

Jesus Calls Levi (aka Matthew)

Lesson Scripture: Mark 2:13-17 **Devotional Reading:** Ephesians 4:25--32

Time: A.D. 28 **Place:** Capernaum

Lesson Aims:

- To show how God called the hated tax collector Levi to follow Him and become His disciple.
- To show that God calls even the worst people to become His disciples.
- To encourage concern for unbelievers rather than criticism of them.

Mark 2:13-17

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Introduction

Is a person ever too evil or wicked to not be saved and used by God? When you consider the names of some of the most infamous killers in history--names that we will not repeat here, thus giving more notoriety to their deeds--you wonder if God extended the same grace to them as He did and does to us. The answer is, yes.

Jesus Christ makes the difference. He is the One who can transform lives. But, an individual must be sincere in making a deliberate effort to be transformed. Levi (more commonly known as Matthew... the same Matthew who it is widely understood wrote The Gospel According to Matthew) was one such person. After his encounter with Jesus, he became a changed person.

Background

Mark presents Jesus as the Servant who was always doing good things for others. Mark wrote with the purpose of reaching Roman people, and in the culture of Rome, servants were very important. It is also, therefore, a very pragmatic or realistic gook without a great deal of emphasis on theology or deep teaching.

The key verse of this book is thought by many to be Mark 10:45, which reads, "⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom (meaning a payment or payoff) for many." The first part of this verse is explained by all the text in the book preceding it, and the last part is explained by all the text that follows it. This is the pivotal verse that takes us from Jesus' ministry to His sacrificial death on the cross.

One of Mark's emphases is the compassion of Jesus that compelled Him to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of those around Him, as He moved through the early days of His public ministry, He carefully chose a group of men to learn from Him and eventually to become spiritual leaders in the church. Among them were some that most of us would never have picked as good candidates for such ministry. His choice of four fishermen--which was studied last week--might have seemed odd, but who could imagine He would choose a despised Jewish tax collector for Rome?

The first recorded criticism of Jesus came from the scribes in Galilee. Scribes were professional keepers of the law... lawyers; religious scholars who prided themselves in knowing the scriptures and reminding all others of their shortcomings. Jesus' healing of a paralyzed man whom his friends had to lower through a roof to see Him is what caught the critical attention of the scribes--as recorded in verses 1--12. Jesus' reaction after reading the scribes' minds was to ask which was easier to do, spiritually forgive the man of his sins or physically heal the man of his paralysis. Jesus meant that it was easy to tell someone his sins were forgiven without there being any physical proof. It was impossible, however, to tell a paralyzed person to get up, pick up his bed, and walk without the proof of the power to heal being immediately obvious. Upon telling the man to get up and walk, Jesus proved instantly that He also had the authority to forgive the man's sins.

1: What caused the first recorded criticism of Jesus by the scribes in Galilee, and what did Jesus do next? (Mark 2:1--12)

As Jesus walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, crowds of people bombarded Him; so much so that He immediately stopped his stroll and began teaching them spiritual truths. The more the people came to listen, the longer Jesus stayed to teach. Jesus had much compassion for the spiritual needs of the people. To Him they appeared to be like sheep that had no shepherd, desperately needing guidance and direction.

2: What took place as Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee? (Mark 2:13, 14)

First of all, let us define what a disciple is. This is a follower of God; a learner. Levi was described in this verse as being the "son of Alphaeus," and a "tax collector." Levi even referred to himself as "Matthew the publican (tax collector)" in Matthew 10:3.

Tax collectors were some of the most hated people in Israel. In order to be a tax collector, a person had to purchase the rights for this business from Rome. He could then charge whatever tax he wanted in order to recoup the money he paid to Rome for his privilege license. Tax collectors were considered traitors and extortioners. They were not allowed to be witnesses or judges in court because they were considered untrustworthy. They were excommunicated from the synagogue. However, God was gracious enough to him to allow him to become one of Jesus' disciples.

3: Who was Levi, and why did his occupation make him an unlikely candidate for being a disciple? (Mark 2:14)

Levi's response to Jesus' invitation of, "Follow Me," was to immediately arise from his tax collector's booth and follow Him. Luke 5:28 says, "*So he (Levi) left all, rose up, and followed Him.*" Remember that Levi was working at the time of his decision to leave it all behind.

4: What was Levi's response to Jesus? (Mark 2:14b)

Jesus went to Levi's house where a huge feast was prepared in honor of Levi's special guest; his new Teacher and Savior. This verse says that Jesus' disciples also attended the feast in Levi's house. Also, Luke 5:29b says, "*... a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.*" Levi invited people he knew; his acquaintances, other tax collectors and sinners. Some of these people could have never met Jesus in the synagogues from where they were banned, so He met them where He could... in their environment.

5: Where did Jesus go soon after He called Levi, and who else went? (Mark 2:15)

As mentioned earlier, the scribes prided themselves on being the most learned interpreters of what God had said to mankind through the Mosaic Law. Their sole purpose was to criticize Jesus and anyone associated with Him--which is why they addressed their question/comment to Jesus disciples in this verse rather than to Jesus directly. This was an underhanded method of criticism. The scribes were intimidated by and jealous of Jesus' teaching and healing. They felt privileged to be the ones to who people were to seek for scriptural truth concerning Moses' law.

6: *Why were the scribes so critical about the people Jesus was with, and how did they voice their criticism this time? (Mark 2:16)*

By "sinners," the Pharisees were referring to anyone who--unlike their claim--did not live by the rigid standards the Pharisees had set based on their interpretation of the law. They no doubt viewed themselves as the only righteous ones there. They had separated themselves from all they considered sinners, and they had a very superior attitude. This is something we should constantly be on guard against. It is easy to develop the attitude that anyone who does not agree in every little detail with us is wrong.

7: *What did the scribes and Pharisees mean by their use of the term "sinners?" (Mark 2:16b)*

Jesus clearly explained to the scribes that people who are not sick do not need a doctor, but those who are sick do. In the same way, He did not come for the purpose of calling righteous people to repentance, but rather, He came to reach sinners--the ones who needed Him the most.

8: *What response did Jesus give to the scribes' criticism? (Mark 2:17)*

Jesus knew that the scribes considered themselves to be righteous already and thus not in need of anything from Him. As self-righteous ones, they could not recognize their own need for repentance. They were spiritually sick but saw no need for the One who could heal them.

9: *How did His response reflect on those who felt superior to others?*

We quickly notice that Jesus was able to discern the thoughts and intents of people's hearts beyond what was obvious on the surface. Jesus, of course, had a miraculous ability to be able to do so. Even so, our lesson clearly calls us to imitate the love, grace, and acceptance shown by God, instead of the critical, self-righteous attitude of the scribes and Pharisees.

10: *What do we learn about how God views people from the way that Jesus reacted to the people in this lesson? How can we apply this knowledge?*

Conclusion

Our lesson this week should give us hope that every one of us can turn to God. It takes an acknowledgment of our sins, but He has provided forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Jesus came to call us from sin to forgiveness. We remain sinners till we find that forgiveness in Jesus. He came to make us righteous in Him.

Practical Points

1. Jesus calls whomever He desires, no matter what other may think or do (Mark 2:13--14a).
2. The best obedience is immediate obedience (v. 14).
3. Like Jesus, we should be willing to befriend anyone in order to share the good news with that person (v. 15).
4. Bible knowledge should lead one to compassion and empathy rather than a judgmental spirit and arrogance (v. 16).

5. It is a good thing that Jesus came to save the spiritually sick, for all people--whether they know it or not--are spiritually sick (v. 17).

Prayer

Father, our world is filled with people like Levi (Matthew) who are spending their time in worldly pursuits, unaware of the happiness that could be theirs as your servants. Help us to befriend them, discover things we have in common with them, and invite them to our homes.

May we do what it takes to bring them to Your Son, the great physician, that they may have eternal life. We can do no less for the One who died for us. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

"All Christians--like physicians--should be concerned with the sin-sick."