

A Party For the Uninvited

Bible Reading: Luke 5:27-39 ESV

Jesus Calls Levi (Matthew)

27After this [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." 28 And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

Feasting at Levi's House

29And 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. 30 And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" 31And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

A Question About Fasting

33And they said to him, "The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink." 34And Jesus said to them, "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? 35 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." 36 He also told them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. 37And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. 38 But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. 39And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good.'" (Luke 5:27-39 ESV)

SUMMARY:

In a stunning break from religious expectations, Jesus walks straight into the world of corruption and calls Levi—the outcast tax collector—into discipleship. Instead of climbing the ladder toward Israel's elite, Jesus redeems a man everyone else had written off, giving him a new name, 'Matthew,' a true "gift from God." His choice confronts our tendency to judge whom God should save. Then Jesus declares that His arrival is nothing less than the dawn of something radically new—like wedding joy bursting into a fasting world, like new wine shattering old skins. His Kingdom demands open hearts, willing to release anything that blocks God's transforming work in our lives.

Historical Context

The Roman Empire collected taxes throughout its territories using contractors called publicani. These contractors would bid on tax collection contracts, and if they won the bid, they paid the Roman Empire upfront. After that, they were allowed to collect additional taxes as their profit.

This system often made tax collectors greedy and corrupt. They were backed by Roman soldiers to enforce payments, and people had no legal recourse to challenge a claim in court. As a result, tax collectors became wealthy but were deeply unpopular among their own people.

The taxes collected were not used for education, health care, or other social services. Instead, they funded Rome's expansion and military campaigns. This caused the Jewish people to view tax collectors as both traitors and sinners.

Tax collectors were usually excluded from most social events. Many of their families disowned them, and they were barred from participating in many religious practices. This context is important to understand because the Gospels mention tax (or 'toll') collectors frequently, making it especially relevant to our passage.

Jesus Gives us a New Identity

Jesus is becoming popular, and the elites from all around Israel (see Luke 5:17) are sending their disciples to observe what is happening. At this point in Jesus' "career" as a Rabbi, He might be expected to move to Jerusalem, avoid sinners, and position Himself to join the religious elite. Instead, we see that Jesus is not interested in that path. He does many things the Pharisees cannot understand.

In Luke 5:27, Jesus approaches Levi (also known as 'Matthew'), a tax collector. As a Jewish teacher, Jesus should not have associated with Levi. Yet not only does Jesus speak with him—He calls Levi to follow Him as a disciple. This would have shocked the Pharisees, as they had never seen a Rabbi do anything like this.

Quote: “If you read [Luke 5:1-11 Jesus’ ‘call of Peter, James, & John’] carefully, you’ll see that Jesus’ call ‘Come, and follow me’ is missing. Nevertheless...Peter, James & John leav[e] everything behind & follow him’ (5:11), but they do so of their own accord after the miraculous catch...The only real story of a call at the beginning of...Luke is found...with the calling of Levi (5:27-32): ‘Follow me,’ says Jesus to this toll collector (Lk. 5:27-28), a call which Levi responds to, leaving behind all he has” [Nico Riemersma, Jesus as Miracle Worker & Teacher, p. 175] Levi responds by leaving everything behind and following Jesus. Later, Levi becomes known to us as Matthew. Somewhere along the way, Jesus gives Levi a new name —‘Matthew’— which in Hebrew means “Gift from God.” Matthew embraces this new identity. In Matthew 9:9, we see the same story of Jesus calling Levi, but Matthew uses his new name in his own account of Jesus’ life and ministry —“The Gospel according to Matthew.” This is something God does repeatedly: He calls people to follow Him and then gives them a new identity. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, it says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and the new has come.” Just like Matthew, when we choose to follow Jesus, He transforms our identity.

We don’t get to Choose our Family

When Jesus calls His disciples to follow Him, He doesn’t consult with the others about His choices. Adding a tax collector to the group would have been extremely embarrassing and could have damaged His reputation. Yet this is crucial for the disciples to witness, because later we will see God calling other, very unpopular, people to follow Him.

Just like the disciples, we do not get to decide whom God brings into His family. Many times, we think we are better than others or believe some people are unworthy of forgiveness. We might even have people in church we don’t like or can’t stand. We must be careful not to become like the Pharisees —judging and gatekeeping who is allowed to come to God.

Quote: Levi (Matthew) was “not serious about practicing his [Jewish] faith according to a Pharisaic reading of the Torah (Law). He is a traitor and unclean, not qualified for Temple worship. But Jesus reaches across boundaries...to invite Levi into his new movement without taking a vote from those who are already his followers [disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, & John, etc.]” [Philip C. Thrakill, Following Jesus, p. 95]

Quote: “Whomever Jesus calls, & whoever responds, is now family. We do not get to pick our fellow-disciples, and wherever the church becomes a ‘club’ of only the socially similar, something essential is lost. Jesus is disruptive of all such habits, he broadens our world! He likes people I want little to do with!” [Philip C. Thrakill, Following Jesus, p. 95]

Preparing the Way for the New (Lk. 5:33-39)

The people noticed that Jesus’ disciples did not behave like the disciples of other rabbis, such as John the Baptist or the rabbis of the Pharisees. There was a tradition of fasting on a weekly basis, and the Pharisees would fast (skipping meals) twice a week. In these verses, the people are trying to understand why Jesus is not asking His disciples to keep up with this tradition. We see this pattern throughout Jesus’ life.

Jesus answers them by giving three images: (1.) guests at a wedding, (2.) trying to patch an old garment with new cloth, and (3.) putting new wine into old wineskins. What He is trying to convey is that something new is coming, and you cannot cling to the old if you want to live in the new. All of our traditions can be beneficial, but if they get in the way of what God is trying to do in our lives, we miss out.

We need to continually examine our hearts because, just like the Jewish people in Jesus’ time, our traditions can sometimes hinder God from doing something new in our lives.