

## INTRODUCTION

Jesus' teaching and miracles inspired awe and confidence. An increasing number of people had faith in him. The more he did - the more people realised who he is.

The calling of Levi (Matthew) was a further step in showing Jesus' work.

## JESUS CALLED LEVI

Until this point other people had come to Jesus or brought their friends to him. In this case it was Jesus who took the initiative.

This was not primarily a response to human need. It was not a healing. It was a call to follow him. Jesus was summoning Levi to become one of his closest disciples.

It is very significant that Levi was a tax collector - Jesus' critics understood that. The tax collectors raised revenue for the Roman government so they were hated as collaborators. They took customs duties on goods in transit. In Levi's case it was trade on the main route between Syria and Egypt that passed through Capernaum. The Romans franchised revenue collection so any surplus went to the people who did it, and charges of profiteering were common.

That made tax collectors very unpopular. They were associated in the public mind with all sorts of disreputable characters; hence the term "tax-collectors and sinners". Because society rejected them they tended to associate with the underclass.

Was Levi an unlikely candidate for Jesus' call?

Jesus' call implied that Levi was expected to devote his time to Jesus' cause and to being in his company.

## HIS CALL TOOK EFFECT

Levi responded immediately. It was an acknowledgement of Jesus' authority. It also suggests a sense of privilege.

It produced a major change in his life.

He "left all and followed Jesus". He must have given up his occupation to travel as a disciple.

His company must have changed as a result, but the first thing we notice is that he called his friends to a feast held in Jesus' honour. Sometimes it is wise to change our company, but it is not always justified as the debate with the Pharisees showed. Apart from anything else Levi was giving them an opportunity to meet Jesus - it was evangelism of a natural kind.

In holding the feast Levi was making a statement about his change of direction and loyalty to Jesus. It was also an act of gratitude for the privilege Jesus had conferred on him. It was an opportunity for Jesus to act and for others to share in his blessing. In Mark's account we read that many 'disreputable' people followed Jesus - they were not only Levi's friends.

But were those people really disreputable? In the eyes of society they were (probably many had been living obviously sinful lifestyles). But to give them the term "tax collectors and sinners" suggested the rest of society was superior - and that is a big mistake. In God's eyes "there is no difference for all have sinned" (Romans 3:23).

That is what the Scribes and Pharisees did not realise. If we realise that we will become humble, and if Christ cleanses us we will want to bring others to him also.

## CRITICISM AND JESUS' DEFENCE

The Scribes and Pharisees complained about Jesus and his disciples associating with such people. Why?

They rationalised their attitude with religious excuses. Those people disregarded the traditions, so it was easy to see them as enemies of God. The tax collectors worked for the idolatrous Romans; so they could be considered as taking the wrong side.

No doubt there were more personal reasons. They did not want others to think they approved of what those people were doing. Was that to avoid giving the wrong signal about such conduct or was it to keep their reputation?

They had a poor understanding of the faith. They thought of it only in terms of being 'correct' - in what they did and in the company they kept. They did not see a need to confess their sin, and they did not realise they needed God's mercy too. It is a hard lesson for a proud person to learn. Jesus defended himself and his disciples by comparing himself to a doctor. He had come to make them better; he could not stand apart from them. The Scribes thought they did not need him; such people have little concern for the needs of others.

Jesus got close to sinners in order to help. No surgical gloves - he came so close he bore our sin in his body on the tree. In his baptism he identified with us. On the cross he suffered our pains for us.

Coming close does not imply approval. Jesus never approves of sin - he came "to save his people from their sins". He said he had come "to call sinners to repentance". We need to remember that when people speak about the church 'welcoming'.

## CONCLUSION

People who do not realise they are sinners sometimes try to avoid 'being contaminated' by those they regard as inferior. By contrast Jesus identified with sinners in order to save us from our sins. It is not wise to think of some people being better or worse than others. We all have sinned and are in equal need of Christ's saving work.

The call of Levi shows what a wonderful person Jesus is and what wonderful work he does. This is God's mercy to his enemies. This is more than physical healing - it is the beginning of a new creation.

This story should encourage anyone to come to Jesus for acceptance, forgiveness, and holiness. It should prepare God's people to welcome others, no matter who they are, and do all they can to match their condition with Christ's salvation.