark spirit. There is no line... she just cared. Ellie went there and held those children in her arms. Loved them. And then made it her career to work with kids with special needs.

During premarital counseling, she and Grant came to my office, and she smiled and said, “I couldn’t find my brush.” Her hair was all over the place like she’d just woken up. She had come directly from work where a kid spent some time grabbing her hair and pulling his face close to hers for a headbutt. Grab, pull. Grab, pull. “It was a hard day,” she said with a smile.

Her dad called me on Friday and said, “I don’t know if you know this, but I thought you might want to know. When Ellie was born, she was born with a transposition of her aorta and pulmonary arteries.” In other words, she was a blue baby. She had an 8-hour surgery at Vanderbilt to correct it, and then she developed a blood clot. They had to do another surgery. Rusty said, “The surgeons gave us notice that there was a slim chance she would survive, maybe five per cent. I prepared myself. This is the day when we’re going to lose Ellie.” The doctors met. Rusty mentioned Dr. Frank Fish and Dr. Tom Graham. Rusty said, “They went to work – the doctors, healthcare workers - and the church surrounded us in love and prayer.”

When I came to Westminster, there was a story about Dr. Tom Graham holding a little baby in his arms after a baptism and walking her up and down the aisle. Yesterday she came up and down this same aisle. And that’s life!

Jesus says to those who draw a line, “Go learn what this means. I desire steadfast love, and not empty religion.”

Steadfast love goes under the skin and into the heart. Always believing in a good life... Tell me I’ve led a good life. You are a good life...

“It was a hard day; I couldn’t find a brush,” she said with a smile. It was a hard day, but a good day...

It was a good day for a tax collector. It was a good day for a Pharisee. It was a good day for a great surgeon. It was a good day for a baby in Haiti that she held in her arms. It was a good day for a man who got his daughter back from death. It was a good day for a woman who just knew that if she touched his garment.... It was a good day for a child, a fistful of golden hair, pulling love ever closer. It’s a good day that the Lord has made! It’s a good day for those who seek to learn what God desires. No lines, only steadfast love. Steadfast love. It’s a life lesson. To whom much is given, steadfast love. Much is required, steadfast love.

It’s one of life’s lessons.

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