

Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the joy of being able to share our faith. Thank You for those with whom we share our worship and the groups in which we meet to share fellowship. Thank You for the privilege of praying and reading the Bible together, and of hearing the testimony of others. Lord Jesus, build us up in our faith, we pray, so that we may honour You throughout our lives: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Try to find an opportunity to pray out loud today, because doing this can focus our prayers immeasurably.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the organisation of the church:** *Pray for the organisation of your own church, and ask the Lord to what is done in His name.*
- *Pray for those who are victims of violence, especially those who suffer because of crimes committed.*
- *Give thanks for sleep, and pray for those who find it hard to sleep*

Meditation

Listen carefully;

*Hear what others have to say,
and be Christ-like in your response.*

Learn intelligently;

*Find out what the world has to offer,
and check it out against Christ.*

Plan realistically;

*Prepare well for the future,
and submit what you plan to the Lord.*

Work diligently;

*Give your all in God's service,
and do everything possible to help others.*

Evaluate shrewdly;

*Discern right from wrong at all times,
and act upon the revelation of the Spirit.*

Share generously;

*Take a portion of what God has given you,
and give it to others and to the church.*

And speak boldly;

*Do not be afraid to speak out,
and show the love and wisdom of your Lord.*

Bible passage - Luke 5:27-32

²⁷ After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the revenue booth, and He said to him 'Follow me.'²⁸ Then he got up, left everything, and began to follow Him!

²⁹ Levi held a great banquet for Jesus in his house, and a large company of tax collectors and others sat down to eat with them. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble to Jesus' disciples and said, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' ³¹ Jesus answered them by saying, 'It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners.'

Bible Study

Review

Our passage today describes the call of Levi, the tax-collector. We would be outraged by this story if it were not for the fact that we are familiar with it, and it is difficult for us to appreciate the sheer hatred that existed in the first century between Jews and those of their own people who collaborated with their Roman overlords. Throughout history, people have born hatred towards those who are different, but such hatred is multiplied many times over, when a few individuals of one proud nation choose freely to side with a bitter enemy and extract taxes from their own people. If Jesus' calling of Peter was amazing (5:1-11), His healing of the leper liberating (5:12-16) and His healing of the paralysed man challenging (5:17-26), then His call of Levi was groundbreaking; and with each incident we learn more about Jesus' ministry.

The details of this story are largely well known, and the story has often been preached upon. When Jesus called Levi, He did so with the same power and authority with which He called Peter and healed people, yet neither Luke nor the other Gospel writers give other details. They simply say that Levi *'got up, left everything, and began to follow Jesus.'* (5:28). Too often, we want proof that people have changed before they can show it, and it is easy to get this story mixed up in our minds with that of another tax-collector, Zacchaeus, who immediately atoned for his sins by giving away money (19:1-9). The proof of Levi's conversion would come later, for this was the man we know as Matthew, the disciple who wrote the first Gospel (see Matthew 9:9-12).

Levi seems to have understood straight away that Jesus' mission was to reach out not just to him but to those like him. He therefore invited Jesus to his house to meet with others who were outcast from normal Jewish society. They, like anyone else, had a common need of friendship, and it is not surprising that those at table were 'sinners' in the eyes of most Jews. Those who grumbled about what Jesus did (5:30) may have admired His ministry but they could not overcome their prejudices. They had begun to think of Jesus as a holy man, possibly the Messiah, but why did He spend time with outcast *'tax-collectors and sinners'*? This question brought from Jesus a famous 'sound-bite', *'I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners'* (5:32). These words sum up the Gospel appeal of a loving Saviour to those who know they have sinned, and they warn those who think they are blameless before God to be cautious about this presumption.

In Jesus' day, the Jewish people believed they were different because they had a 'right' relationship with God (called 'righteousness') through their obedience to the Law and their lineage from Abraham. To them, Tax collectors were like those who did not keep the Law and were therefore outcast, and they were called 'sinners' with more distain than we can imagine. Yet it does not take much reading of the Old Testament to discover that although God is fundamentally opposed to sin, He is equally determined to overcome both sin and its consequences. So Jesus was not doing something new when He reached out to Levi to call him as a disciple; rather, He challenged the God's people to overcome their prejudices and accept God's message that He was in the business of overcoming sin, not just condemning it.

God's opposition to sin and His determination to overcome it does not change, and the message of Levi's call is equally true today and applicable to sinners and religious people alike. We should also be careful to link this story with those that go before it, which describe God's work amongst people: The call of disciples (5:1-11), the healing of the sick (5:12-16), and the forgiveness of sins (5:17-26). As so often in Luke, they work together to give us a glimpse of the priorities of Jesus' emerging ministry.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Who were the tax-collectors, and why were they so disliked?
- What is the significance of banquets, especially this one here?
- What does Jesus mean by 'repentance', both here and elsewhere?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V27 'revenue booth'

It is difficult to translate the Greek word here, which refers to a wayside booth where tax-collectors did their business in the first century. Some translations say 'tax-office', but although we might know what this means today, the idea created by the term is far too grand.

Significant phrases

V28 ‘... and began to follow Him’

Other translations:

‘... and followed Him’ (NIV, NRSV etc.)

The Greek verb here is in the ‘imperfect’ tense, which describes what we might call a ‘continuous action’. Although it is not wrong to translate ‘... and followed Him’, as is done by other translations, I reckon that ‘... and began to follow Him’, captures the idea of beginning a continued course of action, as the grammar of the sentence clearly indicates here.

V29 ‘sat down to eat with them’

Other translations:

‘were eating with them’ (NIV)

‘sitting at table with them’ (NRSV)

The key Greek word here is ‘katakeimai’, which means simply ‘recline’. In those days, the word described the position in which people ate meals; they ‘reclined at table’. The translation ‘sat down to eat’ best reflects what was going on, while not being unfaithful to the original text.

Going Deeper

Who were the tax-collectors, and why were they so disliked?

Levi is described here as ‘*sitting at the revenue booth*’ (5:27). In those days, the Roman Empire was held together by a system of taxes, which paid for the army and the entire mechanism of Empire. Although the Roman Empire was disliked, it was responsible for relative peace, and although the Jews intensely disliked their Roman overlords, the Emperor had given Jewish people considerable freedom within their own lands. However, all this was dependent upon the payment of the necessary taxes. Ultimately, the ruling Herods were responsible for this (Antipas in Galilee), but the practical task was farmed out by a process of bidding, and those who felt they could extract the most from the population would get the job. These tax-collectors were rewarded by a certain degree of protection by the Roman state, in recompense for the fact that they were ostracised by the Jewish community. There is some uncertainty about the taxes collected by such people, but it seems that their main job was to tax the movement of goods, and this is why we read about a ‘*revenue booth*’ (5:27).

The whole of the story here in Luke is filled with potential contradiction and problems. On the one hand, Levi responded to Jesus by leaving his booth and following Jesus, and the text says that he left everything behind. However, Levi was still able to summon the resources for a banquet (5:29), an expensive undertaking usually offered by those with considerable resources. Certainly, Luke says that this was a large meal, with many people attending (5:29). We can almost hear the cries of the Pharisees and others complaining that the meal at which Jesus was the guest was paid for by the honest work of Jewish men and women who had been robbed! Furthermore, the activities of these people made them ritually unclean!

Nevertheless, in the midst of all these difficulties, Jesus ate with the tax-collectors and sinners. Luke does not mention clearly, as do Matthew and Mark (Matt 9:9-13 and Mark 2:13-17), that the disciples ate with Jesus, but this is presumed in the question of the Pharisees and scribes, ‘*why do you eat and drink ...*’ (5:30). It must have been very hard for Jewish working men such as Simon Peter, James and John, to accompany Jesus at such a meal and be introduced to their new companion, who was a tax-collector! It is a remarkable testimony to the authority and personality of Jesus that he held together a group of such different people!

We also forget that someone like Levi had arguably far more to lose than the other disciples. Working men could always go back to their trade if things went wrong, and indeed, this is exactly what Peter and James and John did after Jesus was crucified (see John 21:2,3). Someone like Levi would never be able to go back to the tight knit community of ‘outsiders’ who survived as Jews on the outside of Judaism, once he had left, and as a consequence, some regard Matthew as a particularly poignant example of discipleship. Moreover, although Levi paid for a large banquet for Jesus and his friends, this was possibly the last such extravagance. As far as we know from the rest of the Gospel, Levi (Matthew) would soon be travelling rough like the other disciples. It was tough to journey from riches to rags.

What is the significance of banquets, especially this one here?

Banquets always have considerable significance in the Bible. Most are royal banquets, such as those put on by Esther to obtain the agreement of King Ahasuerus (Esther 5f.) or the parables of Jesus when talking about the royal authority of God in His Kingdom (Matthew 22:2f.). Others are wedding banquets, such as in

the parable of Jesus about the ten foolish bridesmaids (Matthew 25:10f.). Clearly, this occasion was more than any usual meal, even one of extravagance fitting for someone of wealth, as Levi would have been. We cannot know for sure, but it is reasonable to think that Levi held this banquet because of what had happened to him in meeting Jesus. Those present may well have known that such a meal would not have been laid out unless Levi intended to leave, and they would have wanted therefore to see the man who had been responsible for Levi's decision. Jesus was certainly willing to sit at table with these 'tax-collectors and sinners' gathered at Levi's banquet, and cross the great divide, in this case between Jew and Jew.

It is likely that this incident was well remembered by Jesus' opponents, for in both Matthew (11:19) and Luke (7:34), Jesus was aware of a common retort thrown at Him by His opponents, '*for the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"*, yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' The Pharisees were unable to believe that Jesus was the Messiah because all their interpretations of Scripture suggested to them that the Messiah would fulfil all the laws of cleanliness and would 'clean' Israel of her sins. But to them, they believed such an action would entail throwing people out of Israel. By attending the banquet, Jesus made graphically clear to them that He had different plans. He intended to clean Israel by saving sinners rather than throwing them out, moreover, He demonstrated as He did in later teaching, that he did not believe ritual eating laws were relevant to the Kingdom of God (11:37-41).

It is not surprising therefore that when we read what Jesus says about God's great invitation to salvation, He describes it as a feast at which all are welcome (14:16-24).

What does Jesus mean by 'repentance', both here and elsewhere?

Repentance is an important theme in the Bible, and so far in Luke's Gospel, we have only seen it in the preaching of John the Baptist (3:3,8). The other Gospel writers tell us that Jesus preached the message '*repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand*' (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15), but Luke does not mention this. The story of Levi is the first one in Luke's Gospel where Jesus speaks of repentance, and we must therefore ask some important questions.

Firstly, why did Jesus not mention repentance when giving forgiveness to the man who was paralysed (the previous story, 5:17-26)? The answer to this must be that Jesus did not ask for it because it was not necessary, even though the man had sinned (see yesterday's study). It may well be that we drive the issue of repentance too hard today, for perhaps Jesus did not ask the paralysed man to repent because he already knew his past sins; he had paid the price for his past and he knew it. He needed a healer.

The next question is this; why does Luke introduce repentance here, in the story of Levi? Clearly, until Levi met Jesus, he was relatively unaware of his sin and had no way of following a path out of his life as a tax collector even if he had wanted one. Jesus' challenge '*follow me*' (5:27) gave Levi choice, and he needed to respond. By following, Levi made his choice, and he both accepted Jesus' challenge and also turned his back on his past. So Levi repented not because Jesus said to him 'repent!' but because he did what Jesus asked of him, and if we accept the theory that the banquet was a 'leaving feast' for Levi, then he was indeed repenting by leaving behind his past.

Luke's careful use of the word 'repentance' warns us today that although it is essential that people 'repent', they do so in different ways, and often without using the word 'repent'. In the mission of the church, we do well to realise that the Word of God confronts people in ways they can understand, and it is wise for us to be sparing with our use of language that can sound 'religious'. Jesus faced Levi with a call to follow rather than a call to repent, but following the call made Levi repent, in deed; even if he did not know the meaning of this word at the time.

Application

This passage of Scripture indicates that God's people should be like Jesus, who was willing to go out beyond the comfortable surroundings of familiarity and spent time with 'sinners'. Of course, the message that Jesus has come to call sinners to repentance is important at a number of different levels, but the primary level is that of evangelism. This passage tells us about Jesus' desire to win sinners and bring them to righteousness, and this lies at the heart of what we call evangelism today. We are not told about how Jesus will save people here, and we have to read the rest of the Gospel to find this out. But there can be no proper evangelism without the same godly desire on our part to see sinners saved. Evangelism cannot be mechanistic, and we cannot expect to use methods and see automatic results. The heart of evangelism is the desire to help people who do not know God come to know Him, and the desire to see people who know that they are sinners find peace with God.

When writing this, I am aware that people will often respond to this challenge by saying 'that's the call for me', waving goodbye to the normal routines of church life, and giving themselves to spreading the Gospel

'on the front line', on the streets, in pubs and bars and where prostitutes gather, for example. I have noticed that the church can be divided between those who do such things and those who do not, and animosity can grow because of misunderstandings about commitment and mission. How sad. We will soon read those famous verses of the Gospel where Jesus implores His followers to be glad over 'one sinner who is saved' (15:7), and if we cannot share such joy then the true fellowship of the Kingdom has been compromised.

In different times and places, we can see dramatic examples of effective evangelism, but the most important evangelism comes from people being willing to be used by God. Each Christian needs to be a 'friend of sinners' wherever they are, just as Jesus applied Himself to every circumstance in which He was led by the Father. In this way, the church is at its best when all are enabled to fulfil the ministry they have been given through a combination of their gifts and graces, and the practical limitations of where God has placed them in the world.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the meaning of this story about the call of Levi. What does this tell us about Jesus' ministry and mission in this world?
2. Why did people grumble about Jesus, and can we hear echoes of such grumbling today; if so, where?
3. What cultural and other boundaries do we need to cross in order to proclaim the Gospel today?

Personal comments by author

This passage is only a short story', but it is very important, for each story has been chosen by Luke and set in its place for a purpose. I have read a number of books about Luke, and each one either says that there is little structure to the Gospel, or it advocates some limited form of structure, which is not accepted generally by other scholars! Yet as I read the Gospel, I feel that Luke kept to a rather spiritual structure, and we can see this here in chapter 5. At this point, the Gospel is about the contact between God and people through Jesus, which brings healing, forgiveness and in some cases, a call to discipleship. We will see in coming days where the Gospel goes from here.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What do you feel about evangelism today, and how you see it practiced? Write down your observations about whether it has any connection with what you have read here or not. Ask yourself whether you need to be speaking to anyone about Jesus or helping anyone who is burdened by problems. These are your 'mission' opportunities.*
 - *Pray for those whose lives are given to evangelistic endeavour, and pray that they will have God's heart of love for 'sinners'. Pray that God's people will overcome cultural barriers to speaking about God and about Jesus in society generally.*
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Final Prayer

Lord God, You are in control of Your mission to save people and save this world. You alone can understand the complex nature of what is happening today, and You alone have the answers to our needs and the future of our world and our planet. Help Your people to keep close to You through all the perils by which we are surrounded. Thanks be to God. AMEN
