

My Past

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[0 : 00] Well, hey, good morning. My name is Ray Sweet from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. You can always get to know more information about us at FCCGreensburg.com or the FCC Greensburg Facebook page.

But hey, thank you for tuning in today. It's my prayer always that as we get into the Word of God, that most importantly, the Word of God will get into us, transform these hearts, and we may live for Christ with everything we are.

Now I want to tell you about a guy who was born in London in 1725. His mother was a godly woman who taught him to pray, but sadly, everything changed at the age of seven when she passed away. His seafaring father was not a godly man. At the age of 11, his education took a back seat so he could join his father at sea. At 18, he was forced into service in the Navy where his wretched behavior learned a few more tricks.

In his own words, he said, I was capable of anything. I had not the least fear of God before my eyes nor the least sensibility of conscience. See, his seafaring life included being shipwrecked and then becoming a sea captain for the slave trade where his actions toward those slaves were despicable.

[1 : 18] In a crazy turn of events, he also became a slave himself off the African coast where he could barely survive with little food and awful treatment.

And then one day, praise God, as he lit a fire to signal for help from passing ships, a friend of his father saw it, rescued him, and took him back toward home.

However, they came upon a storm like he had never experienced before, a storm that was jarring them all around and filling their boat with water. And when he thought that there was no hope, they for sure were going to drown, he cried out to the God that his mother had worshipped, the God he scoffed at with his lifestyle and criticisms.

Listen, it made no sense.

In our eyes, he was the last guy deserving of mercy. And yet mercy he got as he repented of his sins, surrendered his life to the Lordship of Christ, and allowed the Holy Spirit to daily transform his heart to beat for the glory of God.

[2 : 38] In the words of John Piper, throughout his 82-year life, John Newton was a depraved sailor, a miserable outcast on the coast of West Africa, a slave-trading sea captain, a well-paid surveyor of tides, a beloved pastor of two churches for 43 years, a devoted husband to Mary for 40 years, a personal friend to William Wilberforce, John Wesley, and George Whitfield, and finally the author of the most famous hymn in the English language called Amazing Grace.

And in that hymn, he wrote these famous words, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.

So welcome back to week two of our series in Matthew called Greater Than. And go ahead and turn if you would, if you got your Bibles there. Go to Matthew chapter 4 with me.

Matthew 4, about two-thirds of the way through your Bible. And let's just be honest, life often hits us like a Mack truck. Say that again, life often hits us like a Mack truck.

Sometimes it's circumstances that we have no control over that make us feel like we really are going uphill both ways. Sometimes it's my own attitude or my own behaviors that get me into trouble and have consequences.

[4 : 03] And even when I try to get back on track, Satan's shiny temptations often seem too much to handle. Yet, we learned last week that in Christ, we have everything we need to overcome Satan's attacks by hiding that word of God in our hearts and calling that truth back up.

We are more than conquerors through Christ Jesus. And today, we're going to talk about another biggie that Jesus is greater than. And that's my past.

That's your past. And here's the thing. Whether you were born in a pew and have been in church every Sunday since, or maybe this church and Bible stuff is all brand new to you.

Possibly you're somewhere in between. Regardless, we each have a past. We've all gone outside of God's parameters. We've sinned against Him. Do you know how I know that for sure?

Because Romans 3.23 says, For all, that's you and me. Jesus is the only exception, okay? For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

[5 : 09] That means that one sin causes us to be separated from a perfect Heavenly Father whose holiness and righteousness do not allow Him to stand before sin.

And yet, He loved us enough that Jesus came into this world to become the ultimate sacrificial lamb that takes away the sins of the world. And so, here's an equation.

The sinless life, plus the cross, plus the tomb, the empty tomb, equals the Savior. The Savior who offers us forgiveness and life everlasting when our hearts truly belong to Him.

See, that's what John Newton, a man who admitted to doing some awful, awful things, that's what He called amazing grace. So, you've got a past, okay? Welcome to the club.

I do too. And that's not something to be taken lightly because there are some whose pride flares up and they act like they've done nothing wrong. It's always somebody else's fault. They can go to Bible studies, they can go to church, and yet the heart is still hard, okay?

[6 : 14] And each of us have to guard against ever letting our heart get there. Or maybe you're on the other end and you're hypersensitive to your past. You let it paralyze you. You feel like God could never love or use someone like you.

Either way, let's allow the mercy and grace of our God to speak to our hearts today as we look at two different passages here in the book of Matthew where Jesus is calling His disciples to follow Him.

All right. So, like I mentioned earlier, you should be with me now in Matthew chapter 4. Matthew chapter 4. And let's start here in verse 18. As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew.

They were casting a net in the lake for they were fishermen. Come follow me, Jesus said, and I will send you out to fish for people. At once they left their nets and they followed Him. Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John.

They were in a boat with their father Zebedee preparing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and they followed Him.

[7 : 27] So, first glance, without understanding culture, it's like, okay, Jesus said, follow me. These guys followed Him. What's the big deal here? But when you understand that in this culture, the highest occupation you could strive for was to be a rabbi, to be a spiritual leader over the people.

And so, what we don't often understand is that a rabbi in this culture would always have disciples who would follow them for something like maybe six, eight, ten years before they would go into ministry themselves and be a rabbi.

And so, in order to be a disciple of the rabbi, you had to be from the right family, you had to have a squeaky clean past, be among the brightest, have an extensive education.

In other words, you had to be the best of the best to hear those words from a rabbi, come, follow me. And Jesus, who each of these guys are very familiar with, calls them to be His disciples.

Young men who did not meet all that fancy criteria, and yet, can you imagine being made to feel less than all these years and now, this guy that we know is the Savior of the world, but in that time, they were trying to figure out if He was, but the Savior of the world calls you to be His disciple.

[8 : 48] Could you imagine that? I hope so, because you have that same call on your life as well. So, if you're a note taker today, go ahead and grab that outline, and here's how you can do that if you're listening through audio here.

You can go to the YouVersion, Y-O-U version Bible app. Download that. It's absolutely free. It's an incredible resource to have. Go ahead and download that, and go to the menu, the bottom right-hand corner should be three lines.

Click on that. Go to events. Go to First Christian Church, Greensburg, Indiana, and click on that, and you'll be able to see our outline. But here's the first part. I just want to share one sentence with you today that I pray God will use in each of our hearts, and the first part says this, you are saved from your past.

In the passage we just read, we see Jesus call two sets of brothers to follow him, Peter and Andrew, and then James and John. These two families even worked together as fishermen. They were very blue-collar type of guys, and so let me do a quick profile, and we don't need to do all four guys. Let's just do one brother from each family, okay? And so the first one is a guy that's pretty popular, who is Peter.

[10:04] A lot of us can relate to Peter. He's a big, bold personality. He's a blue-collar fisherman. Let's put it this way. His mouth often wrote checks, his behind couldn't cash, okay?

And as we read through the Gospels, we see a man who's impulsive, hot-tempered, and cowardly. And I wouldn't be shocked if by the time Peter met Jesus, he'd probably been in 50 fights and lost half of them.

And we even see him as a disciple who had witnessed the miracles of our Savior, and still, he denied even knowing Jesus three different times.

Now, we're not done with this guy. We're not giving up on him, but let's move on to John for now. John was also a fisherman, but we get the idea that his family was maybe a little more well-to-do in this business.

They owned their own boat. That was a big indicator. They had hired servants who worked for them. That was a big indicator. And Jesus nicknamed John and his brother, James, the two guys, the sons of thunder.

[11:06] Now, they must have been pretty wild, okay? And we see a man who could be vengeful and fiery in John. He could be selfish. He could be judgmental. Even lack that servant's heart. He wanted to be on Jesus' rider left in heaven, but he didn't want to do what it took to get there.

But once again, we're not done with this guy. So let's look at one more profile. Flip a few pages with me. So you should be in Matthew chapter 4. Now go to Matthew chapter 9 and then verse 9. And now let's look at Levi, also known as Matthew, as Jesus calls him, out of his tax collector's booth into a life of grace and purpose.

Here's what Matthew 9.9 says. As Jesus went out 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. Now in our culture, no one is jumping up and down about an IRS worker, especially right now at tax time, okay? But hopefully, no one's looking to slash their tires in our world either.

[12:09] But, this was different because in the first century Jewish culture, tax collectors were often lumped together, seen as guys who were just as bad as prostitutes, murderers, robbers, unbelievers, and most often they just referred to them as sinners.

Here's why. With Israel being under Roman control at this time, being mistreated by the Romans, being under their control completely, the taxes on transported goods were contracted out to the locals.

So guys like Matthew would pay Rome and agreed upon some for the right to collect taxes and then they were allowed to charge whatever they basically wanted and get wealthy in the process.

They didn't just recoup their money and make a little bit. They often got very wealthy and you could do nothing about it as someone who maybe had items you were bringing in to sell.

They hated tax collectors. They refused to even include them in society and they often would give them the what for anytime they could. And so, they were hated for two big reasons.

[13:15] Number one, the corruption. Number two, they're traitors. They're Benedict Arnolds against their nation working for the enemy for Rome. And what does Jesus do? He calls this outcast to be one of his disciples.

This was radical. This was divinely intentional. And it should serve as great joy for you and me today because we have a past as well. We've made mistakes.

We've sinned against God. We've wallowed in our addictions and our pride and our selfishness. We've hurt other people and yet, Ephesians 1 starting in verse 7 says, in him, in Jesus, we have redemption through his blood.

The forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. So, if you're a child of God today, which is a commitment that you have to make, Jesus has done the work on the cross, but we have to repent and be baptized into him.

It's that commitment, Jesus, you have my whole life. If that's you, like Newton, we can say that we were a wretch and yet, because of Jesus, we can boldly proclaim amazing grace, how sweet the

sound that saved a wretch like me.

[14:31] You know, I am so thankful for these examples in Scripture of God, not always choosing the best of the best and yet, sometimes he did choose people who were looked at pretty highly, but he also takes flawed, jacked up sinners and he washes them clean by the blood of Christ and there's nothing he delights in more because the word of God tells us than to seek and save the lost because Jesus is greater than your past, no matter what your past may be.

So, if you are a disciple of Jesus today, you can boldly proclaim these words from Corrie ten Boom. She said, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt my debt of sin has been wiped out.

Now, if you've been in church all your life, maybe you've been a follower of Christ since you were a kid, I need you to hear something. I know sometimes you have these people who get up and share these big stories and you are, at times, maybe you feel like you don't have a story to tell, that you don't have an impact that you could make based on where you've been, but that is a lie from Satan. There are so many people just like you who need to hear your story and God specializes in putting people in your life for you to share with. I dare you. All you have to do is ask him, Lord, I want to share my story.

Will you put someone in my path that I can tell about Jesus and I will guarantee he will give you those opportunities. And then there are those who maybe have a big testimony. You've hit rock bottom.

[16:07] Maybe you didn't grow up around the Lord. Maybe you've come from a really rocky past. I don't know, but the Lord has brought you out. Praise him. Use that story not to brag, but to show what God can do in what seems to be impossible situations.

Because if your heart belongs fully to Christ, you are saved from your past. Now, let's finish that sentence. You are saved from your past and you are empowered for a purpose.

John Newton, the man who once was a vile slave trader, mistreating, causing hopelessness to so many, he's now forgiven, transformed, and even preaching the gospel as a joyful pastor, a gentle husband, a faithful friend, and a vessel of hope to those around him.

As great as it is, God doesn't just want to save you. He also wants to empower you for one of the very purposes that you were created, and that is to shine him into this world with your own unique personality, giftedness, and passions.

So let's go back to Matthew 4.19 for a second. Come follow me, Jesus said, and I will send you out to fish for people. I kind of like the older translations that say, I will make you fishers of men.

[17:28] I love how Jesus met these fishermen right where they were, right in what they understood, and he calls them not out of their profession because there's anything wrong with it, but he basically says, listen, I have an even greater purpose for your life.

Yes, you know all about fishing, of course, so let's get to work and let's fish for people so that they can discover hope. Later in Matthew 9, starting in verse 37, we see Jesus surrounded by those who understood farming, and listen to how he relates to them.

He says, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Now, let's go back to our profiles from earlier.

We mentioned the sinful behaviors of Peter and John and Matthew, but look at what happens when God gets a hold of people who are all in. Peter goes from this big, brassy, all show, no go personality to a man who has sold out for Christ.

That boldness with a huge helping of humility begins to be used for the kingdom as he stands up as the leader at Pentecost, and he preaches the word of God alongside his brothers in Christ, and listen, 3,000 people surrendered to Jesus and were baptized that day.

[18:47] He continues to mature and grow as he becomes one of the pillars in the Jerusalem church. He wrote the books of 1 and 2 Peter and eventually gave his life telling the world about Jesus.

John goes from vengeful, fiery, selfish, and judgmental to bold, loving, and compassionate. Jesus entrusted John to take care of his mother Mary.

He preached and healed in Jesus' name, wrote the Gospel of John, 1, 2, and 3 John, even shared a great revelation with us that is called the book of Revelation. And he'll go down as the one apostle not to be killed for his faith.

And then there's Matthew. And we see the instant transformation in Matthew 9, verse 10, right after Jesus called him from the tax collector booth. It says, While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's

house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? On hearing this, Jesus said, It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

[19 : 54] So, not only does one societal outcast come to know Jesus, but the rest of his friends will have the same opportunity. We don't know what happened with them, but they had the same opportunity and I bet you some of them surrendered to Jesus.

And listen, he is used by the Lord. Matthew is used to share Jesus with his friends. And while the Bible is a little quieter about Matthew from this point on, we know that he preached in several areas according to tradition.

He wrote the gospel of Matthew and he gave his life shining Jesus. Now, I don't share about these three guys today to put them up on a pedestal. Okay?

I share their story to say that we're just like them. We're human. And yet, he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. And I love these words inspired by the Holy Spirit that Paul spoke.

And if you think about Paul's story, this guy hated Christians, persecuted them with zeal. And yet, when God interrupted all that and he came to know the grace of God for himself, everything changed.

[21 : 01] And he could write these words from Ephesians 2.10. He said, for we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Now, I know that you are listening right now and you may be an official part of our church family or you may not, but I'll tell you, we have some incredible believers who love people and who are very relational.

People who can have a conversation with anyone and make them feel comfortable. Can I tell you something I hope we are never as a church? I never want to be a church where when a visitor walks in, we're just cliquish and no one even seems to notice or care about people.

So for all of us, we can be friendly, we can realize that church is a mission field too, we can step away from our cliques and pay attention to maybe those who are visiting, those who need someone to be there with them, but especially for those of you who love to get to know people who are a little bit more adventurous and relational, you don't realize that your smile and your conversation may be what someone brings someone back.

It may be what gets someone involved in a church family for the first time and ultimately it may be what brings them to Jesus and changes everything about their life. If that's you, keep greeting at the door, keep greeting at holy grounds, in the parking lot or just as you walk past those made in the image of God.

[22 : 27] Or maybe you take those gifts and more, that adventurous spirit and you use them to go on mission trips, to make a difference for the kingdom in that way. Others of you, you're creative types, whether that's music, art, design, decorating, planning, the list keeps going, but God can empower that gift for his glory.

Could you imagine if we didn't have a talented praise team up here each week? Worship music could be rough, especially if you want me to take over because I can't sing to save my life. But I'm thankful that our worship teams lead us to the throne in worship every single Sunday and do it with excellence.

And then there's the super detailed people among us who sometimes can get a bad rap for being so particular. But when you come in on Sunday, guess what? Things are going to look nice. The property is going to be welcoming and well taken care of.

Connection point is going to be organized and helpful. Holy grounds food is going to be delicious and ready to be served. You're going to be blessed in ways that you didn't even know that people had to do things to make you blessed in that way.

We're going to be great stewards of our finances. Announcements are going to be clear.

Distractions are going to be eliminated so people can discover Jesus and grow deeper in love with him.

[23 : 42] Others may be listening right now. Just say, hey, I'm a worker bee. Put me to work. That's awesome. Can I tell you with being in the Family Life Center right now in our contemporary services that we set up and tear down about four times a week.

That's a lot. What a blessing for those people who see a need and just jump in, set up, take down chairs, whatever's needed. What a joy for those who have the gift even to cook or to help serve meals.

And we didn't even mention children and youth workers who are glutton for punishment. But wow, do they know how to love and lead our children and our youth to Jesus? And I'm sure there's some areas that I'm not mentioning right now, but I am so thankful for God's grace that he freely offers to you and to me today.

That he is greater than my past. And I'm grateful he didn't save us to sit us in a pew just to sit us in a pew. He saved us to serve with enthusiasm so we can make an impact for his kingdom.

And just like John Newton, if we are in Christ, not only do we have hope on this world, on this earth, but we have hope for all eternity in paradise and we can say these words with joy.

[24 : 59] When we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

Listen to me. Jesus is greater than our past. And I'm so thankful. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for just how good you are.

Thank you for your word today. Thank you for constant, I mean, we just looked at three or four of the disciples here, but we know if you go down all 12 apostles that you can see just guys who had a past and yet you redeemed them and you used them in awesome ways.

So, thank you God that you don't care where we've been, what we've done, who our mama is, who our mama isn't, that you offer us hope and forgiveness and life in Christ.

And Father, we just pray that you will empower us to use our unique gifts and abilities and passions and skill sets for your glory. So, Father, get us out of the way, do what only you can do, and Father, thank you for this hope that you lavish all over us.

[26 : 22] We pray all this in Jesus' precious and holy name. God's people said, Amen and Amen.

Hey, you noticed in this passage that we looked at and we didn't dwell a lot here but I want to focus on it for a second.

When Jesus said, come follow me to those four guys, those five guys that we looked at there today, did you notice what their response is? They didn't dilly-dally.

They didn't just say, well, let me think about it and pray about it. What did they do? They got up, they left all the worldly things behind and they said, you are the Savior and we will follow you with everything that we are and so maybe today you have been feeling God calling on your life.

You've never truly surrendered your life to Him. You've never been baptized into Christ showing that you are surrendering all of you to all of Him.

If that's you, I just encourage you to get up and say, Jesus, here's my life. I'm going to follow you with everything I am. So if you'd like to have a conversation about that, we are here.

[27 : 34] We would love to come alongside you just like others have done for us. I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for so many who have poured into me and not given up on me when they probably should have. And so, hey, reach out in a couple ways, 812-663-8488.

That's 663-8488. First Christian Church, Greensburg, Indiana. My name is Ray Sweet. I'm the lead pastor here. Or you can email me at ray at fccgreensburg.com.

But hey, thank you for listening today. And just remember, Jesus is greater than your past.