

THE CALL OF LEVI

Mark 2:13-17

Personal history occupies a large place in the Gospels. There is no better way of presenting the essential truths than by showing their effect upon a human life. Perhaps there is no better way of presenting the gospel of Christ than by telling what the Saviour did for one who put his trust in Him.

God's Word has a marvelous way of summarizing a whole life in a sentence. The scriptural biographies of many prominent people are strikingly and extraordinarily brief. Such is the one of Levi, who is better known as Matthew.

I. His Character.

1. He was a publican.

In recording the names of the apostles he called himself a publican. This title was the name given to an employee of low degree, whose duty it was to collect the tribute money. Rome had conquered the Jewish nation and had exercised the privilege of making the conquered contribute to the cost of keeping themselves under the yoke. The business of collecting revenue was let to the highest bidder, who was then allowed to use his own method of collecting the money. It was considered that his duty was done when he paid a certain lump sum into the Roman exchequer, and all above that amount which he received from the populace he was allowed to keep. Such a system naturally provided ample opportunities for graft.

No Jew could become a publican without surrendering every claim to moral integrity. Nobody could hold that position very long without incurring the wrath of former friends and neighbors. He was despised and scorned as a traitor, and hated and feared as an extortioner. The very profession was an exceedingly disreputable one. The fact that a man was a publican barred him from fellowship with respectable and reputable people. He was looked upon as a social outcast and was commonly ranked with the vicious and criminal.

2. He was a lover of money.

He rejoiced when he saw the shine of money. To gain it brought joy to him. What he wanted most of all was money. What he loved most of all was money. What he worked for most of all was money. He was successful in making money.

II. His Call.

For some time the Lord Jesus had been making His home in Capernaum. There He preached, taught and healed. Quite likely Levi had heard Him. If he had not heard Him personally, certainly he had heard of His fame which had spread rapidly.

One morning Christ left the house where He had been staying and started through the town toward the shore of the lake. As He passed through the official quarter, He saw Levi at his post at the receipt of custom. With a keenness far beyond that of microscopic scrutiny, the Lord Jesus looked upon him whom the people despised. He was attracted to him and loved him. He recognized his gifts and coveted them for Himself and for the kingdom of God.

Christ saw in him the one who would become the writer of the Gospel according to Matthew. As one sees the oak in an acorn, the river in the rill, a conflagration in a match, a statue in cold marble and a tree in a sprout, so Christ saw tremendous possibilities in Levi. So, to this despised publican Christ addressed perhaps the first courteous words that he had heard in many days and simply said, "Follow me." Included in this appeal "Follow me" were these thoughts also: "Transfer your business ability to Me and to My work. Put your courage on My side. Put your splendid independence to work for Me. Make your majestic will obedient to My will. Favor Me with your faculties of imagination. Turn over to Me your tenacity. Transfer your vision, your common sense and your discrimination to My side." Yet, Christ did nothing but simply bid Levi to follow Him. He never used any persuasion. He did not offer any inducement or make any promise. But, there was not any hesitation on the part of the publican. His response was instant. He just got up and followed Christ.

Our Lord knew exactly what was in him, all his weaknesses and sins. He also saw infinite possibilities in him, whom others had given up in despair and disgust. This incident shows us that Christ is on the lookout for big, high-talented men and women. He looks for those of disciplined gifts and powers of mighty achievement. Surely Christ will glorify the meager gift, but He certainly will not ignore the larger one. He wants the superb gifts as well as the slender endowments. He covets all of our talents for His cause.

It was not easy for him to answer the call of Christ, regardless of the charm of the Master for men. It meant the loss of wealth, and the abandonment of a lucrative position. It demanded a clean break with all the past. He could not occasionally slip away from Christ and resume his seat at the place where he had collected taxes. So far we know, he had no other means of livelihood. Christ Himself was an itinerant teacher without an income. So far as money was concerned, He had nothing to offer Levi. To follow Christ meant for him to surrender the certainty and comforts of his worldly calling for the uncertainties of the Christian ministry. Nevertheless, without a moment's hesitation, Levi arose, left all, forsook his business and literally followed Christ. In going so he began a new life. He stepped out of his toll-booth of bondage into liberty, peace and joy. For him it was the birth hour of delight, joy and hope. It was the greatest hour that he had ever known.

III. His Conduct.

1. He gave Christ the place of honor in his home.

When Christ suddenly commanded him to follow Him he rose up and kept on following Him. He had come to know Christ and wanted to do something to show that love. He had an elegant home and ample resources to make possible an altogether delightful social occasion, such as a banquet. But he did not have any social standing. Nevertheless, he invited Christ to his home and gave Him the place of honor in it. In many homes today Christ has no place. Since there is never a conversation in them about Christ, He would not be comfortable in them. Would He feel comfortable in your home? Christ accepted the invitation of Matthew because He wanted to encourage and help him.

2. He introduced Christ to his friends.
Having made Matthew a clean, honest, upright, happy, self-respecting, God-honoring and Christ-loving man, he began to tell others about his Saviour and Lord. So real was his sense of obligation, and so deep was his joy, that he sought occasion to make Christ known to his friends. Knowing from experience how unhappy they were, and wanting them to know his Saviour, he invited them to his house to meet Christ. He wanted them to know what had come into his life through the miracle of regeneration. He wanted to introduce them to Him Who could give men power to hate what they once loved and to love what they once hated.

3. He enthroned Christ as the Lord of his life.
Matthew's mind was mastered and his thoughts were different. After that day he lost his love for money in his love for the Master. He learned what a fool he had been in making money at the cost of character, honor and friendship. From Christ he learned that the love of money can dry up the tenderest sentiments, break down the highest moral standards, stifle the noblest impulses and warp the fairest judgments.

Many publicans and sinners, old friends of Matthew, some of whom may have already become followers of Christ, attended the feast to which he had invited them. They all sat at meat with Christ and His disciples. Matthew's heart must have leaped with joy as he witnessed the realization of his dream. Christ sat at the feast with these men, without any semblance of the attitude of patronage or contempt.

Others were present at the feast also, but not as guests. As observers of the scribes and Pharisees who stood outside the house of Matthew, lest their pious selves be contaminated by the unorthodox diners, charged Christ with cultivating a friendship with publicans and sinners, which they considered to be very defiling.

A Pharisee, whether scribe or not, would not enter into the house of a publican, or recline at a table with one of another nation. But, he did not hesitate to stand without, watch and criticize. When the ones who had gathered at the house of Matthew saw Christ reclining at the table with that assembly of publicans and sinners, they made the sneering observation: "How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners?" To them it was conclusive evidence of His lack of discernment and holiness.

Christ elected to answer the question Himself. In justification of His conduct He used two illustrations, one of which was a proverb and the other was the application of it to the matter in hand. He made the significant statement, "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." He thus explained and vindicated His conduct, and defined His earthly mission. A physician goes to a sick room or hospital, not because he likes disease or delights in the companionship of invalids and sufferers, but because he wishes to relieve and to cure; so Christ companied with sinners, not because He countenanced sin or enjoyed the society of the depraved, but because, as a healer of souls, He was willing to go where He was needed most and to work where the ravages of sin were the worst. He came into the world to save sinners.

When Christ said that not the healthy, but the sick, need a physician, He did not imply that these scribes and Pharisees were spiritually healthy; nor that they were righteous; but He did mean to convey that as they assumed health and righteousness in themselves, they were outside the scope of His skill and call. That is still true. We should never think of ourselves so as to exclude our need of Christ. None are so sick as the diseased who think themselves well, and none are such sinners as the sinful who think themselves holy.

What hope Christ's words must have brought to the guests in the house of Levi! The religious leaders had shunned them, despised them, hated them and made them believe that their God cared as little for them, or loved them no more. Here in their midst was One whose pure face and spirit rebuked their sins, but whose presence and words expressed a divine sympathy and declared that sinners were the special objects of His affection and His saving power.