

Lunch with Levi

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[0 : 00] So the reading this morning is from Luke chapter 5, verses 27 to 31.

! It's the calling of Levi. 32, sorry.! 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. Then Levi had a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.

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? Jesus answered them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. After church...

[1 : 20] That was a bit loud. After church one Sunday afternoon, parents asked their young boy if they had learned anything in the kids group at church that week. With a beaming smile, he says, Yeah, I learned God's name.

Expecting him to say Lord or Christ or something else like that, they take interest and they ask their boy what God's name is. With a proud smile and all the confidence in the world, the boy looks at his parents and answers, It's Harold.

Are you sure? The parents ask. Both surprised and a little bit confused, they began to worry what the leaders might be teaching their children.

Yeah, it says it in the Bible. Our Father in heaven, Harold be your name. Another week, a young girl goes to her mother and asks, Mummy, in church today we learned that God is everywhere.

Is that true? Yes, that's true. The mother responds with a smile. So if he's everywhere, is he at school? Yes, God is at school. If God is at school, is he at home with us?

[2 : 30] Yes, God is at home with us too. If he is everywhere, does that mean God is inside us? Is God inside my tummy? Yes, I suppose God is inside your tummy.

Why do you ask? Good, she says. God's hungry and wants a banana. So the humour aside, obviously in these stories, the children didn't quite hit the mark.

They misunderstood what they had heard. They don't have all of their theology in place, as we would expect for a child. But there is something that they do have.

In Matthew 18, Jesus says that we must have faith like children to inherit the kingdom of God. That faith doesn't require all of the answers.

It's open. It's honest. It's filled with joy and so often makes us smile. And it doesn't hesitate, even if that means getting something wrong.

[3 : 37] Jesus calls his disciples who fit that bill. He calls fishermen who aren't educated. He calls a tax collector.

Not people who have all the answers. Not people who are chosen by the religious superiors. In this passage, Levi was Jesus' choice. He certainly was not the choice of the Pharisees.

The passage starts with Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his booth.

That's about all we are told about Levi at the moment. We're not told about his family. We're not told where he's come from. We're not told whether he learned the scriptures. We're told he was a tax collector sat at his booth.

He was despised by everyone. He was greedy. He was corrupt. Just like every other tax collector. So we know that the Roman Empire are in charge at the moment.

[4 : 44] And they tax everything. They needed to. They were spread so thin. They needed to get as much money as they could. They tax land, on trade, even on census data.

And to do it, they recruited local people like Levi to collect on their behalf. Using those people were often using corruption to get themselves rich as well.

These men were seen as traitors, extortionists, and deeply hated by everyone. Because not only did they sell out their own people to the Roman Empire.

In order to incentivize people to do this job, because you know you're going to be hated if you do this job. You know your friends aren't going to like you. You know you're going to bring shame to your family.

So in order to incentivize people to do this job, the Roman Empire would turn a blind eye to people who took more money than they were required to pass on to the Roman Empire.

[5 : 46] They allowed people to line their own pockets. We even have historical texts outside the Bible that confirm this exact practice of tax farming and financial abuse under Roman law.

Flavius Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, he said the taxes were exacted with severity and the people were burdened and impoverished. Levi was one of several people who caused that, who placed that upon his own people.

We know that Zechariah is another. And someone will be, I believe we'll be talking about Zechariah in an all-age service later in the series. But it gets even worse than that.

Tax collectors, particularly those who are part of the Jewish people, they flouted God's law. They remained loyal to Caesar over God.

They overcharged and they kept the excess from themselves, stealing from their own people. They manipulated records and lied about what people owed. They were greedy and they coveted the money of others.

[6 : 59] They brought shame upon their family, including their mother and father. And very, very likely they would not have taken a day off working on the Sabbath because that means more money.

That is six of the Ten Commandments that we can list off easily. And if we were to look in more detail at the Jewish law, I'm sure we could find even more ways that the tax collectors were breaking it.

So not only were they traitors in the eyes of their own people, they were sinners in the eyes of God. And they were treated and seen as among the worst of them.

And everyone knew that. This passage tells us that Levi was sat at his tax booth. He was probably there working. He was probably counting money.

He was doing the exact thing that put him in opposition of his own people and in opposition of God. And Jesus went up to him.

[8 : 00] Levi wasn't looking for Jesus. He wasn't looking to move on from his job to find a rabbi to follow. But Jesus went up to him and called him.

And when Jesus called Levi, he said, follow me. He didn't say, give me all of your Sundays or all of your Sabbaths would have been Saturdays back then. He didn't say, come and find me when you finished your job and you have the time.

He didn't say, come and hang out with me tomorrow and you can get on with your job after that. He said, follow me. And that is exactly what Levi did.

Levi didn't question it. He didn't hesitate. He didn't wait to fix his life first. He got up and he followed Jesus. And there was no going back for Levi.

If somebody working for the Roman Empire abandons their post, there's no crawling back to Caesar to say, sorry, can I have my job back? They're done. The Roman Empire would turn their back on them as well.

[9 : 10] Levi had already put himself against everyone he knew. And by doing this, he was putting himself against the one group of people who would lack out for him as well.

And how much money did Levi leave behind at that tax brief? If he was counting money, the passage says, Levi left everything to follow Jesus. How much money was that?

We could suppose what actually happened to that money. Likelihood is somebody or a group of people found it abandoned and decided that they would take it. Or maybe some of those people who were in the process of paying the taxes got some of that back.

We have a saying that you can take a person out of a place, but you can't take the place out of the person. That's our way of looking at things. Jesus has a very different way.

He takes Levi away from the tax booth, but he takes the tax collector out of Levi as well. He gives Levi a completely new life.

[10 : 11] He gives him a new start. He gives him a new name. We see throughout the Bible that God changes the name of people. And the times that he does that are significant times.

And they are times of calling when God calls them into a new mission. Levi was associated with his old ways, with being a tax collector, the shame of it on his family, on his friends, on his people, the sinful nature of it.

But Jesus gave him a new name. It's not actually mentioned in Luke, but we know that this is the same person based on how and when they were called in the book of Matthew.

Because that is the name that he is referred to. Matthew, it means a gift from God. And he went on to become the writer of one of the four Gospels.

This tax collector gave his life to Jesus and wrote one of the four Gospels. Matthew focuses predominantly on reaching out to the Hebrew people.

[11 : 25] He was desperate to tell them about Jesus. Because a name change in the Bible is a complete change of identity.

And it's a change of mission too. Why is all of this so significant? It's when we think about the calling that Jesus gives us.

It's not about us going looking for them. It's not about us doing things to earn the grace of Jesus. We are saved and we are called by grace and grace alone.

Another story. A young boy went to a birthday party for the first time. He didn't know the family very well.

He was just a classmate of the birthday boy. And he had never been to a party like it before. With the music, the games, the balloons and a huge chocolate cake. The mum of the birthday boy lined them all up to get some cake.

[12 : 32] And suddenly this boy ran off crying. The mum went to find him. To ask him what was wrong. And through tear-stained eyes, he sobbed. Nobody told me there would be cake.

I didn't bring any money to buy a piece. The mother had sympathy in her eyes. She laughed gently and said, Sweetheart, you don't need to buy a slice of cake.

It's a party. It's already being paid for for you. The boy looked at her to try and work out if she really meant it. Or if she was just being nice.

A smile crept upon his face. And a moment later, he started crying again. What's wrong? The mother asked. The boy replied, It's a party.

And you did something nice. And I've just been crying. We're not saved by the things that we do. We don't pay the cost of the gift that we've been given.

[13 : 32] Jesus has already paid it. So how do we respond to that gift? When you're given a gift, maybe for a birthday or Christmas or an anniversary, do you smile?

Do you open it eagerly? Do you share the excitement with other people? Or do you hesitate? Put it on a shelf and let it gather dust. How do you respond to grace?

Like the boy in that last story, are we getting upset because we misunderstand what grace is about? It's not about giving us a new set of rules to follow.

It's not about being left out because nobody told us that it would be on offer. It's not about counting the cost of it. Grace is a gift for us.

That Jesus has already paid the price. And like Jesus went to Levi, he comes looking for us to give us that gift.

[14 : 37] Follow me, Jesus said to him. And Levi got up, left everything and followed him. How long did it take Levi to leave his tax booth and follow Jesus?

Maybe a matter of a few seconds. There isn't even a full stop in that sentence. Jesus said, follow me. Levi followed him.

He didn't make excuses. He didn't say he was too busy or he needed to finish what he was doing first. No, he immediately followed Jesus.

He immediately saw what he had been offered and he left everything behind to accept it. Because that gift that Jesus offered was so much more valuable than anything else.

He didn't hold anything back. What excuses are we making? What are we holding back from Jesus?

[15 : 42] Do we need to finish our work shift first? Do we need to finish counting with that money and make sure it's put away safe? Or are we ready to accept the invitation that Jesus offers?

We move on barely in the passage and it says, then Levi threw a great banquet. It doesn't tell us how much time had passed.

It just says then. That suggests that this happened quickly. That it was an immediate reaction. Maybe there was a little bit of planning to do. He had to go out and buy some food. He had to reach out to his friends to invite them.

But he started on that immediately. He threw a party because he was filled with joy that Jesus had chosen him. He recognized what Jesus was offering and he reacted appropriately to that.

The party wasn't an attempt to earn Jesus' favor. He already had that. He already had that grace. The party was a response to it.

[16 : 49] So what is our response to the grace that Jesus offers us? Levi invited everyone that he knew to the party.

Because there's something else on that day that Levi discovered. But the joy that he has from Jesus choosing him. Joy is contagious.

You can't keep it to yourself. He had encountered the grace that Jesus offered. And a chance to change his life. And he just had to share that with other people. I want you to think about what is the greatest news you have ever received.

Maybe it's the birth of a child. Maybe it's a new job. A recovery from illness. An engagement. Or maybe it's something else. When you receive news like that, how long did you keep hold of that before telling someone?

Because I would wager it wasn't that long. When we are given such exciting news, we are desperate to tell people. To share that. So how much greater is the news of Jesus' grace?

[18 : 00] Yet, how often do we hold on to that? Keep a close grasp of it. Or worry what other people are going to say to that news.

Instead of giving in to the excitement that Jesus' grace should bring. When was the last time you felt so much joy in your life with Jesus that you couldn't help but talk about it?

Are you living like someone who's been invited into a celebration of God's grace? Or like someone who's missed the memo? And is just carrying on as if nothing has changed?

Tommy, age 17, wanted so desperately to share Jesus with his peers that he chose to run Youth Alpha in his school.

He got permission from the school. He was given a time and a room that he could run at him. He advertised it in his school assemblies and nobody signed up.

[19 : 05] On the day the Alpha course was due to start, he and a few of his friends went to the classroom and they set up. They used their own money to buy plenty of food.

And they prepared faithfully, even though they weren't expecting anyone based on the sign-ups. And then they waited. Eventually, somebody stepped through the door to ask if that was the right room for Youth Alpha.

Then another. Then another. In total, 100 students showed up to Youth Alpha that Tommy was running. By the end of it, 60 of them gave their life to Jesus.

Sarah, age 15, she was so passionate about her faith that she wanted to share it with other Christians. She tried to set up a Christian union at her school and she was refused.

So she kept trying and every time she was told no. The head teacher was a firm atheist and thought a Christian union would only be a bad thing. Eventually, the head teacher had had enough of being nagged and so she agreed to let Sarah try a Christian union with one condition.

[20 : 18] She would go along. And if she saw anything that she didn't like, she would shut it down quickly. So that's exactly what happened.

The head teacher went along for a few weeks, already with her mind made up on what she was going to do. Six months later, the Christian union is still going.

And that head teacher is going along to a local church regularly because of what she saw in that Christian union, because of Sarah's response to grace.

Both of those stories are real testimonies. The names are changed. But they are real testimonies and they show us examples of what can happen when we respond to the grace that we've been given instead of sitting on it and pretending like nothing has changed.

So who are you going to invite to your grace party? If the Pharisees have their way, it's the morally clean, the righteous who get invites.

[21 : 24] That way we don't have to risk feeling uncomfortable. We don't have to risk our convenience. We don't have to risk our nice, tidy Christian bubble. But is that what the Grace Party is supposed to be about?

What about the homeless, the drug addicts, convicted criminals, those who are struggling in life? What about the LGBTQ plus community?

What about those who live lifestyles that you don't agree with? Those who have cheated on their families? Those who have taken advantage of money or power?

Those who have lied, envied, been greedy, thought lustful thoughts, shown pride, put anything or anyone before God? Jesus didn't avoid complicated people.

He did exactly the opposite and surrounded himself with complicated people. If we only invite the people that make us feel comfortable, we are not building God's kingdom.

[22 : 33] We're curating a club. We don't get to decide who Jesus goes after. Jesus goes after everyone and he invites us to be a part of it.

He had one simple answer to the Pharisees. It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

We don't get to be gatekeepers for God's grace. We don't get to decide who is worthy of God and who isn't.

God's grace is for everyone. And what about you? If the Pharisees had their way and only the most righteous and the morally pure get invited, do you get an invite?

I'm not convinced I would. Of that list that I read out, I know and I can think of examples recently where I've done, where I've lied, where I've envied, where I've done things that I shouldn't have done.

[23 : 47] But that is the point of the grace that Jesus offers us. We're not saved by being perfect. We're not saved by fixing our life first.

We're saved by grace. Grace is being given something that we don't deserve. Levi wasn't perfect when he started following Jesus.

He was far from it. Jesus didn't say to him, fix yourself and then come and follow me. Levi was simply willing.

He was willing to leave his old life behind and give a new life to Jesus. He followed Jesus exactly as he was.

And Jesus asks us to do the same. He doesn't ask us to fix ourselves first. He calls us to come to him with all of the mess, exactly as we are.

[24 : 52] He doesn't call the perfect or the prepared or the religiously qualified. Jesus calls the willing. And that's all we need to be.

In Isaiah 6 verse 8, Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send and who will go for us? And I said, Here I am, send me.

You might have noticed I am wearing part of that verse on my hoodie. And actually it was at spring harvest that I felt convicted by God for that verse in particular.

God called Isaiah and Isaiah was willing. He didn't hesitate. He didn't make up excuses. He didn't ask a hundred questions to get all of the answers.

With childlike faith, he simply stood up to be counted for God. And he said, Here I am. Send me. Jesus didn't call Levi because he had it all together or because he was a great speaker.

[25 : 57] Certainly not because he was liked. He called Levi because Levi was willing. He was prepared to stand up and be counted for God.

To leave his old life behind. To give everything to follow Jesus. Jesus called him as he was.

And Levi said, Yes. You see, that is the grace that Jesus offers us. And that same grace that was offered to Levi, a tax collector, seen by the people as the worst of the worst, among the worst of the worst.

That same grace that Jesus offered to Levi, he offers to you. For the moment, forget about everyone else. Forget about Levi. About Isaiah.

Or about the person next to you. What is your response? William Barclay, a Scottish theologian, said, There is no one too bad for Jesus to love.

[27 : 05] And nobody too good to need his love. He also said that there are two great days in a person's life. The day we are born. The day we are born and the day that we discover why.

This is the why. To be counted as a follower of Jesus. To live his life rather than our own.

You don't need to be perfect. You just need to be willing. And to respond appropriately. To come as you are.

Perhaps broken, tired, messy. But open. But open. So here's the big question as we come to the end.

What will you do next? Will you hold back and make excuses to Jesus? Or will you come as you are and give everything to him?

[28 : 11] We're going to play a song in a video. It's by David Crowder. It's called Come As You Are. Because that's our prayer for you this morning. To come as you are.

To follow Jesus. To be counted for him. Perhaps as we listen to those words. We can say to God.

Here I am. Choose me.