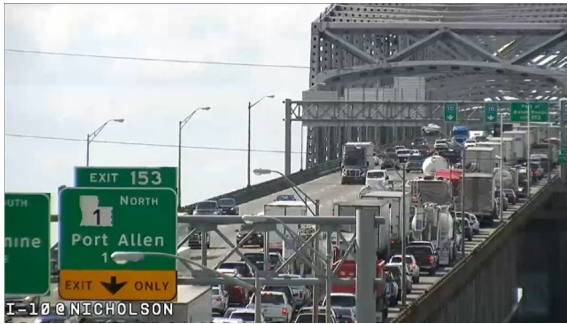


Early Days with Jesus, Pt. 4
When Jesus Doesn't Want You
Luke 5: 27-32

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Perhaps the chamber of commerce worked with the department of transportation. Maybe it's intentionally a welcome to town feature. For people newly moved to Baton Rouge, we provide a little mandatory orientation to our region. Leave downtown for the first time to get on I-110. After a very short on-ramp, you learn what we forgot to tell you. If you don't immediately and dramatically move out of the right two lanes, you're going to get a wonderful view of one of our most dramatic natural wonders. Since you have no choice but to travel to Port Allen, don't forget to look down at the Mighty Mississippi!

Getting on a road you can't get off of makes quite a metaphor for life. The traffic can get so thick and fast that for years we can't even change lanes. A decision made, or not made, years ago may keep us speeding away from where we intended to go. Sometimes, so many compromises have been made, so many deals struck with our consciences and negotiations forged with our pasts, that we can hardly recall where it all went wrong. It can feel too late to change. This is just the way things are. All we know how to do is to keep going with the routine. We pretend not to notice the heart-yearnings as we move through our paces. We may secretly long for a different life, but because we don't know how to get one, or if it's even possible, we just keep on as we are.



Levi understood these feelings as he sat at his tax booth on the main road that went from the Mediterranean Sea past Capernaum, where Jesus had been teaching, all the way to Damascus. Levi was a man so compromised that he was locked into his life whether he wanted to be or not. His options were mortgaged to the hilt, and the spiritual creditors on either side of him were not inclined to refinance.

Levi was a Jewish man. Levi was a Roman tax collector. So, he was accepted by neither his own people nor his foreign employers. The Romans shrewdly sold the rights of tax collecting to locals. These tax franchises were lucrative business. The Romans told the collector what the assessment was, and after he met that figure, the rest was his. So the tax collector would make his profit by charging more than the already crushing Roman rate. The chariots and spears of Rome backed him against protest. Naturally his fellow Jews hated him. He had sold out to their pagan oppressors. Levi made a profit on the misery of his compatriots. But the Romans hated him, too. Though they ran the system, they despised a man so dishonourable that he would gouge his own people.

Ironically, Levi's name meant that his ancestry was in the Levite tribe, those people of Israel set aside by God for priestly service. The Levites owned no land but were to be supported by the tithes of the people. In return, they dedicated their lives to the service of the Lord's worship. The Levites maintained the continual sacrifices of atonement and thanksgiving. Through the Levites, reconciliation with God was effected. They served the Lord through the Temple worship on behalf of all the people. Now here was Levi living off the "offerings" of his people through the despised tax system. And in return, the people received from Levi not the joy of reconciled relations with God, but the misery of Roman servitude.

Levi, then, was rich, filthy rich, but isolated. He couldn't enjoy his wealth with those who had been family. He couldn't go to synagogue or to the Temple. And the Romans would never have him. His only friends were the small circle of those like him, others who had compromised their heritage, their souls, their faith, their values until there was no turning back. They were friends by default and need. Generally, he was a despised man, and no one hated him more than himself. Of course he didn't think about these things every day. Like the rest of us, he let the demands of the hour carry him to work, stayed late, and used whatever tricks he could to get to sleep at night.

The Glorious Interruption

When Jesus passed by, Levi suddenly felt a wind of possibility rush over him. He looked up from his life. A long submerged hope that things could be different rose up in him. A warm voice thawed his frozen heart in an instant. "Follow me." Two words. Two words, and suddenly a way out was opened up. No one had wanted anything from Levi, besides money, in years. No one ever willingly asked for *him*-- for his company and his allegiance.

"Follow me." Follow him. Leave the tax booth unattended. Risk the wrath of Rome. Quit the job. Lose money. Go on the lam. Get out of town. Out of this prison. For what? For another start. For a new life. For a companionship not born of money, a fraternity made of people whose principal conversation was not how to keep the masses away from their assets and homes, but a fellowship based on the call of this man who had the audacity just to say, "Follow me."

In an instant Levi considered what it would be to have new conversations, to talk about God, to welcome others, to live for a purpose. Before he knew it, he stood up from his seat and went to Jesus. Someone had bought all the debts of his soul, paid off the spiritual creditors, and given him back his life. He had been compromised into a spiritual and social prison, but now the walls were torn down, and he was free again.

A New Kind of Party

Jesus' acceptance of Levi opened the floodgates of gratitude. Levi hosted a great feast. He invited everyone he knew. And as his house was grand, and the food and drink flowing, a great crowd of his old friends showed up. The other tax collectors came, as well as the prostitutes, the questionable business people, the hustlers, and the pretenders. All the compromised sinners showed up. And they had a great party. The wine ran and the food was magnificent. Jesus was there, and he didn't leave early. He loved them, and he feasted with them. His presence gave them a sense of being reconnected to life again.

This celebration, however, did not please the religious leaders of the day. They didn't care for this bash at Levi's house, and said to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (5: 30).

Jesus answered for his followers, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (vs. 31). I came for Levi precisely because he was a comprised, lost mess of a sinner. I did not come for those who think they're fine as they are. Why do I eat with sinners? They're the only kind of people there are! But if you don't want their company, don't worry, I won't force you. I didn't come for the well and the righteous. Here's the shocker: the strongest block to our reception of the Son of God who has come to us is not our sinfulness, but our refusal to admit it. Our compromises and brokenness, our poor choices and out-right destructiveness do not keep us from Jesus as surely as pretending we have no need of him. He has come for *us*, for those of us who will admit that we are not righteous--not right, not connected, not whole-- but tired of life at this breakneck pace, and longing to be

healed. He comes to answer our desperation with his forgiving, fulfilling presence.

So, Levi became one of the twelve. He has also been known as Matthew, and tradition assigns him authorship of the first gospel. Here, then is a story of a transformation greater even than physical healings. And it is a story for all of us who know some secret tales of compromise in our lives. For example,

- Have you ever started down a road thinking you'd just go that way for a while, and then found you couldn't get off, all these years later?
- Have you held your tongue so long that you've forgotten what it is you needed to say, and fear now that if you opened your mouth the cries and the rage would blow down a house?
- Have you ever pressed your lips against lips forbidden to you, and then not known how to stop, what to say, or how to look your spouse in the eye? Perhaps now the secret, long covered up, festers inside, poisoning your hours.
- Have you gone along without truly dealing with important relationships until you realise you're just numb?
- Have you ever rearranged the truth one time and then discovered how easy it is to do it another time, and another, and then found you could no longer tell right from wrong, fact from fiction, lies from truth?
- Have you ever covered up, erased a figure, taken a life, hidden a diagnosis, passed the buck and the blame, looked the other way, held your tongue when you should have said something, or blurted out when you should have kept quiet?

Oh yes, we have. Perhaps we haven't compromised ourselves in every one of these ways, but many of us have gone far enough down Levi's road that we understand. We know what it is to go to the tax booth every day, dancing on the edge of despair, nodding over coffee and hoping futilely that no winter wind will ever blow over our house of cards.

To all of us, Jesus says, "There's a way out. Follow me. You don't have to be imprisoned by what you've done or been. Follow me. I know who you are and I want you with me. Get up and let the coins fall into the dust, let the books flap in the wind, let the officials remind you of your contract. I can negotiate a new deal. No matter where you've been. No matter where you are. No matter how compromised your soul. No matter how soiled your hands. No matter how thick the prison walls seem. Follow me. I can get you out. I will set you free. Your life is with me now."

Jesus calls us. And from that moment, everything can change. With him there is forgiveness and grace. There is new life. Now, as immediately as he did to Levi, Jesus offers it to you.

The Parties We May Host

Of course, there will still be the old life to deal with. But that suits Jesus fine. Levi held a party for Jesus and invited the only guests he knew: the tax collectors, the prostitutes and the rest of the sinners. And Jesus went and enjoyed the feast, partaking heartily. In that hour, Jesus not only rejoiced with Levi, but brought his love and joy to many others. The gospel got inside walls normally closed to religion. For Levi had access to people the Pharisees could never touch. He had connections with people who might think they could never get near Jesus. And Levi was not shy to tell them about what had happened to him. The old gaps in his soul were being filled. The long loneliness was over. His lies were finished and his prison gates were open. Life had begun again for Levi. As a result of his transformation, he could connect many others with this wonderful Jesus.

And that is precisely where you and I, as the compromised ones called by Jesus, have a mission to complete. There are people we may tell. We may invite others to join us in following the one who brings peace at last. Precisely because of our old compromises, we know people just like us. So we are able to enter places where others, who, thankfully, have been faithful and good for years, cannot go. The spiritual kinfolk of Levi can get into the boardrooms and the staff meetings. We can reach the people out on the road. We can go into the shops, the factories, the warehouses, the stations. And to all those we may offer them words of life. We may bring them to a different kind of party, inviting them to join the fellowship of those who have answered Jesus' call.

There's only one kind of people Jesus says he didn't come for: the healthy and righteous. That is to say, the self-righteous. The fine in themselves. The proud. The ones insist they are their own standard of righteousness. Those who say, "I figure God can take care of himself and I'll take care of myself." I'll figure it out on my own. The ones who think sinners and sick people are someone else. Fine. Don't worry. I didn't come for you. You can have your choice. You can say "My will be done" and I'll let you alone.

That chills me. Because so many times, I act that way. It's all good, God. So just don't mess with me today. I got this. Of course it never works. And I always return to him. But what would happen if one day he just said once and for all, "Fine. Have your own way. I didn't come for self-sufficient people."

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He wants us to stay connected to that point of need in us. To keep a line into the Levi the tax collector that is still in our hearts. He calls us to a relationship of continuing dependence on him. A life of constantly releasing our wills into his. We keep admitting all the truth he reveals to us. That doesn't lead us to condemnation, but to life.

We gather on Sunday mornings as a collection of liars, adulterers, cheats, fakers, gossips, drunks, idolaters, doubters--sinners every one of us, not least of whom is the pastor. But we gather in the hope that we can, as a result of Jesus' call, get off the highway and turn around. Jesus comes to us even when we are years down the wrong road. Though we feel isolated by our compromises, his voice reaches the innermost depths with an invitation to return to fellowship. Jesus finds and warms the long-buried heart, even when we thought it was lost and turned to stone. His invitation searches out the child who still yearns to be picked up and held close. We thought we had put too many years of determined self-reliance between us and our need for him. But he breaks through. When we have decided that we have simply done too much wrong to ever be worthy again, he calls us to himself. When we cease from ourselves, we hear his precious words: "Follow me." And everything gets made new.