

JESUS CAME TO CALL SINNERS

Mark 2:13-22

Key Verse: 2:17

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."

In today's passage, Jesus calls a tax collector to be one of his disciples. By calling a selfish tax collector, Jesus reveals that he came to call sinners, not the righteous. In Jesus, even a selfish person like Levi can be changed into a man of God. May God help each of us to make a decision to follow Jesus as Levi did!

I. JESUS CALLS A TAX COLLECTOR (13-17)

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them the word of God (13). Jesus taught the word of God whenever and wherever people gathered--in a house, on a temple court, on a mountainside, and beside the lake. Jesus is the good shepherd who leads his sheep to the green pasture to eat the spiritual food.

Look at verse 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.* As Jesus walked along the streets of Capernaum, he saw a man sitting alone in the tax collector office. People hurriedly passed by the man. No one stopped to hello to him. But Jesus did not ignore this lonely man. Jesus called Levi and asked him to follow him.

Who was Levi? He was a tax collector. The Jews hated tax collectors. We don't like tax men either, but they hated tax collectors much more intensely than we dislike IRS agents today. At that time, Israel was ruled by the powerful Roman Empire. The Roman government hired local Jewish agents to collect taxes. The tax revenue was used to maintain military forces to control the region. Naturally these tax collectors were hated by the Jews. The tax collectors not only worked for the hated Roman government but were dishonest. They often collected more taxes than they were supposed to and pocketed the difference (Lk 3:12-13). They made money at the expense of their own countrymen. They were traitors. If the paralytic was a powerless sinner, Levi represented a selfish sinner.

Why would anyone want to be a tax collector in such situation? It was because Levi thought that money would make him happy. So he wanted to make as much money as he could, by any means. He made some money, but in the course of making money, he became a person who was hated by people and by himself. He became a selfish man. These days, selfishness seems to be accepted as a normal behavior. The devil has deceived many people to regard selfish life as a norm in this capitalistic society. But we learn in Genesis that God created us in his own image to be a blessing, not to be selfish. In this sense, selfishness is a sin before God. Selfishness is a spiritual sickness.

What happened to this selfish man? Levi wanted to be happy. However, he discovered that money could not make him happy. He had no friend whom he could share moments of joy and sorrow in life. Everyone despised him for what he did. Even his dog seemed to bark at him for betraying his own people. He had many things in his mansion, including a shiny chariot in his garage, a heated swimming pool, and a big screen TV. But his heart was troubled because of his guilty feelings. At night, he would hear the cries of a mother from whom he took away the tuition money for her children. He would suffer from nightmares. He wanted to come to God for help. But he couldn't even pray in that situation. Levi was haunted by fear and anxiety, despite his financial security. And he was lonely. How did Jesus help him?

Jesus saw Levi and said to him, "Follow me." To people's eyes, Levi was a selfish scumbag. They felt sick to their stomach to see the selfish man. They despised him for his position as an agent of the Empire Internal Revenue Service. When people look at a person, they usually see things like his job position, education, physical appearance, clothing style, and so on. They usually judge a book by its cover. It is very difficult for us to help a person if we do this, because we don't even want to approach a person who is washed up. But Jesus is different. Jesus sees in a person, not what they are, but what they could become. When he saw Simon, an impulsive man, he saw a solid spiritual leader. So he gave the name Peter or Cephas, meaning "rock." When he saw a lonely Samaritan woman, he saw in her a beautiful woman of God. When Jesus saw Chris Sherrill, a young man with little hope and spiritual discipline, he saw a man of faith who could be a blessing to many others.

When the people saw Levi the tax collector, they were disgusted. But Jesus saw something else in Levi. He saw that Levi was a lost sheep, wandering without meaning and purpose in life. Jesus saw his inner agony. Jesus saw that his soul was dying because of his sins. Levi was also a son of Abraham created in the image of God, but the image was disfigured in him because of his sins. Jesus did not see him as a washed-up man with no hope for future. He did not see him with the eyes of judgment, but with the eyes of compassion. He called Levi in order to restore the image of God in him.

When Jesus called him by saying, "Follow me," Jesus wanted to help him so that he could overcome his selfishness and be a source of blessing to many other people. "Follow me" was the voice of salvation. Levi had been following his selfish desires, not knowing it was a way to die in eternity. Now Jesus invited him to follow the Savior. It was a turning point in his life. His selfish life was about to be transformed into a disciple of Jesus. Indeed, this selfish man later became St. Matthew who recorded the beautiful Sermon on the Mount. In Jesus, a selfish person like Levi can be transformed into a man of faith.

How did Levi respond to Jesus' calling? Levi got up and followed Jesus. He made a decision to abandon his sinful life and begin a new life. He was so happy that Jesus the Son of God did not ignore him like everyone else did. He made a decision to leave his lucrative job and to follow Jesus. Likewise, there comes a time in our life when we must make a decisive decision of faith to follow Jesus. Some people do make such decisions. Abraham did. Moses did. Mary the mother of Jesus did. Simon Peter did. And Levi in

this passage did. Their lives were changed forever in God. On the other hand, some people fail to respond to Jesus' calling. Jesus told one rich young man to sell his possessions to help the poor and then follow him. "When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Mt 19:22). It was a tragedy that he let money come between Christ and him. May God help us and our Bible students to make decisions of faith when we hear the voice of Jesus!

Levi experienced heavenly joy in his heart. He could not keep the joy to himself. So, for the first time, he spent his own money to prepare a dinner party. He used to hate spending his money for someone else. This time, however, he was happy to go to butcher shop and grocery store to buy many delicious items to prepare a feast. For the first time in his life, he tasted the joy of spending his money for someone else. He invited Jesus, the disciples, and all his tax collector friends to the dinner party. This was an expression of his thanksgiving to Jesus; it was an expression of his spiritual joy. It was a party to celebrate his new life.

The dinner party was very joyful. Everyone, especially the disciples, ate a lot (15). They were all happy to celebrate Levi's new life. But there were some people who were not happy about the joyful party. They were the teachers of the law. Perhaps they were in the middle of their regular fasting ritual. They walked around with serious faces. They were proud of their fasting. Then they heard the sound of joyful laughs in Levi's house. And they saw Jesus eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors. They asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (16) The religious leaders despised people like Levi. They did not even try to understand their agony. They were supposed to be shepherds for God's flock, but they had no shepherd's heart.

What did Jesus say to them? Let us read verse 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."* Jesus came to call sinners, not the righteous. The religious leaders were self-righteous. They didn't even know they were sick in their hearts. They even criticized Jesus for having an eating fellowship with his sheep. But Jesus told them that he came to help the sin-sick people. He came to heal their wounded hearts and lives. All of us are sinners before God (Ro 3:10). We are sinners like the tax collector. We are often selfish. Sin separates us from God. Sin breaks our relationship with God and with people. We feel helpless and we feel lonely. But praise God for sending Jesus to heal us! Praise Jesus who came to call sinners like us!

II. NEW WINE INTO NEW WINESKINS (18-22)

The teachers of the law did not like it when Jesus mingled with people like tax collectors and sinners. They were legalistic. They attacked Jesus with a legalistic question: "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" (18) Originally, the practice of fasting began with a good motive. It was an effort to come closer to God. By this time, however, their fasting had become no more than a ritual.

What did Jesus teach them? Look at verse 19. *Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them."* Jesus told them that they did not have to go around making sad faces, because Jesus the Savior came and was among them. Where Jesus is, there is the kingdom of God. Jesus forgives our sins and gives us eternal life. So we can be joyful as long as we are with Jesus. Only when Jesus is taken away from us by this world, we must fast and pray so that we may be with him again.

Look at verse 21, *"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse."* An old garment is rigid. The religious leaders had fixed ideas, and they were unwilling to accept the word of God spoken through Jesus. They had no room in their hearts for learning and growing. So they did not learn anything from Jesus. They only criticized him. By contrast, Jesus' disciples were ordinary men, but they had a learning mind.

Jesus gave them another illustration. Look at verse 22. *"And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."* Jesus compared the Pharisees to old wineskins. Wineskins were made of animal hide. Overtime, they became rigid and brittle. They could not hold new wine that tends to expand. The Pharisees were not willing to embrace the new teachings of the Messiah (Jn 8:43) that were dynamic and revolutionary. They insisted on their legalistic way of serving God. They had no love of God in their hearts. However, Jesus' disciples were different. They were very rough and young. But they loved God and the truth of God. They had ears to hear the word of God. They were flexible and adventurous. They made many mistakes. But Jesus encouraged them saying, "New wine into new wineskins."

In this passage we learn that Jesus called a selfish man named Levi and changed him into a man of God and a committed disciple. Most of all, we learn that Jesus came to call sinners, not the righteous. The sin problem is the most serious problem facing mankind, but no man has a solution to this problem. Only Jesus can set us from the bondage of sin and death. Praise God for sending Jesus to call sinners like us! May we love Jesus with all our hearts and become new wineskins!