

JESUS CALLS LEVI

Luke 5:27-32

Key Verse: 5:27

"After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him...."

From the outset of his earthly Messianic ministry, Jesus called his first disciples. In chapter 5, Jesus calls two disciples. They were Simon the fisherman (5:1-11), and Levi, a tax collector. They were either ambiguous people or anonymous people. Jesus chose two disciples from among two ordinary kinds of people in order to train them until they could come to know God and be shepherds of God's flock. Furthermore, Jesus chose them in the hope that they would fulfill God's purpose for world salvation. In today's passage, Jesus chooses a disciple by the name of Levi. He was a tax collector and a social outcast and a public sinner. What on earth was Jesus going to do with such a person?

First, a man named Levi (27a).

Jesus went early in the morning, as was his custom, to a quiet place to pray. Our Lord Jesus prayed first before doing anything. On the way back, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax booth. Look at verse 27. "After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him..." Most people passed the tax collector's booth hurriedly, as if they were passing by a leper's quarantine. They might have had premonitions that they would have nightmares or encounter unfortunate events when they passed a tax collector on the road. But Jesus did not bypass Levi as others had done. Jesus stood at the door of his tax booth for a while, and then quietly knocked. Levi opened the door and Jesus stepped into the booth and said, "Follow me!" It meant precisely, "Now I choose you as one of my disciples." This was a short meeting between Jesus, the God of mercy, and a man who was lost in sin. Who was Levi?

Levi was a tax collector. Tax collectors were local Jews employed by Roman authorities. They were hated by their fellow Jews because they collaborated with the Roman invaders. They collected heavy taxes from their suffering people and shared the money with the Romans. Most of all, the Jews hated them because they sold their Jewish identity for the sake of money. As we know well, the Jews could survive all kinds of suffering from being crushed by powerful nations, because they had a strong national identity as Jewish people. In the synoptic gospels tax collectors are bracketed with "sinners" (Mt 9:10; Mk 2:15; Lk 5:30). They were branded as quislings. In those days, Roman rule over the colonial peoples was cruel. Roman rulers demanded blind submission and respect from the conquered peoples, and they oppressed them with taxation. Later, Roman rulers severely persecuted the early Jewish Christians who indirectly challenged their maggot-breeding corruption. At that time, the people of Israel were so oppressed that they had to confirm several times a day whether they were alive or in a nightmare. Levi did not care about his suffering people at all. He was a sadistic person.

Levi was a powerful sinner while the paralytic in the previous passage was a powerless sinner. Most people living under Roman rule either were crushed or they despaired. But Levi had no idea of yielding to the adverse situation. Even if Levi was in a fatalistic situation, he did not despair. He did his best to figure out how to overcome the hard world. Immediately, Levi grasped that money was everything. So he firmly decided to become a tax collector to make lots of money. After making this decision, he might have thought that he was smart.

Probably he was confident that he could make a great deal of money in several years and then go back to school and finish his Ph.D. in oratory. After his decision, he used all his ability to make money. As soon as Levi made some money, he began to get the taste of money. After that, he became quite a different person. Gradually, he lost shining inspiration in his mind. He lost the desire to go back to school to finish his Ph.D. Rather, he regretted that he had studied so hard in the past. On the other hand, he became so greedy that he couldn't control himself. He said, "Hmm, money is good. I am good, too." But nobody could say he was a good man. James 1:15 says, "Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." Men are most happy when they grow in the holiness of God, and when the image of God is formed increasingly in their inner men. But this man Levi was growing in his selfishness.

Second, "Follow me," Jesus said to him (27b-30).

When Jesus called him, "Follow me," he invited Levi. Look at verse 27. "After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him...." When Jesus said, "Follow me," it was an invitation to his home, even though Jesus did not have his own house. Virtually, it was an invitation to the heavenly kingdom. Up until this time, people did not associate with Levi, much less invite him to their homes, because he was an outcast. But Jesus embraced him and welcomed him. In spite of Levi's wretchedness, Jesus saw him as a precious human being. To Jesus, he was lost and wandering, like a prodigal son, wearing the mark of Cain, longing to come home. Jesus was like a father who watches his son delirious with a serious sickness. His heart was broken. When Jesus said, "Follow me," he was knocking at the door of Levi's heart to invite him to the kingdom of God (Rev 3:20).

When Jesus called him, "Follow me," he put hope in Levi. What did Jesus do with this wretched man? Jesus saw him with the hope of God. In the eyes of his fellow Jews, Levi was a quisling who should commit suicide, as Judas Iscariot had done after betraying Jesus. Probably the Jews thought that Levi was a man of no heart. Probably the Jews thought that he was a man of no tears. But in Jesus' eyes he was a precious child of God--lost in sin. To Jesus, Levi was not a useless man; he was misguided and was misusing his ability and his unyielding spirit. Jesus knew that Levi was tired and weary spiritually. Jesus knew that demons channeled through hisadroitness. Jesus knew that all the townspeople hated him and said, "He is a quisling! He has money, but he is a rotten man!" But Jesus didn't think so. Jesus saw that in him there lay hidden the greatness of God. Just as all the people of the world work hard to be better people, so Levi also must have wanted to have a noble character and human recognition, for he was also a human being.

No one understood this man, Levi. But Jesus knew that he had no shepherd to take care of him, so he could not use his undying determination properly. Jesus knew that Levi could be great leadership material because of his blind "do or die" spirit. He showed this spirit when he made a decision to follow Jesus, and he left everything and followed Jesus. Jesus also knew that Levi was made in the image of God. Levi looked like a hopeless person with his fallen countenance and propensity to sigh deeply. But to our surprise, Jesus saw him with great hope. To Jesus, he was great leadership material. Jesus put his hope in Levi, believing that he was made in the image of God. Common sense tells us that Levi was a selfish, ruthless and heartless person. But Jesus believed that he would be raised as a man of God's broken shepherd heart. Jesus believed that he would be among his disciples. Jesus understood that Levi had tasted money and become quite a different person. Likewise, if Levi experienced the holiness of God, he would be changed into a man of holiness, for he was made in the image of God. Jesus' hope was right. Through Jesus' labor of love, Levi grew up until he could write the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus saw him with the hope of God; he saw that this terribly selfish man could be changed into a most sacrificial man of God. May God grant us the hope of Jesus.

Missionary Joshua Hong saw Brian with the hope of Jesus. Brian was a very lovely boy. But without his father's love and discipline, he could not grow strong in his inner man. Once he suddenly wanted to drop all of his classes. Yet when Missionary Joshua looked at him, he saw true greatness in him. So he prayed with a loud voice and tears, believing that if only Brian accepted Jesus he would be a great servant of God. Now Brian is growing day by day. He has just about finished a math degree at UIC and he feeds more than 12 sheep per week.

Look at verse 27. "After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him...." When Jesus called him, "Follow me," he decided to raise Levi as one of his top disciples. As we know well, "disciple" means "student" of Jesus. A student of Jesus must learn of Jesus. But it is not easy to learn of Jesus. One young man received Jesus' abundant grace through sacrificial servants of God until he could finish college and marry a beautiful woman of God. So he should have learned the giving spirit of Jesus. But he did not. He remained selfish. He knows the giving spirit of Jesus. But he does not practice what he knows. Levi the tax collector was different. At that moment, Levi felt euphoric. He felt that dirty demons hurriedly ran away, 10 by 10, and 100 by 100, until not one was left. What is more, heavenly sunshine shone around him. Simultaneously, Levi could see God in Jesus. This is the reason he left everything and followed Jesus. Since then, Levi felt it was very sweet to learn of Jesus' life and work. Look at verse 28. "...and Levi got up, left everything and followed him." When we make a commitment in God, we can have a love relationship with God. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn 15:5). Levi learned of Jesus' life and work with undying determination until he could describe the heart of Jesus. Levi is the best man of literature in history because he described the heart of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Third, Levi prepared a big dinner (28-30).

Let's read verse 28. "...and Levi got up, left everything and followed him." This tells us that Levi made an immediate decision to follow Jesus, leaving everything behind. His influence was great. There is an episode about St. Augustine. He was an intellectual hedonist. But he heard God's word: "...clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Ro 13:13,14). Later, when he saw one of his prostitute friends, he turned around and ran away so as not to meet her again, even on the street. He may have learned from Levi, who turned from being a tax collector to a disciple of Jesus. In this way, his sin of selfishness was healed and he became Saint Matthew. In this part, we learn that if we are going to be good Christians, we must have a clear decision to follow Jesus.

To Levi, in the past, money was everything. But now, Jesus was everything to him. Levi was lost in sin, but now Levi was found in Jesus. He wanted to be one of Jesus' disciples. In other words, he wanted to start a new life in Jesus by learning and obeying his words. How was it possible for him? In the past, when he lived for money, he had no joy of life. He had no appetite to eat, even though he ate delicious food. But when he met Jesus, joy began to overflow in his heart and his stomach began to growl for more food. Why? Because he had been lost, but now he was found in Jesus; he also found new joy. He was so joyful that he held a great banquet for Jesus at his house. This time, the penny-pincher spared no expense. He bought lots of food and invited all his tax collector friends and some other people from the bottom class and enjoyed an eating fellowship with them. This eating scene draws a sharp contrast between Levi's selfish life and his life in Jesus. The mood of the banquet was carefree and exuberant. The disciples, Peter, James and John, were there, eating with much gusto and huge appetites, as were Levi's fellow tax collectors. They were sinners. But it was the heavenly kingdom, because Jesus was there with them.

Fourth, the religious leaders' spiritual blindness (30).

Look at verse 30. "But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and "sinners"?' " The Pharisees were the religious leaders of the times. They knew something about ritualistic ceremonies. But they did not have the compassion of God. So the Pharisees condemned Jesus and his disciples as friends of tax collectors and sinners.

Fifth, I have come to call sinners (31-32).

Jesus heard their complaining and knew that they did not have God's mercy in their hearts. So he said to them in verses 31,32: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Jesus' reply reveals the purpose of his coming. The purpose of his coming was to heal the sick with the love of God (Ro 3:23). The purpose of Jesus' coming was to call sinners to repentance. Jesus came to preach the good news of the kingdom of God so that people might repent their lives of sin and come to God. These days many people think the word "repentance" is out of date. But the real meaning of repentance is turning to God; it is coming to Jesus as we are. When we read verses 31 and 32, which say, "Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance,'" we cannot but cry because of Jesus' love for sinners. Suppose Jesus did not shepherd Levi, what would have happened to him? But in his great mercy, our Lord Jesus called Levi the tax collector and shepherded him. Finally, Levi was convinced that Jesus is the Son of God who gives eternal life. And he became St. Matthew, who was happy to imitate Jesus.

In this passage, we learn that Jesus chose Levi, a tax collector, as his disciple. Jesus called the most selfish man and raised him until he became St. Matthew. May God raise many St. Matthews in this country.