

Jesus Calls Levi
 Has Jesus Called You?
 Mark 2:13-17
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¹³ He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. ¹⁴ And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

¹⁵ And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷ And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Imagine having a job that is highly in demand. This is a job where you can make money and accountability is low. However, this is a job where you are constantly despised, hated, rejected and talked behind your back. Not only are you hated, you viewed as a traitor by your fellow country-men.

What kind of a job would that be? This was the job of a tax-collector in the first century. Tax collectors could collect taxes over and above taxes owed. One commentator says "if a tax-collector collected more than the sum contracted to the state, it belonged to him. In other words, the tax-collector received the surplus, if any, above the contracted sum and associated costs. This constituted his profit".

Picking up from last week, we saw Jesus forgive and heal a paralytic. Now Jesus is outside of Capernaum. Beside the sea of Galilee. And a large crowd gathered around. And he taught them. After he had finished teaching, he was then walking beside the sea.

¹³ And he went again beside the sea and all the crowd came towards him, and he had been teaching them.

I have four major points of emphasis as we cover this passage today.

- Consider the Call of Jesus

¹⁴ And passing by he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "You follow me". And he rose and followed him.

- Notice Mark does not tell us that Levi is a tax-collector. It just says Levi was sitting at the tax booth. How do we know this man is a tax collector? Luke 5:27 - *“After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth.*
- The parallel account from the Gospel of Matthew identifies a tax collector as Matthew in chapter 9 verse 9. Although Mark and Luke also list Matthew as one of the twelve apostles, neither Gospel explicitly identifies Levi as Matthew. They do identify the collector Jesus called as Levi. It is likely that “Matthew” and “Levi” are two names for the same person. “Levi” may have been his given name and “Matthew” his apostolic name. Just like Simon Peter. Why did Levi want to change his name? Well, being a tax collector definitely carried some negative message. Imagine someone like Bernie Madoff being saved while he was scamming others. After he is saved, he goes by Barnabas instead of Bernie or something like that.
- So, Levi or Matthew was found at the tax collector’s booth. This toll booth ran from Damascus through Capernaum to the Mediterranean coast. Levi was likely employed by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. He would collect taxes or tolls for goods in transit. When a toll is imposed for traveling in those roads, no one knew how much the toll booth operator paid the authorities. So there was a huge opportunity for corruption.
- Jews hated and despised their fellow tax collectors so much that they prohibited receiving alms and donations from a tax collector. Why? Because their money was believed to have been gained illegally. Also, if a tax collector entered a house, all that was in it became ceremonially *unclean*.
- Levi, very likely was a descendant of the Levi - Jacob’s son. Levi’s clan had been charged with serving in the Jewish temple and the carrying the Ark of the Lord in Old Testament times. So, if this Levi, son of Alphaeus, is from the priestly clan, he would have been particularly shunned because of the questionable vocation he chose over a religious one. So, imagine the predicament of the Levi. He was in job where there was money to be made through underhanded means but hated by his fellow men.
- Levi had been living a life of corruption and practicing a life of sin. He was in a job where sin was his choice and livelihood.

Jesus knew all this Levi and the corrupt toll system.

Jesus sees Levi, knowing fully well the reputation Levi carried and the life of sin he was living, Jesus calls him with two words “Follow me”.

And what does Levi do?

The last part of verse 14 - *And he rose and followed him.*

Levi’s response is a little unsettling and scandalous to those who employed him and those who watched him. Levi was a public figure. People knew him and knew about his job- he

was under Roman authority which allowed him to professionally defraud others. People saw him every day. He made money off of his fellow-country men.

But now, with just hearing the two words of Jesus Christ, Levi, stands up, vacates his chair, his job, his position, his employment and his identity. Imagine what it would have been for those who were watching him. Leaving this job meant leaving his livelihood, his vocation, his whole past behind him.

When we covered in Mark 1 (verse 16), we saw Jesus called Andrew, Peter, James and John. We know these men were fisherman by trade. These men left their fishing in order to follow Jesus. But their fishing skills didn't leave them. Because we know that Peter went back fishing after Jesus was crucified.

However, the tax collector's job was different. The job was in high demand. It was a highly sought after job. Once you leave the job there was no going back. It was backfilled rather immediately.

Levi knew this. He also knew the corruption and sin he lived in. He was hated by his countrymen but now he is called by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke 5:28 tells us “*And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.*”

Levi knew what he was leaving and what he was signing up for.

We see similar responses from Peter, Andrew, James and John in the Gospel of Luke – “*..they left everything and followed him*” Luke 5:11.

Mark tells us that Peter and his friends immediately followed Jesus. (Mark 1:18).

- Consider Jesus Himself – The Consummate

What is it with the call of Jesus that these early disciples left everything and followed him?

What makes Jesus so compelling to these men that they left their vocation, their identity, their past and simply followed Jesus?

I'll tell you why Jesus was so compelling.

In Jesus, you find true and lasting satisfaction, true fulfillment, the greatest love, joy and peace your soul. When Jesus finds you, you are ushered into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus said that “*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*” Matthew 13:44

In the Gospel of John, when Andrew, the brother of Peter found Jesus and he told his brother about it. Andrew said to Peter, “*We have found the Messiah*” John 1:41. And later

“Philip found Nathanael and said to him, *“We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph”*. These were Jewish people who knew something about a Messiah and when they found Jesus they could not contain their excitement.

But Paul did not know Jesus first and he says about this about Jesus – *“we have this treasure in jars of clay”*. 2 Corinthians 4:7

Consider what Paul said, *“Indeed, I consider everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of Christ Jesus my Lord.”* Philippians 3:8.

Now following Jesus has a cost.

- Consider the cost of following

What did Jesus say about anyone following him?

“If any man would come after me, let me deny himself, pick up his cross and follow me.”
Mark 8:34

Denying and following Jesus, however, is a small cost to pay to the glory and benefit you have by following Jesus.

Paul says in Second Corinthians chapter 4 verse 17, *“for this momentary affliction is preparing for us, and eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”*

Compared to the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ, do you see this material world as very valuable? Levi didn't. Neither did Peter, Andrew, James or John.

So, Levi believed, repented, denied himself and followed Jesus Christ. There was no going back. He knew there was going to be a cost to follow Jesus. He simply got up and followed Jesus and became one of the apostles.

And what we see in the next few verses is how joyful Levi is and in that joy and happiness he honors the Lord Jesus Christ at his home. Levi was somewhat of a public figure. He knows that his fellow tax collectors need to know about who his new master is. So he throws a lavish party.

- Consider the consequences

Have you wondered what are the consequences of not following Jesus? Paul writes to the Ephesian church we were once *“following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, ... carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath”* Ephesians 2:2-3. Those who don't follow Jesus follow either

the world, the devil or their own flesh or all three. And the consequences of following these – wrath! Levi was a child of wrath. When Jesus called Levi, he became a child of God and a child of joy. How does Levi’s joy look like?

¹⁵ *And it came to be as he was reclining in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. For there were many and they were following him.*

It appears Levi broke a taboo. There were others who were shunned by the religious elites and they were following Jesus too. Verse 15 tells that there were sinners along with tax-collectors. Sinners was a term used for those who did not follow the religious rules of the Pharisees. They were sort of outcasts. Yet Jesus wants to dine with them. The word *reclining* suggests this was a formal party or banquet. The dinner was probably Levi’s farewell party to become the disciple of Jesus or perhaps it was an opportunity to tell his tax collector friends about Jesus and even introduce the Savior to them. Luke 5:29 describes the feast this way – *“And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.”* So Levi hosts a banquet. He invites his friends. However, you see the critical Pharisees waiting and watching.

Verse 16.

¹⁶ *And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*

“In the ancient world when Jesus lived, table fellowship or being part of a formal banquet carried a great significance. To have dinner with someone meant acceptance of that person. Jesus assumes the role of the host at this feast. And for Jesus to have dinner with someone who has had a questionable reputation, the tax-collector’s profession which by any measure was despised and held in disrepute, this new relationship and hanging out with fellow sinners and tax collectors was too much for the teachers of the law.” - Notes likely attributed to John MacArthur

Jesus responds to the Pharisees:

¹⁷ *And Jesus heard said to them “that those who are strong (well, able) have no need of a physician but those who are sick I came not to call the righteous but sinners.*

“I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” Luke 5:32

This is a weighty statement by Jesus. Jesus responds with a Jewish proverb that *“only the sick need a doctor”* was very common in their day.

Jesus came not to call the so called righteous but sinners.

Jesus's call to salvation in order to share in it, a person must first recognize his or need of it. A self-righteous sinner is incapable of recognizing that need, but a sinner can.

This is the core of Christianity. Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

Christ does not save after you have cleaned up but He save them as sinners.

How does Jesus call people today?

Answer: Through the preaching of the Gospel.

Jesus sent out his disciples in Mark 6:12 - "*And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two*". "*So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent*" (v.12). Our commission is the same. To proclaim a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Only Jesus can forgive sins.

Has Jesus called you?

If he did. Tell your friends. Levi did.

If you have not been called, you have been served the Gospel. Turn to Jesus. Repent and follow Jesus. You will find rest for your soul.

----- Discipleship Questions-----

MESSAGE SUMMARY: Jesus Calls Levi? Mark 2:13-17

HEAD: These questions help you examine the truth of God's Word.

1. What do we learn from Jesus calling Levi to follow him? What does his response indicate and what implications can you draw from Levi following Jesus?

HEART: These questions help you wrestle with what you believe.

2. What do you believe about your calling to follow Jesus? 1 Corinthians 1:12, 21-24, Romans 1:6-7, Jude 1:1, Ephesians 5:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 2 Timothy 1:9
3. What is God convicting you of and to believe in light of this message?

HANDS/HABITS: These questions help you bring the truth into your everyday life and develop behaviors that change your habits.

4. For personal reflection: What will you change in light of your calling to Christ?