

JESUS SAID, “FOLLOW ME”

Luke 5:27-32

Key Verses: 5:27-28

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, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

In today’s passage Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to be his disciple. Levi was a selfish sinner. He was a social outcast. No one wanted to be friends with him. What on earth was Jesus going to do with such a person? Jesus’ calling of Levi teaches us about the hope of God for each of us. We can have hope in God no matter who we are because he has hope for us! May the Holy Spirit plant the hope of God in our hearts!

I. A SELFISH TAX COLLECTOR (27a)

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.* The words “After this” refer to the two preceding events--Jesus’ healing of a man with leprosy and a paralytic. These events showed that Jesus is the God of compassion and mercy. He had mercy on two very sick people and healed them, not only physically but also spiritually. Now he turned his attention to a man who was fine outwardly but very sick inwardly.

On that day, Jesus went out early in the morning probably to a quiet place to pray, as was his custom. On his way back, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting alone at his tax collector’s booth. Who was Levi and why did Jesus speak to him?

To understand Levi, we need a little bit of historical background. The nation Israel was occupied by the powerful Roman Empire at that time. And the Caesars needed much money to maintain their military forces to rule their colonies. In Judea, the empire hired locals to do the dirty work, that is, collecting taxes. The Jewish tax collectors were hated by their countrymen. We don’t have warm feelings towards IRS agents. But in Jesus’ time, the tax collectors hated intensely because they collaborated with the Roman invaders. The tax collectors betrayed their own people for their selfish gain. They were traitors. And the tax money would be used to strengthen the enemy military force, and who would want that? Furthermore, many tax collectors collected more money than they were required by Rome and pocketed the difference. When some tax collectors came to John the Baptist to be baptized, he told them “Don’t collect any more than you are required to” (Lk 3:13). When a tax collector named Zacchaeus met Jesus personally, he promised to pay back four times of the amount to people whom he had cheated (Lk 19:8). We can see why the tax collectors were hated so much by their people. In this situation, why would anyone become a tax collector?

Under the oppressive Roman rule, people despaired and longed for the day of liberation. But Levi turned the adverse situation for his personal gain. No doubt he was a very able man. He was an excellent student in school, making good grades. Why did

this promising young man decide to become a despicable tax collector? He must have had many reasons. But one thing is clear: he wanted to make money. Probably his family was poor and he felt he should support them financially. When he got a taste of money, however, he became quite a different person. He became very greedy until he couldn't control his greed.

At the beginning, perhaps he had an aspiration to become a good educator to help future generation. But once he set his mind on money, he changed his major from elementary education to accounting. After passing the Roman CPA exam and obtaining a lucrative position at the Capernaum branch of the Roman IRS, he began to make much money. In order to make a little more money, he would close his eyes to crying mothers as he took away the tuition money for their children. With the money, he bought a mansion in the fashionable district of the town and installed security measures to keep away thieves. He built a heated indoor swimming pool. Two Roman-made shining chariots were parked in his garage. When he came home from work, many servants took care of him with delicious food and personal care. His life was a great success from a worldly standpoint.

But inwardly Levi was not a happy man. He had no friends. No one wanted to associate with a traitor. His own family members despised him, even as they enjoyed spending the money he brought home. Levi was a wealthy man, but he was a lonely man. Loneliness is hard to endure. Many people today are lonely, even though they have hundreds of "friends" on Facebook. I read a recent newspaper article that said how many people today live two different lives, one on social media and the other in reality. One young woman posted a gorgeous, smiling selfie photo on Instagram just one hour before she committed a suicide. If Levi were here today, he would have posted a smiling selfie in front of his beautiful indoor swimming pool on Instagram. Everyone would envy his seemingly perfect life. But in reality, Levi would cry silently at night because of his loneliness.

Most of all, Levi was lost spiritually in his sin of selfishness. Some people may not consider selfishness a sin. After all, everyone is selfish and self-centered most of time. Our economic system is built on selfish pursuit of happiness by everyone. But we learned from the Bible that we were created to be a blessing, not to be selfish. Levi became selfish, selling his own conscience for the sake of money. He betrayed his own countrymen for his personal gain. We cannot serve two masters. Levi chose money over God as his master. He was hopelessly lost in sin. Who could rescue this lonely sinner from his sin and death?

II. "FOLLOW ME" JESUS SAID (27b)

Look at verse 27 again. *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.* On this particular day, Levi was again pondering about his life—how unhappy he was despite all the money he had. He was sitting alone in his office. No one wanted to stop by to say hello to him. Most people avoided even talking to the heartless tax man. They would hurriedly pass by his tax office. But Jesus did not pass by him. He approached the lonely man and gently

said, “Follow me.” Jesus called Levi to be one of his disciples. This was a historic meeting between Jesus, the God of mercy, and a selfish man who was lonely and lost in sin. “Follow me”—these two words changed Levi’s life forever.

What can we learn from Jesus who called a selfish sinner? We learn that Jesus looks at each person not for what they are now, but for what they could become in God. In other words, Jesus sees each of us with the hope of God. Simon was a smelly fisherman with big mouth, but Jesus saw his potential to become a rock solid man of faith. Paul was an ambitious rabbi who persecuted Christians for the sake of his career advancement, but Jesus saw his potential to become a great missionary to the Gentiles. In the eyes of his fellow Jews, Levi was a worthless scumbag who should be shunned. But in Jesus’ eyes he was a precious child of God—lost in sin and misguided by his selfish desires. When Jesus saw him, he was filled with compassion for him. Jesus knew that Levi was tired and weary. Jesus understood his loneliness. He knew his inner agony. Jesus knew that Levi was disgusted with himself. Levi was a hopeless person. But Jesus saw him with great hope. Jesus put his hope in Levi, even though Levi was the last person in the world anyone could have hope for. Levi was selfish, ruthless and wretched. But Jesus saw potential in him to become a spiritual leader and what he could do for God if he was changed. Jesus saw him as a father sees his spoiled son. Jesus saw him with the hope of God that this terribly selfish man could be changed into a great man of God.

Jesus didn’t say many words to Levi. Only two words—“Follow me.” These words gave Levi a new life direction. Up until now, Levi followed a wrong thing—money. His life was messed up because he had no idea why God created him and put him in the world. Jesus told him to turn away from his selfish life and follow the Son of God. It was an invitation and, at the same time, a promise to take care of him and lead him to a life that is abundant in God. Jesus knew how difficult it would be to help this selfish man to be changed into a man of God. Old habits are hard to shake off. But Jesus would bear with him and pray for him. Jesus is the God of hope. Finally, Levi the tax collector became St. Matthew who recorded the beautiful Sermon on the Mount. In Jesus we have hope, no matter who we are. May God help us to see our life with the hope of God! May God help us to see young people around us with the hope of God!

Levi was a social outcast. To many people, he was a social parasite. But Jesus embraced him and welcomed him. To Jesus, he was lost and was wandering like a prodigal son longing to come home. When Jesus said “Follow me,” he was knocking at the door of Levi’s heart to invite him to the heavenly feast. This reminds us of Jesus’ invitation for all of us in Revelation 3:20, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

III. LEVI’S DECISIVE DECISION TO FOLLOW JESUS (28-32)

What was Levi’s response? Look at verse 28. “...and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.” Upon Jesus’ personal calling, Levi got up, left everything and followed Jesus. He made a decisive decision to follow Jesus as his disciple. He did not

calculate this and that. He left everything behind including his lucrative job. His decision of faith is a good example as to how we can respond to Jesus' personal calling. I remember how a student from the University of Maryland responded to Jesus' calling. He was a radio jockey for the campus radio station. He was deeply into heavy metal music. But after meeting Jesus personally through 1:1 Bible studies, he decided to throw away his music collection that he had costed him much money. The expensive collection was not important any more, now that Jesus was in his life. Likewise, before we met Jesus, we used to value things of this world such as money, pleasure, human honor and recognition, and so on. But we have a new value system now. Nothing is more important than following Jesus, now that we are found in Christ.

Look at verse 28 again. *"...and Levi got up, left everything and followed him."* In the past, for the sake of money, Levi even abandoned his own conscience. He betrayed his country and his people. He was lost in sin. But after meeting Jesus, he found a fresh outlook on life. In the past, money was everything to him. But now, Jesus was everything to him. Levi had been lost in sin, but now he was found. He wanted to start a new life in Jesus as his disciple. When he heard Jesus' voice "Follow me," he did not hesitate. He left everything and followed him.

Look at verse 29. *Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.* Before Jesus called him, Levi had no joy of life. He had no appetite to eat, even though he was served only gourmet food. But when he met Jesus, joy began to overflow in his heart. He was so joyful that he threw a great banquet for Jesus at his house. He spent much money to prepare a dinner party, not for himself, but for Jesus and others. He used to be a penny-pincher. Now he was willing to spend his money to buy food and drinks for Jesus and others. This dinner party scene draws a sharp contrast between his previous selfish life as a tax collector and his new life in Jesus. Everyone at the party was happy for Levi. Jesus' disciples were eating with gusto, as were Levi's fellow IRS friends. Most of all, they were happy for Levi who was smiling from ear to ear. They celebrated the new life of Levi. It was like a heavenly banquet. Jesus says in Luke 15:10: "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." This dinner party also signaled another change in Levi's life. He used to live a selfish life for himself. Now he began a life of being a blessing to others as an evangelist. He invited tax collectors and other sinners to his house. He wanted to testify the grace of Jesus upon his life. He probably shared his life testimony, saying, "You all know that I used to be a very selfish man. But Jesus changed me."

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?"* These religious leaders got together to come and criticize Jesus. They heard joyful sounds coming from Levi's house and they didn't like it. They complained to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" To them, tax collectors and other sinners were hopeless people. They refused to associate with them. Spiritually speaking, however, tax collectors needed the mercy of God, even more so than other people. But the Pharisees would not even talk to them, let alone minister to them. But Jesus was different. Jesus had a shepherd's heart for them. He ate together

with them to celebrate Levi's new-found life. But the religious leaders condemned Jesus and his disciples as the "friends of tax collectors and sinners". They did not know the broken shepherd's heart of God toward the sinful people.

What did Jesus say to them? He 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*" (31-32). What an amazing statement! Jesus came to heal the sick. He came to call sinners to repentance. You know what? This means Jesus came to heal us who are sick with a terminal disease called sin. Everyone is a condemned sinner. There is no exception. There is no one righteous, not even one (Ro 3:10). All have sinned before God (Ro 3:23). We have fallen and we are unable to get up on our own. But the good news is that God sent his one and only Son Jesus to save us from sin and death. Jesus came to call sinners to repentance. As long as we confess our sins before God and come to Jesus as sinners who need his healing, Jesus is willing to heal us, just as he did for Levi. So what does it mean to repent? It means to turn away from our sinful ways and turn to God. Jesus came to call us to repentance because repentance is the only way to invite Jesus into our life and receive the gift of eternal life in the kingdom of God. And this was what Levi the tax collector did.

In this passage we learned that Jesus is the God of hope. He called a selfish tax collector to be his disciple. Jesus raised Levi to be a great servant of God, St. Matthew. In Jesus we can have hope. May God help us to make a decisive decision to follow Jesus as his disciple!