

The Call of Levi

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[0:00] All right, with that, if you have a Bible, I invite you to flip it open or turn it on. We are in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 2.

And we have, you know, we're a church that is very intentionally, very much on purpose, obsessed with Jesus. And so we are taking our time going through the story of Jesus as presented in the first, the earliest Gospel written by a man named Mark.

And we've explored all sorts of things about Jesus's purpose and the Gospel and the Kingdom and exorcism and his preaching. And now we're getting into some of the early controversy stories about Jesus.

Jesus was not only popular, which he was at least at first, but also controversial. Now, let me give you a little bit of my own behind-the-scenes kind of stuff.

I told the morning service this, I'll tell you as well. Now, when I'm studying a passage for a sermon, I try to read it, you know, a couple weeks ahead of time and just marinate in it.

[1:07] So I journal on it. I use imaginative exercises or prayer, place myself as a character in the story, imagine that I am one of the disciples or one of the Pharisees or one of the people who are getting healed or having a demon cast out of them.

I pray about it. I read commentaries. I try to think about examples from my own life. And I've always prided myself on the fact that I don't typically, like, prepare the sermon on Saturday.

I try to have it done a couple days earlier so that you see where this is going. The words of the sermon did not hit the page until 6 a.m. this morning.

Not out of lack of preparation. The preparation was the same, but rather out of a lack of confidence about what it was that this church needed to hear from this passage.

Because we're dealing with the story of Levi, a tax collector, who has been called by Jesus to follow him in the controversy because of that call.

[2:09] And we'll get into some of the reasons why I struggled with it. But I want to invite you into the struggle with me. I think sometimes sermons can give this certain sense of certainty, alliteration accidental, certain sense of certainty that here is the answer to this passage.

Here is the one way that we are meant to understand it. Here is the one, two, or three takeaways. And today is a little less certain. It's more of a struggle and a wrestling and an invitation to struggle along with me.

Is that all right tonight? All right. Thank you. This side of the room is with me. You all, you are dismissed. Here is the word of the Lord.

Mark chapter 2, starting in verse 13. Jesus went out beside the lake again. Now, I love, there's going to be some interruptions in the reading.

I'm sorry. I love how Jesus had just gotten done with the controversy. He was in a room stuffed with people. A paralyzed man was let down by his friends into a roof.

[3:14] Jesus forgives the man's sins. It strikes up controversy. Jesus heals the man. And then Jesus' response to this huge scene is to go and get out to the beach.

Which I can relate. As an introvert, by the time the 7 o'clock rolls around tonight, I wish I were at a beach resting. And I like how Jesus gives us permission to rest and to get away from the crowd.

Or at least he tries, because we keep reading. And the whole crowd came to him. They can't take a hint. And he began to teach them, like Jesus does. Verse 14, as Jesus continued along.

And so it's this traveling scene. Jesus walking, teaching. And as he's moving, he sees Levi, Alpheus' son, sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes.

Jesus said to Levi, follow me. And Levi got up and followed him. Now, in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, this scene, the Gospel writers add the phrase, Levi gets up, leaves everything behind, and follows Jesus.

[4 : 17] And if you've heard this story like me, there's this imagination that I have about Levi just abandoning everything that he owns to follow Jesus. But that's not actually what happens.

I think there is an abandoning that happens, and we'll talk about that. But rather, there's also a reappropriation of what Levi has for new purposes. Verse 15, Jesus sits down to eat at Levi's house.

So Levi abandons the tax-collecting kiosk. And it uses the wealth, the privilege, and the possessions that he has to dine with the divine, to eat with Jesus.

Jesus sits down to eat at Levi's house. And many tax-collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples. Indeed, many of them, these tax-collectors and sinners, had become his followers.

When some of the legal experts from among the Pharisees saw that he was eating with these sinners and tax-collectors, sinners and tax-collectors is this phrase that kind of serves as an A to Z way of saying all the bad people.

[5 : 22] Sinners, those who, by their own choice, have become impure and have removed themselves from God's societies because of their actions. And tax-collectors who have aligned themselves with the empire, who have begun to collaborate with those who have oppressed.

It's the A to Z of the bad people. Jesus, sitting with the sinners and tax-collectors and legal experts, ask, why is he sitting and eating with them?

Verse 17, when Jesus heard it, he said to them, healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. I didn't come to call righteous people but sinners.

Pause for a word of prayer with me. Spirit of God, we trust that you are in this place. We trust that you are going to illumine our minds to understand your word.

We thank you for the example of Jesus. We thank you for the words written down by your servants, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. God, I pray that as we wrestle with this text together, that we would be convicted in places where we need to grow, comforted in places where we need to be healed, and that we would know the difference between the two.

[6 : 32] We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. So the first thing I notice is that Jesus extends his call to follow him to those that I probably would not call.

Jesus extends his call to follow him to those that I would probably not call. Now, I grew up and was raised in conservative evangelical Christian spaces.

And there were varying amounts of hostility that those spaces would represent about making very thick, dark lines between the us and the them and who should be a part of us and who should not be.

But I also was part of spaces that considered themselves a bit more friendly. They had a marketing degree and a fresh coat of paint. And so they could be willing to maybe put a little bit of an eraser on that thick, dark line.

And so in their imagination, when Jesus is calling, extending his call to those that they weren't so sure about, they meant, well, Jesus is so grace-filled and so loving and so kind that Jesus would even call girls.

[7 : 46] Jesus would even call gay people, maybe. Jesus might even call Black Lives Matter supporters. So the lines that were kind of being gently erased out of the sense of how large God's grandiose love and mercy was, was the other was people who there was something wrong with their identity, but God's grace was good enough for even them.

But that's not what's happening here, because this assumes that there's something inherently not quite perfect about being a woman or an LGBTQ person or a person of color or an immigrant or a refugee.

There's something in that that assumes, well, God's grace is so good that it extends to even them. And the them is something that God had never had a problem in the first place with and nobody should have.

But rather in the story of Levi, we see something different. We're not talking about people whose identity make us uncomfortable because of the religious elite telling us that's the way we should feel.

Rather, we're talking about folks like tax collectors, people who had taken their power, aligned it with the power of the empire, and began to collaborate on how to oppress people together.

[9 : 06] And so that's what a tax collector did. They were granted authority by Rome to tax their own people, the same ethnicity and nationality and geography, and also take some money on the side.

So the religious authorities and most people of that ethnicity would turn against the tax collectors because they were traitors. And in the Jewish imagination, they were perpetually unclean, unable to participate in community life.

So how does that translate and apply for today? What would it look like for Jesus to extend an invitation to someone like that?

Now, I am deeply conscious of the fact that I'm standing in Washington, D.C. right now. Okay? So here are a few of my suggestions with that awareness.

Jesus' call to those who I would not consider to call. Jesus' call to those who might be on the outskirts of society, on the outskirts of what might be permissible. Jesus' call might be to people like federal employees and contractors.

[10 : 14] Jesus' call might be to the police and ICE enforcement officers. Jesus' call might be to those who join the army, veterans, those who have taken their lives and given it over to the powers that be.

Those who have been granted authority by the state to sometimes harm others in the name of justice. Which, oh yeah, that could be some of us.

Could be me. I am somebody who has been granted the authority by the powers that be in a variety of places to carry the title pastor. And I have, I confess, used that title to marginalize.

To marginalize people. To push out people who made me uncomfortable. But in reality, what I was doing was harming someone who God never wanted to be excluded in the first place.

Some of us are so used to the ritually unpure being defined by the religious elite of our own day, typically conservative evangelicalism. Even those that we consider outsiders has been twisted.

[11 : 38] So we pat ourselves on the back. Hey, Table Church, we're a church that welcomes outsiders like LGBTQ people and women and black people and brown people. And we pat ourselves on the back and we don't even think to wonder if these categories of who's in and who's out are the right ones to begin with.

On the other hand, some of us, a few of us, were so ready to decry those who would carry out injustice that the idea of inviting the ICE officer or the federal employee or the Southern Baptist minister over to dinner grosses us out.

So Jesus extends his call to those that I know I would not call. And Jesus' call makes the ritually pure uncomfortable. Think about it from the perspective of the legal experts.

They see this rabbi, Jesus, going around, claiming that the kingdom has arrived. And then Jesus starts hanging out with the co-conspirator with the empire. Jesus starts having dinner with the person who is considered a traitor by his people.

And so of course they're uncomfortable. Of course their reaction is going to be, Jesus, no, you've aligned yourself with the wrong kinds of people. And I can have the same sense of upsetness when I wonder and question and see people hanging out with those who I think don't deserve to be here.

[13 : 06] Hey, this church is, you know, welcoming and kind and inclusive, but please, please don't include those who have aligned themselves with the wrong side of the law.

Please don't include those whose theology doesn't line up with mine. Please don't include those who aren't as inclusive as me. You see the irony. So I wonder, and I ask myself, who are the people that I would not invite?

Who are the people that if Jesus were to extend an invite to dinner to them, I would say, no, Jesus, you've gone too far. The thing is, is that grace is most effective.

I've said this before. Grace is most effective on those who know they need it. The final thing that I consider and think about and wonder is, am I Levi?

Is it possible that I am the Levi in this story? Have I been compromised by empire? Have I been granted authority and power and privilege that I use not to heal, not to bring justice, but rather I use to make sure that I keep it to myself?

[14 : 25] But here's the difference between Levi and the religious professionals. Levi leaves his booth. Levi accepts the invitation.

Levi knows he needs the grace of God. The religious professionals, on the other hand, they don't enter into the dinner. They go and tap the disciples and say, why is Jesus doing that thing?

We're not going to go inside. The religious professionals refuse to acknowledge their need for grace. Levi, let's make it clear, is invited to dinner, but there's a condition to that invitation.

It's that he leaves the booth. It's that he leaves behind the power and the authority and the privilege that's been granted to him by the empire that he's been using to harm others.

Levi leaves that behind and rather reappropriates the authority that he has, the privilege that he has to invite in sinners and Jesus. Religious professionals do not.

[15 : 32] And this is what Jesus meant by healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners. Now, if you like me and you grew up in conservative religious spaces, then you might be tired of being called a sinner.

But what Jesus is saying is that grace is most effective for those who know they need it, for those who admit they need it, for those who are willing to admit, I need grace. I'm not done yet.

God's not done with me. As soon as we reach the place where we say, I'm finished, God's done all his work, then we're going to miss out on God's further invitation to be transformed, redeemed, liberated.

Let me give you some modern examples of what this might sound like. COVID deniers, they don't need a vaccine. There's no amount of science or articles or evidence that you can give a COVID denier to get them to take a vaccine because a COVID denier says there's no pandemic in the first place.

I don't need it. But people who are living a pandemic, they might need it. Now, the rhetoric of this is not saying, well, there are some people who don't and there are some people who do.

[16 : 40] No, everybody does. But if you live in the place of, well, there's no such thing as a pandemic anyway, then there's no amount of evidence that you can do to make them believe that they need a vaccine.

White people, whose society tends to deem innocent, don't need to reform the policing or justice system. But black and brown people, who are automatically deemed guilty, do.

American citizens, I don't need immigration reform. The refugees and those who are trying to cross the border do. Christians who know who's in and who's out, who has all the theological answers, who have decided to, that they alone have the right Bible interpretation, everybody else doesn't, who have no doubt deep down in their core, who we need to keep in and who we need to kick out.

But they don't need Jesus. They don't need a Savior. They're done. They're finished. But Jesus followers who are in process, Christians who are still figuring it out, who know that they've been compromised by the forces of the empire and they need to have that flushed out of their system by the Holy Spirit, but Jesus followers who have recognized that they have been hurt and traumatized and abused by systems and forces and people.

They need a Savior. They're willing to admit it. They know that they need grace. They know that they need a God to transform them and change them and to keep that work going.

[18 : 16] The healthy don't need a doctrine, but the sick do, Jesus says. And so Levi hears the invitation of Jesus, who leaves his taxing booth and follows.

And so the challenge and invitation is this. The invitation is the call to follow Jesus is being extended to each of us every day.

The call to follow Jesus, to admit, I may be compromised in some way. My soul may have been traumatized in some way. My, the core of who I am may have been wounded in some way.

And I need grace to be healed. That's the invitation. And the challenge is to wonder, when are we the Levites?

When are we the ones who are standing outside as the religious professionals and saying, we're not going in there. Why is that? Why has Jesus gone in?

[19 : 19] The challenge is to wonder, when have we drawn these lines of purity and impurity, of who can be in and who should stay out? We decide to enforce them.

But Jesus' call continues each and every day. I told a little bit of my testimony in terms of my life, but my spiritual testimony is kind of different in that I, there's only been once or twice where I've heard what I believe to be this audible voice of God.

When I was 12 years old, I was at this youth retreat, and the band was playing, Open the Eyes of My Heart, and a real banger from the 90s. And, at that point in my life, I had grown up in church, I had been baptized Catholic, I had been baptized Lutheran, and I had been part of the whole church thing for a long time, but I was messed up inside.

I had gone through the foster system, been taken away from my mom, I had experienced all this pain and hurt and trauma, and I was just pissed off at God. And then I heard this voice that asked me to kneel down.

And I felt the presence, the Spirit of God wash open. And then I look back at my life from 12 years old, when that happened, forward and see all of the lies that I believed about God, from then forward.

[20 : 47] And it can be easy to say, well, whatever 12-year-old Anthony experienced, must not have been real, right? But I don't think, I don't think God's that impotent.

I don't think God's that weak. I think, I think that God was present there, and then there was a long, winding journey of learning about God, and learning about grace, and also being misinformed and lied to about God, in the years between.

And I believe that within God's economy, nothing is wasted. And that every lie that has been believed, there was an invitation to unbelieve it.

Every thing that I was told about God, that it was untrue, there was an invitation to believe something else more beautiful. And now here I am, and somewhere in my 30s, and thinking that, oh man, I'm so much more mature now, I've arrived, right?

No, of course, when I'm in my 60s, I'm going to look back at 30-something-year-old Anthony, and recognize all of the lies that I believed now. But God's call continues to keep leaving the tax booth, to keep laying down the power, to keep setting aside the privilege, to keep being willing to learn and to admit, that if I were kicking out the same people when I was kicking out when I was 12, and 14, and 16, and 18, then if I keep that going on, 60-something-year-old me is going to kick 34-year-old me out, and I can't live like that, and none of us can live like that, because then we will end up as alone as ever.

[22 : 20] I think that's a decent definition of that. Rather, God invites us to dine with tax collectors and sinners, to leave behind a tax booth every day, as the Apostle Paul writes, to die daily.

And if I can offer that to myself, if Jesus is offering that to me, then maybe I should be offering that to others as well. Thank you. Thank you.