**JESUS CALLS LEVI  
Mark 2:13–17**

**“*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.*” (v. 14)**

So far in Mark’s gospel, Jesus has been preaching the good news of the kingdom of God and healing many sick people. In the previous two passages, Jesus healed a leper with his loving touch and a paralytic with his declaration of forgiveness. Today’s passage continues Jesus’ miraculous healings with the spiritual restoration of a man who was just as sick as the last two—Levi the tax-collector. Through this story, we can see Jesus’ grace, compassion, and hope to call sinners as his disciples and to restore their spiritual health and purpose in life.

1. **Follow Me (vs. 13–14)**

After Jesus realized that his preaching indoors could be detrimental to the integrity of the building, he relocated to a larger venue, the Galilean lakeshore, which could accommodate the many people who came to hear him. Look at verse 13: “***Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.***” Jesus taught God’s word to the crowd. Teaching and preaching were the main focus of Jesus’ earthly ministry. When Jesus proclaimed God’s word, God’s power to save sinners and change lives was manifested.

But spiritually thirsty crowds weren’t the only ones by the Sea of Galilee. Let’s read verse 14 together: “***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.***” Capernaum, where Jesus was ministering, was along a major trade route, and the Romans set up customs stations where they could collect taxes not only from the locals, but from the merchants travelling through. Levi son of Alphaeus, also known as Matthew, was employed by the Romans as a tax-collector at one such station.

Levi was a Hebrew name, showing his heritage as an Israelite. God gave his wonderful purpose for the people of Israel when he called Abraham, that through them all nations would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). God wanted to raise Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to bless the whole world. Moreover, Levi may have been a descendant of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. We learned this year in Exodus how God consecrated the Levites out of all the tribes of Israel to serve him. The Levites didn’t inherit land along with the other tribes, for God himself and their ministry before him was to be their inheritance. God appointed the Levites, especially the Levitical priests, as spiritual leaders to administer the sacrificial system, teach the word of God, and pronounce blessings in God’s name. God had a wonderful purpose and hope for the tribe of Levi to bless the rest of Israel, and for the nation of Israel to bless the rest of the world.

Levi, however, had lost God’s purpose for his life. The tax-collectors in Israel during Jesus’ time were Jews working for the Romans to collect from their own countrymen the heavy taxes the Romans demanded. The Jews deeply resented the Roman subjugation they were under and saw the tax-collectors as national and racial traitors, who were working with the enemies of Israel to oppress their own people. Moreover, tax-collectors were overwhelmingly corrupt. Since the Roman governors appointed soldiers to enforce the tax-collection, the tax-collectors could collect as much as they wanted. Their bosses didn’t care how much they collected, as long as they met their quota. So a skillful and motivated tax-collector could quickly become wealthy by dishonestly collecting more than he was required to—and they almost always did. The Jews considered tax-collectors as part of a basket of deplorables together with public sinners such as thieves, adulterers, prostitutes, and predatory lenders, and they excluded them from the synagogue and Jewish society.

Tax-collecting was not only disreputable but also highly competitive. Levi, as a tax-collector, was able and hard-working, but he used his God-given potential not for serving God and blessing others, but for serving his own selfish interests and burdening others. However, he found that a self-seeking, materialistic life was not all that he had hoped. He had thought that if he only had enough money, then he could have happiness and security and satisfaction in life, so he rejected his Jewish heritage and God’s purpose for him to choose a lucrative career as a tax-collector. Now Levi was disillusioned, having achieved material prosperity and realizing that he could not buy happiness or meaning. Levi was despised by society and even his own family; a relative who was a tax collector was a disgrace, and his family members were ashamed to be seen in public with him. Worst of all, Levi was separated from God, and so he was isolated and lonely. Holding onto a value system where money is everything, he became merely a money-making machine, and his soul became shriveled and dead. But he felt there was no way back; even though he yearned to start over again, he had burned behind him the bridges back to Jewish society by exploiting them to get rich.

It was at this point that Jesus saw Levi. Jesus saw not merely his outward appearance, but his miserable condition. Whereas others viewed Levi with contempt and resentment, Jesus looked at Levi with compassion and hope. Jesus knew Levi’s great sin of having sold his soul for material gain; he saw Levi’s wretched slavery to sin and his directionlessness in life. But Jesus also saw his readiness to life a new life and great potential to be a blessing to others.

In our individualistic and materialistic culture today, there are many people like Levi, especially among college students. Many young people are full of potential, hard-working, and humanly well-off, but instead of using what God has given them to glorify and serve God, they live for self-seeking purposes, seeking to advance themselves and their careers rather than God’s kingdom. Such people look fine outwardly, but inwardly they are empty and wandering without purpose in life. Consequently they become lonely and burdened with guilt. We should see them like Jesus with eyes of compassion and hope, recognizing their spiritual need as well as their potential.

Look at verse 14 again: “***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.***” By “Follow me,” Jesus didn’t mean just for Levi to walk behind him. Let’s think about the meaning of Jesus’ words, “Follow me.”

First, Jesus was inviting Levi to a new purpose in life—to turn the focus of his life from self-centered to Christ-centered. This was Jesus’ call to repent. Repentance is not just admitting that some things you did were mistaken, but turning over ownership of one’s life to Jesus. Repentance opens up the way to restoration from the damage that sin inflicts to be remade in the image of Christ, according to God’s original intent in creating mankind.

Second, Jesus was inviting Levi to salvation—to the kingdom of God. Instead of living miserably and hopelessly in sin, Levi could have the joy of salvation and the hope of eternal life in God’s kingdom. In Jesus, Levi could experience freedom from his guilt through forgiveness of sins. He had lived for so long as an outcast, but Jesus restored him as a precious child of God.

Third, Jesus was inviting Levi to follow him as his disciple. A disciple is a learner—one who comes to Jesus and learns from him. Levi’s sin-sickness was not healed instantaneously; rather, he was sanctified gradually through hearing Jesus’ teaching and spending time with Jesus, getting to know him. As a disciple learns from his master, he begins to imitate his master, and he eventually continues the master’s work. Jesus had hope that Levi the sinner, Levi the tax-collector, could grow in his holy image and be entrusted with Jesus’ work of world salvation.

Jesus saw Levi not as he was, but as he could be in Christ, as Apostle Matthew who would bless the church for millennia afterward by serving as Jesus’ biographer. Levi Matthew would be restored to his original purpose by writing the gospel of Matthew for his people the Jews, revealing to them their King Jesus, Son of Abraham and Son of David. In Jesus, Levi lived a far greater life than he ever could have apart from Jesus’ call, “Follow me.”

Just as Jesus had a wonderful plan for Levi’s life, so he has a wonderful plan for each of us. God has given each one of us potential, and we have the choice whether to use it to serve God and bless others, or to ignore God’s call and pursue our own selfish gain and pleasure. God wants to use us gloriously for his kingdom, to build his church and glorify his name, to live an eternally significant life, but too often we are content to settle for the worthless and fading things the world seeks—possessions, reputation, entertainment, career. God created us for a purpose. The purpose of mankind is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. To bring glory to God is our highest potential and greatest blessing and joy. The way to glorify God is through living for his kingdom as a disciple of Jesus, as we see from Matthew’s life.

Let’s think about Levi’s response to Jesus’ invitation: “***Levi got up and followed him.***” Levi immediately accepted Jesus’ invitation, quitting in the middle of his shift, walking away from his old life to follow Jesus. Levi gave up everything to be Jesus’ disciple, but he gained so much more. He gave up worldly friends to gain a new spiritual family. In place of earthly security, he gained eternal security in God’s kingdom. Levi threw away the career he’d worked so hard to advance but received a wonderful new job as an apostle and biographer of Christ. He abandoned the fleshly comforts money could buy for true peace and joy that all the money in the world couldn’t purchase. He left everything to gain Christ.

Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:8, “…*I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ*”. Before Paul met Christ, he had achieved so much from a human perspective, but he threw it all away as worthless compared to the supreme value of Christ himself.

1. **Jesus Came to Call Sinners (vs. 15–17)**

Levi showed his repentance and gratitude toward Jesus by throwing a great banquet for Jesus and his disciples. Look at verse 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.***” Before, Levi had been greedy, stingy, and selfish; now, Levi was generously using his wealth to honor Jesus by hosting a lavish party for him and his disciples. This complete change in his value system evident through his actions attested the genuineness of his repentance. Levi’s party had another purpose: so that other sinners like he had been could have the opportunity to meet Jesus and receive the same joy of salvation and new life that Levi himself had. Wanting to share his joy, he invited all his friends, hoping that they too could repent and follow Jesus. The other tax-collectors and sinners who knew how frugal and exacting Levi used to be must have been astounded by the radical change in his attitude.

Jesus came to Levi’s house and ate with tax collectors and sinners—listening to their stories and teaching them the good news of God. Those who had been alienated and despised by society felt that they were loved and valued. God's grace overflowed as sinners found hope in Jesus. Many confessed their sins with tears, and there was great joy. It was a picture of the heavenly banquet in the kingdom of God.

But not everyone shared in the joy. Look at verse 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?’***” In ancient times, eating with someone was a sign of friendship and acceptance, treating them as your equal. So for Jesus to eat with public sinners and tax collectors was truly radical. This shows the grace and humility of Jesus’ incarnation, that he would lower himself to dwell among sinful men. The Pharisees however considered holiness as being set apart from sinners; they could never imagine themselves sharing a table with sinners, and so they criticized Jesus. Due to their pride and self-righteousness, the teachers of the law were blinded from seeing both Jesus’ amazing mercy for sinners and their own desperate need for it.

Jesus heard their judgmental critique and rebuked them. Let’s read verse 17 all together: “***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 likened himself to a doctor and sinners to people who are sick and in desperate need of a doctor. Jesus didn’t deny that Levi’s dinner guests were sinners or downplay their wickedness, but he saw their condition as a sickness, which he alone could cure. He saw them with the compassionate eyes of a physician—not condemning or criticizing, but seeking to make well.

A doctor accepts his patients regardless of their sicknesses, even cancer or AIDS. He doesn’t avoid the patients’ smelly wounds and diseases, but willingly touches and cares. He spends time with the patients, listens to them, and gives hope. Doctors go wherever the sick are, even risking their lives. In 1977, a young optometrist named Tom Little went to Afghanistan seeking to give sight to the blind eyes of the poorest of the poor. At that time the country was peaceful and its borders were open. Then Russia invaded and there was a war followed by Russian occupation, and then a take-over by the Taliban. Dr. Little stayed through it all. He ministered to the blind and near-blind. In August 2010, he and his team were massacred by the Taliban. President Obama awarded him the 2010 Medal of Freedom.

The president said: “An optometrist from New York, Tom Little could have pursued a lucrative career. Instead… he was guided by his faith and he set out to heal the poorest of the poor in Afghanistan. For 30 years, amid invasion and civil war, the terror of the Taliban, the spread of insurgency, he… helped bring to Afghans, literally, the miracle of sight. Last summer, Tom and his team of doctors and nurses were ambushed and senselessly murdered. Today, we remember and honor Dr. Tom Little—a humanitarian in the truest sense of the word; a man who not only dedicated his life to others, but who lived that lesson of Scripture: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’”

Likewise, as our Great Physician, Jesus left behind his heavenly glory and came to this world to heal the sick. He accepted any kind of sick people just as they were and healed them. Jesus’ miraculous physical healings pointed to his power and love to forgive sins and grant spiritual healing, as he had healed Levi. For this, Jesus would lay down his life on the cross for the sick. Isaiah 53:5 says, “*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*” On the cross with arms outstretched, he waits for any kind of sin-sick people to come to him and be healed.

Jesus came to restore the image of God in sinners and to restore people’s purpose in life to God’s original plan for us, so that we might live according to our full created potential. Jesus said that he did not come to call the righteous. Whom is Jesus referring to as righteous? Romans 3:10 says, “*As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one’*”. The so-called “righteous” people for whom Jesus has *not* come are the self-righteous, who do not recognize their need for Jesus. Jesus came as the Savior of the world, but those who do not acknowledge their need for salvation cannot accept their Savior.

If a doctor is in the room, the problem is not the illness itself, for the doctor can cure that; the problem is if the patient refuses to acknowledge the reality his ailment and receive treatment. We as humans are without exception sinful and deserving of eternal punishment. The only thing that could possibly spare us from God’s wrath against our sin is Jesus and the salvation he purchased for us on the cross. A patient needs to trust in his doctor and follow the doctor’s orders with a great desire to be healed. In the same way, we should come to Jesus as we are and place ourselves in Jesus’ healing hands, submitting our lives to him so that he can make us whole in every aspect of our lives. However, if we do not recognize and admit ourselves to be sinners before God, then Jesus has not come for us, and that is a dreadful notion. According to 1 John 1:8–9, “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*” Jesus has come to save sinners, calling them to repent and to live a new life of following him.

I myself was once like Levi—living a self-centered life, seeking my own pleasure and prosperity, impure in my words and thoughts, wandering without direction in life. I squandered my time for my own entertainment, sometimes staying up all night playing games. My academics suffered and my spiritual life stagnated. I had no spiritual or life goals. I desperately needed spiritual restoration. But just as Jesus saw Levi, he saw me and called me through his servants, who invited me to Bible study and taught me the Bible. They saw me not as I was—an undisciplined, selfish, immature student—but as a future spiritual leader and shepherd, and so they faithfully served me with Jesus’ words and helped me to grow as his disciple. Through his word, Jesus restored my purpose in life to serve his kingdom and bring glory to him as a shepherd and Bible teacher for college students. Sometimes it’s hard for me to see hope for students who seem spiritually sick and immature and slow to grow even after we’ve studied together a long time. However, this passage reminds me that in Jesus, there is hope for even the worst sinner, and I should also remember that my shepherds served me patiently for many years as I slowly matured.

Jesus called a despicable tax-collector as his disciple and compassionately ate with sinners. In Jesus, there is hope for any sinner. Jesus came as the perfect doctor to heal the sin-sick by the power of his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus wants to restore the image of God in us and to restore our original created purpose. Some of us may suffer from sin-sickness, such as greed, jealousy, materialism, worldly ambition, fear, anxiety, anger, pride, bitterness, directionlessness, addiction, or complacency. Jesus invites you today, whatever you are suffering from. He wants to heal you, if only you will let him. May each of us recognize our sinful condition, come to Jesus in repentance, and heed Jesus’ call:   
“Follow me.”