

GOD AMONG US

A Gospel-Centered Exploration of JESUS' MINISTRY



D. A. HORTON



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ABOUT THE GOSPEL PROJECT

Some people see the Bible as a collection of stories with morals for life application. But it's so much more. Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it's also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters—even a love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus. This is *The Gospel Project*.

When we begin to see the Bible as the story of redemption through Jesus Christ, God's plan to rescue the world from sin and death, our perspective changes. We no longer look primarily for what the Bible says about us but instead see what it tells us about God and what He has done. After all, it's the gospel that saves us, and when we encounter Jesus in the pages of Scripture, the gospel works on us, transforming us into His image. *We become God's gospel project.*

ABOUT THE WRITER



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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Welcome to *The Gospel Project*, a gospel-centered small-group study that dives deep into the things of God, lifts up Jesus, focuses on the grand story of Scripture, and drives participants to be on mission. This small-group Bible study provides opportunities to study the Bible and to encounter the living Christ. *The Gospel Project* provides you with tools and resources to purposefully study God's Word and to grow in the faith and knowledge of God's Son. And what's more, you can do so in the company of others, encouraging and building up one another. Here are some things to remember that will help you maximize the usefulness of this resource:

GATHER A GROUP. We grow in the faith best in community with other believers, as we love, encourage, correct, and challenge one another. The life of a disciple of Christ was never meant to be lived alone, in isolation.

PRAY. Pray regularly for your group members.

PREPARE. This resource includes the Bible study content, three devotionals, and discussion questions for each session. Work through the session and devotionals in preparation for each group session. Take notes and record your own questions. Also consider the follow-up questions so you are ready to participate in and add to the discussion, bringing up your own notes and questions where appropriate.

RESOURCE YOURSELF. Make good use of the additional resources available on the Web at gospelproject.com/additionalresources and search for this specific title. Download a podcast. Read a blog post. Be intentional about learning from others in the faith. For tips on how to better lead groups or additional ideas for leading this Bible study, visit: ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject.

GROUP TIME. Gather together with your group to discuss the session and devotional content. Work through the follow-up questions and your own questions. Discuss the material and the implications for the lives of believers and the mission to which we have been called.

OVERFLOW. Remember... *The Gospel Project* is not just a Bible study. *We* are the project. The gospel is working on us. Don't let your preparation time be simply about the content. Let the truths of God's Word soak in as you study. Let God work on your heart first, and then pray that He will change the hearts of the other people in your group.



SESSION 1

JESUS CALLS THE FIRST DISCIPLES

“We cannot come thinking we are someone special or a person of privilege. We come with the understanding that we are nothing without Him ... We bow before the Master because godliness demands submission.”¹

TED TRAYLOR

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

Phone calls exist to be answered. In our day, we've gotten good at ignoring them. When our cell phones ring, we usually look at the caller ID to determine whether or not we should answer the call. Sometimes the call comes at a time when we don't want to be interrupted. Other times we decide to return the call later, send a short text, or ignore it altogether.

But there are times we miss a call because our phone is on silent. We pick up our phone to see who reached out to us and then return the call because we hate that we missed the chance to speak with the person. We send a text message or leave a voicemail, apologizing for missing the call earlier and expressing our availability to talk.

In rare cases, we may have to block persistent callers who harass us and won't stop. In the worst cases, we may have to change our phone number.

What habits do you have when it comes to making and receiving calls on your phone?

When have those practices been beneficial? When have they been problematic for you?

Sometimes we treat God's call to repent and follow Jesus the way we treat a caller on the phone. We may choose to ignore God's call, to "silence" it by distancing ourselves from the Scriptures and from other Christians.

In today's session, we see Jesus' call to repentance, a call that He extended to unlikely and unexpected people. Instead of ignoring the call, the first disciples abandoned their old way of life and received Christ's invitation to follow Him. Now, as believers in Christ, we have the privilege of answering God's call to discipleship and then extending the same call to those who need to repent and believe.

1

Jesus Calls for Repentance

Jesus' methodology of ministry is marked by the use of the phrase "From then on." In Matthew 4:17, this phrase indicates the launch of Jesus' public ministry.

From then on Jesus began to preach,
"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near."

MATTHEW 4:17

Now that Jesus' ministry was public, He called for repentance as the prerequisite for discipleship. To repent means to change one's mind, to turn around in a way that leads to life-change. Jesus was not making a suggestion but issuing a command. The person who hears the command is to make a conscious decision to obey and then live accordingly. To repent means to leave your former way of life to follow Jesus, and repentance is demonstrated through faithfully following Him.

Jesus' ministry started with a command that may have seemed abrupt. But consider how God has been good to His creation by providing us—His creatures—with experiences in life that lead to joy. Our encounters with everyday goodness are not mere coincidences; they are provided by God to soften our hearts toward Him and lead us to repentance. As the apostle Paul said in Romans 2:4: "Do you despise the riches of his kindness, restraint, and patience, not recognizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

Why do you think Matthew summed up Jesus' preaching ministry with this announcement about God's kingdom and the call to repent?

Jesus' ministry began with the call to repentance, and that leads us to two questions:

WHY DID JESUS CALL FOR REPENTANCE?

Jesus gave a reason the people needed to repent: "Because the kingdom of heaven has come near." That is the announcement that lays the foundation for repentance. Jesus was expressing the truth that God's kingdom—His rule and reign—was coming to earth through Him and His work. God was keeping His promise to bring salvation to sinful humanity and restoration

to a broken, fallen world. He was keeping His promise to send the Messiah to make everything right. Because God was acting in this way, Jesus said the people needed to repent to get on board with what God was doing.

So, Jesus' call to repentance is a prerequisite for discipleship. Why? Because being a disciple implies following Jesus as King. You can't follow Jesus as King if you are not repenting of sin and embracing Him as Lord.

WHAT ARE WE TO REPENT OF?

As we read at the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve fell into sin. From Adam we inherited a sinful nature (see Rom. 5:12-19) and have become slaves to sin (see John 8:34). When we repent, we admit our need for God's power to save us and our desire to be involved in His kingdom agenda, not our own.

The gospel message proclaims Jesus' perfect life, His death in our place, and His resurrection; and it tells us that Jesus is the only qualified Savior for sinners. We put our faith in Him, and we renounce our sin and our self-righteous attempts to earn salvation. We turn away from our selfishness and sin in order to follow Jesus, the One who brings God's kingdom to earth.

Do you sense urgency in the words of Jesus in this passage? Why or why not?

What is the role of urgency in the call to repentance?

2

Jesus Calls the Unlikely

Because Jesus calls everyone to repent, there is no specific “profile” that describes followers of Jesus. The only qualification is repentant faith. Jesus calls people from all backgrounds and every imaginable way of life. Anyone who responds to His call will be saved and assured of a place in the family of God.

If you were picking a team of people to help you change the world, what types of people would you want? Why?

In the next scene, we see Jesus call His first disciples. These first followers were fishermen—probably not the kind of occupation or position in society you’d expect a Messiah to choose from when bringing together men who would change the world. Take a look:

¹⁸ As he was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter), and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ “Follow me,” he told them, “and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father, preparing their nets, and he called them.

²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

MATTHEW 4:18-22

Jesus didn’t choose celebrities with money and influence. He didn’t choose politicians with connections or CEOs of Fortune 500 companies with excellent leadership and managerial traits. Instead, He chose two sets of brothers who were all fishermen.

- The first set (Peter and Andrew) were everyday blue-collar workers.
- The second set (James and John) worked for their father, who had hired help (see Mark 1:20), so they may have come from some level of affluence.

In His call, Jesus used a play on words when He took their occupation (fishermen) and turned it around, saying He would make them “fish for people.” What’s amazing is that both sets of brothers immediately followed Jesus when He called them. They didn’t have all the details, they didn’t have a destination in mind, but still they obeyed Jesus’ call to follow.

Like Abraham, who left his family and country to go to a place promised by God, and like Samuel, who said, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam. 3:10), the disciples followed in the footsteps of their faithful ancestors and heeded God’s call.

What are some examples from Scripture of men and women who obeyed God when He called them?

What are some examples of people who disobeyed or delayed their obedience?

Today, Jesus is calling people from every walk of life to leave their selfish pursuits and follow Him. It takes wisdom to understand the nature of God’s particular call on your life. It may not require that you walk away from your family business or sell all your belongings. But it will definitely require you to give up the idea that you command your own destiny. It will mean you give up any trace of selfish ambition that affects your life decisions. God’s kingdom must be first.

As we submit to God, He does amazing things through us. The beauty of God’s call to repentance is that He brings together people from various backgrounds and groups in order to highlight His glorious work of redemption. He calls people you’d least expect. He does things you would never predict. He doesn’t just call “the cream of the crop” to be His spokespeople but unlikely people whose life-change will demonstrate the glory of His work.

Why is it both comforting and empowering for believers to know and understand that God calls everyday, ordinary people to proclaim His extraordinary gospel?

3

Jesus Calls the Unpopular and Unexpected

Jesus didn't only call fishermen to follow Him; He also called people with despised occupations. Matthew, for example, was a tax-collector.

Jewish tax-collectors had a terrible reputation. They were seen as traitors and swindlers. And yet, Jesus extended His call of discipleship to someone who had this occupation, even when He knew there would be fallout.

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the toll booth, and he said to him, "Follow me," and he got up and followed him.

¹⁰ While he was reclining at the table in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came to eat with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹² Now when he heard this, he said, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."

MATTHEW 9:9-13

After Matthew obeyed Jesus and followed Him, he quickly saw his worlds collide. His old world of relationships with tax-collectors and sinners now mixed with his new world of Jesus and the other disciples. Put those two worlds together and, not surprisingly, the tension led to a confrontation. The Pharisees saw who was at the party, and they questioned the faithfulness of Jesus because of the company He was keeping.

Jesus heard their questions, and He answered them by saying the sick are the ones who need a doctor. He didn't come to call the righteous but sinners. It was Jesus' heart to seek and save the lost (see Luke 19:10). Jesus is the great physician seeking to heal those who are spiritually sick, infected by the disease of sin (see Ps. 103:3).

Why do you think the Pharisees felt offended by the people at the dinner?

How should Jesus' response impact the way we think about our own hospitality and ministry?

What kinds of people did Jesus minister to?

As we look at the story of Jesus' earthy ministry, we see a vast array of people He embraced, ministered to, and forgave of their sins.

- He healed an official's son (see John 4:46-54).
- He cleansed the leper (see Matt. 8:2-4).
- He healed the paralytic and forgave his sins (see Matt. 9:1-8).
- He healed the unclean woman with the issue of blood (see Mark 5:25-34).
- He fed the multitudes (see Matt. 15:32-38; John 6:1-14).
- He raised the dead (see Luke 7:11-17; 8:41-56; John 11:1-44).

Jesus sought out all types of people and treated them with dignity by having compassion on them, listening to their pain, and meeting their physical and spiritual needs.

Since we are commanded to imitate Christ (see Eph. 5:1), we have the privilege of taking the gospel to those who are underserved, neglected, and overlooked. The gospel compels us to restore the dignity of society's outcasts by affirming the fact that they, like all humans, were made in the image of God (see Gen. 1:26-27). How will they hear the call of Jesus to repent unless someone who knows Jesus goes to them and shares the gospel, extending the call to repent and the invitation to follow Him?

As followers of Jesus, how can we model His actions to those in need around us?



GROUP STUDY



Warm Up

How do you normally choose the types of people you want as a part of your life?

How do these people compare to the types of people Jesus typically did life with?

“It is ... remarkable that Jesus calls Matthew to be his follower, even though society in general and the nation’s leadership in particular would have written anyone like him off as beyond saving! Jesus is interested in people regardless of their backgrounds. In part that is why many tax collectors and sinners followed Jesus ... Every human being is a sinner and therefore in need of a saviour.”²

God commands and compels His children to share the good news of the gospel with people everywhere, from all walks of life. We must fight any tendency to profile people and assume they are not redeemable or attractive enough to be ministered to. Don’t close your eyes to the world around you. Be aware of the people God has placed in your path. Don’t profile people or write off others as beyond the reach of God’s grace. Jesus called unlikely people, and He still does.

In what ways might your study this week impact the way you choose who you spend time with in the future?

“From the beginning Jesus took it for granted that people are sinners, and accordingly his first message was that they must repent. Only so would they know the forgiveness he came to bring.”³

LEON MORRIS

Discussion

1. Why did Jesus call for repentance? What are we to repent of?
2. What is the role of urgency in the call to repentance?
3. If you were picking a team of people to help you change the world, what types of people would you want? Why?
4. What are some examples from Scripture of men and women who obeyed God when He called them?
5. What are some examples of people who disobeyed or delayed their obedience?
6. Why is it both comforting and empowering for believers to know and understand that God calls everyday, ordinary people to proclaim His extraordinary gospel?
7. Why do you think the Pharisees felt offended by the people at the dinner?
8. How should Jesus' response impact the way we think about our own hospitality and ministry?

Conclusion

I once learned a valuable lesson on the streets of Kansas City. My friend and I decided to connect one day to pray for and evangelize the community surrounding our church plant. We noticed a tall, slender man with dirty clothes and a long unkempt beard waving at us. He ran up and told us that the guy who normally sold drugs in that area was not there anymore. We told him we weren't looking for drugs; we were out on the streets sharing the love of God.

During this 30-minute encounter, my friend and I were able to share the gospel with this man. He had been released from prison after receiving a cancer diagnosis. He had just one month to live. That day he prayed to receive Christ.

Later, he told my friend and me that every morning he prayed to God to send him a sign to know if God was pleased with him or not. He said that when he heard the gospel message about his sinfulness, Jesus' work, and the command to repent, his heart was willing to receive God's embrace because he finally knew how he could be in a right relationship with Him.

To be honest, when I first saw that man, I assumed he was homeless and wanted to bum money off us. Sharing the gospel was not my first thought. But now, looking back, I am amazed to think that God put us in that place to share the gospel and call a man to repent—a man who pursued *us*!

Spend some time praying this for you and for your group:

"God, thank You for calling the unlikely, the unpopular, and the unexpected. Thank You that You call all of us to repentance. Stir in our hearts the desire and willingness to answer Your call to discipleship and extend that same call to those who need to repent and believe, no matter who they are. Amen."

1. Ted Traylor, *The Eight Callings of God* (Bradenton, FL: Outcome Publishing, 2009), 118.
2. Joe Kapolyo, "Matthew," in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) [eBook].
3. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) [WORDsearch].
4. Kevin DeYoung, "A Friend of Sinners and No Friend of Sin," *The Gospel Coalition* [online], 12 October 2013 [cited 6 July 2016]. Available from the Internet: thegospelcoalition.org.

