

# **To Seek and To Save the Lost**

## **Jesus Calls Levi**

*Luke 5:27-29*

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# Jesus Calls Levi

## Scripture

Luke wrote his Gospel so that we would know that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. In the early chapters of his Gospel, Luke showed Jesus seeking and saving those with *physical* ailments. In today's narrative, however, Luke showed Jesus taking the initiative to reach a sinner who was a *social* outcast.

Let's read about Jesus calling Levi in Luke 5:27-29:

**<sup>27</sup> After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." <sup>28</sup> And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.**

**<sup>29</sup> And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. (Luke 5:27-29)**

## Introduction

Do you remember when you got together with a whole bunch of friends to play a pick-up game of soccer or basketball or softball or whatever? First, two people stepped forward to be the leader of each team. Then, they would each take turns picking a player from the rest of the group. If you were not one of the leaders, you hoped that you would be one of the first ones picked. But, if you were not one of the first ones picked, you dreaded being one of the last ones chosen.

You remember how it went as most of the players were selected, and you and a handful were the only ones remaining. You knew that you were not very good and that you were not really wanted by either leader. You were probably viewed as a liability. In fact, sometimes the leaders would argue over the

person they did not want on the team!

“If I take him, you have to take her,” one leader would say.

“No!” the other leader would say, “Two of them are not nearly as good as she is.”

And so on it would go until everyone was finally selected.

If you have ever been in that situation, you know how awful it felt not to be wanted.

When Jesus selected people to be on his team, as it were, he did not choose only the best people. In fact, the Gospel writers, and Luke especially, point out how often Jesus chose the ones that no one else wanted. Jesus often chose the outcast, the marginalized, the ostracized, the shunned, the disliked, and the spurned to be on his team.

The account of Jesus calling Levi is a wonderful example of what happens when Jesus chooses a sinner to follow him.

## **Lesson**

The analysis of the call of Levi as set forth in Luke 5:27-29 will teach us how Jesus saves sinners.

The call of Levi shows us the doctrine of:

1. Election (5:27a)
2. Effectual Calling (5:27b-28)
3. Repentance (5:28)
4. Faith (5:28)
5. Worship (5:29a)
6. Evangelism (5:29b)<sup>1</sup>

### **I. The Call of Levi Shows Us the Doctrine of Election (5:27a)**

First, the call of Levi shows us the doctrine of election.

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<sup>1</sup> The outline and material for this message is from Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1, (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 228-231.

Jesus was in the region of Galilee where he was preaching, performing miracles, and forgiving sins. **After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth (5:27a).**

Of all the people in Israel tax collectors were among the most hated. At that time the country of Israel was subject to the Romans. The Romans employed Jews to collect taxes for them, and so tax collectors were regarded as traitors.

The taxation system lent itself to abuse. The Roman custom had been to farm out the collection of taxes. They assessed a district at a certain figure and then sold the right to collect that figure to the highest bidder. As long as the buyer handed over the assessed figure at the end of the year he was entitled to retain whatever else he could extract from the people. And since there were no newspapers, radio or television, and no way of making public announcements that would reach everyone, the ordinary people had no real idea of what they had to pay.

There were two types of taxes. First, there were stated taxes. There was a poll tax, which all men between the age of fourteen and sixty-five, and all women between the age of twelve and sixty-five, had to pay simply for the privilege of existing. There was a ground tax, which consisted of one-tenth of all grain grown, and one-fifth of wine and oil. This could be paid in kind or commuted into money. There was income tax, which was one per cent of a person's income. In these taxes there was not a great deal of room for extortion.

Second, there were all kinds of duties. A tax was payable for using the main roads, the harbors, and the markets. A tax was payable on a cart, on each wheel of it, and on the animal which pulled it. There was a purchase tax on certain articles, and there were import and export duties. A tax collector could order a man to stop on the road, unpack his bundles and charge him what he liked. If the man could not pay, sometimes

the tax collector would offer to lend him money at an exorbitant rate of interest and so get him further into his clutches.

Thieves, murderers, and tax collectors were classed together. A tax collector was barred from the synagogue, and so he was not able to participate in worship.

A Roman writer tells us that he once saw a monument to an honest tax collector. An honest specimen of this hated profession was so rare that he received a monument!<sup>2</sup>

All the Jews in his community hated **Levi**. He was considered a traitor, a thief, and irreligious. One commentator described him as “sinfully rich and socially ostracized.”<sup>3</sup> There he sat, day by day, collecting money from his fellow Jews. They could not stand him.

Yet we should see our sinful selves in **Levi**, because until we come to Christ, we are like him in many ways. We sit at the tax booth of our own sin, trying to get as much for ourselves as we can and not caring what we have to do to other people to get it. We will keep sitting in our sin, going about our own business, until Jesus interrupts us the way he interrupted **Levi**. **And Jesus said to Levi, “Follow me” (5:27b).**

It is likely that Levi knew Jesus. Since Jesus was traveling all around Galilee, he may have passed by Levi’s **tax booth** on many occasions. Perhaps Levi had also heard some of Jesus’ teaching and had been exposed to Jesus’ authority.

What is important to note, however, is that before Levi ever decided to follow Jesus, Jesus decided to make him one of his followers. Here we see the doctrine of election—the sovereign choice of God. As Jesus later said to his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16a). Levi did not go up to Jesus and ask if he could follow Jesus. No, Jesus came to

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 76-78.

<sup>3</sup> David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 109.

Levi and chose him before Levi ever chose to follow Jesus. Levi was chosen by the grace of God. There was nothing meritorious in Levi for Jesus to choose him.

That is true for every follower of Jesus. Every Christian is Exhibit A for the doctrine of election. Jesus sovereignly chooses—on the basis of his grace—every person who comes to God through faith in Jesus. The Bible teaches that every Christian was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4).

## II. The Call of Levi Shows Us the Doctrine of Effectual Calling (5:27b-28)

Second, the call of Levi shows us the doctrine of effectual calling.

While Levi was sitting at the tax booth, Jesus said to him, **“Follow me.” And leaving everything, he rose and followed him** (5:27b-28).

The Bible teaches us that there are two kinds of calling. The first is known as a *general* calling. This call goes out to everyone. Whenever the gospel is proclaimed, everyone hears the message to turn from sin and believe in Jesus Christ. But not everyone responds to that *general* call.

However, there is a second kind of call that is known as a *special* calling. It is also known as an *effectual* calling. When the gospel is proclaimed, God enables his chosen people to respond positively to the gospel. And this is known as *effectual* calling. This is the call that the apostle Paul had in mind when he said those whom God predestined, “he also called” (Romans 8:30).

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines effectual calling as “the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us

to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.”<sup>4</sup> This was the call that Levi received—the call that effectually drew him to embrace Jesus Christ and follow him. Up until this point in his life, said one of the Church Fathers, he was “a man greedy for dirty money, filled with an uncontrollable desire to possess, careless of justice in his eagerness to have what did not belong to him. . . . Yet he was snatched from the workshop of sin itself and saved when there was no hope for him, at the call of Christ the Savior of us all.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus effectually calls every Christian. He says, “**Follow me,**” and by the inward work of God’s Spirit, he enables us to embrace Jesus Christ, and we then choose to follow Jesus.

### **III. The Call of Levi Shows Us the Doctrine of Repentance (5:28)**

Third, the call of Levi shows us the doctrine of repentance.

Jesus called Levi to follow him. Too often we gloss over Levi’s astonishing response: **And leaving everything, he rose and followed him** (5:28). Levi was completely transformed, converted, and repentant.

Repentance is a complete turnaround. It is a complete change of mind. It is a complete redirection. It is making a complete break with the past in order to follow a new way. It is not merely an expression of sorrow for sin and wrongdoing, but it is a commitment to a new way of living.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines repentance unto life as “a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in

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<sup>4</sup> *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, “Commentary on Luke,” quoted in *Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just Jr., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT3 (Downers Grove, IL: 2003), 95.

Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.”<sup>6</sup>

Earlier in chapter 5 Luke described Jesus calling Simon Peter, James, and John to follow him (5:1-11). You may recall that they were partners in a fishing business. Luke said that “they left everything and followed him” (5:11). However, they still had their boats and could have gone back to their fishing business, if things did not work out as well as they might have hoped. In fact, they *did* go back to their fishing business after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection (John 21:1-3).

But for Levi there was no turning back. Once he left everything, he would not have had the funds to buy the rights to collect taxes again in the district. He had more to lose than the other disciples, and he really left it all behind. He left behind the sinful structures that led to his financial gain.

Repentance is a definite break with the old life of sin, no matter what the cost.

Every Christian makes a complete break with the old life of sin in order to follow Jesus.

#### **IV. The Call of Levi Shows Us the Doctrine of Faith (5:28)**

Fourth, the call of Levi shows us the doctrine of faith.

There are two aspects of conversion. One is repentance, and the other is faith. It is impossible to have one without the other.

Luke said of Levi in verse 28, “**And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.**” Luke chose his words very carefully. He used three verbs in this verse. The first two verbs indicate an action in the past, and the third verb indicates a continuous, ongoing action. So, verse 28 could be paraphrased as follows, “Levi left everything, he rose, and was following Jesus.”

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<sup>6</sup> *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).



When Levi got up from the tax booth to follow Jesus, it was for the rest of his life.

That is what it means to have faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is not merely having head knowledge about who Jesus is and what he did. It is a lifelong commitment to follow Jesus.

R. C. Sproul says that following Jesus involved a literalism that is often overlooked. Jesus, as was the case with other rabbis in the ancient world, was what we call a “peripatetic” teacher. He would move about the countryside with a group of students around him who would follow him wherever he went. As Jesus walked down the street or through the community, his disciples would walk along behind him, committing to memory the words he uttered. Thus a disciple was a person who joined himself to the company of a rabbi and was committed to mastering whatever it was that the rabbi could transmit to him by way of teaching. The word, *disciple*, is the word *mathetes*, which means, simply, *learner*. A disciple of Christ is one who studies under Christ, who submits himself to the teaching of Jesus, who listens as the Master speaks, who seeks to understand what the Master is saying, and to emulate the response that the Master requires. The life of a disciple is one of service, study and obedience.<sup>7</sup>

Faith in Jesus involves a wholehearted commitment to Jesus.

## **V. The Call of Levi Shows Us the Doctrine of Worship (5:29a)**

Fifth, the call of Levi shows us the doctrine of worship.

When a person knows for sure that his sin has been forgiven and that he has received the free gift of eternal life, he wants to give Jesus the honor that he deserves. Levi did that by

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<sup>7</sup> R. C. Sproul, *A Walk With God: An Exposition of Luke* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 93.

throwing a party for Jesus. Luke said that **Levi made Jesus a great feast in his house** (5:29a). For years Levi had been cut off from any kind of relationship with God, and now he was feasting with the Son of God! As Bishop J. C. Ryle said,

Nothing can happen to a man which ought to be such an occasion of joy, as his conversion. It is a far more important event than being married, or coming of age, or being made a nobleman, or receiving a great fortune. It is the birth of an immortal soul! It is the rescue of a sinner from hell! It is a passage from life to death! It is being made a king and priest for evermore! It is being provided for, both in time and eternity! It is adoption into the noblest and richest of all families, the family of God!<sup>8</sup>

Every Christian delights in worshiping Jesus, the one who has given him a new life, a new purpose and a new destiny.

## **VI. The Call of Levi Shows Us the Doctrine of Evangelism (5:29b)**

And sixth, the call of Levi shows us the doctrine of evangelism.

Levi's worship of Jesus was not a private matter between him and Jesus. He wanted his friends to know about Jesus. He wanted them to meet him as well. And so Luke told us that **there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them** (5:29b).

Christians have a great desire for others to meet Jesus as well. Having experienced forgiveness and freedom because of Jesus, Christians want others to know how they can also have what Jesus has given them.

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<sup>8</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke, Vol. 1* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 148-49.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the call of Levi as set forth in Luke 5:27-29, we should respond as Levi did, knowing that no one is beyond hope of salvation.

The call of Levi is really the story of every Christian. Jesus saves sinners by first choosing us by his grace (*election*) and calling us to follow him (*effectual calling*). By the work of the Holy Spirit, he enables us to turn away from sin (*repentance*), and believe in him (*saving faith*). As we follow Jesus, we glorify God (*worship*), and tell others about him so that they too can meet Jesus (*evangelism*).

Levi, by the way, is also known as Matthew, which means “gift of God.” He not only followed Jesus but also wrote the Gospel of Matthew, which has influenced untold millions of people in the way of salvation.

Once he was a hated and despised man. But, one day Jesus met him and changed his life. We should never despair that we or anyone else is beyond hope of salvation.

Jesus called Levi to follow him. Levi responded to Jesus’ call. He followed him and became one of the giants of the Christian faith.

What Jesus did for Levi, he can do for every one of us. Let us respond to the call of Jesus and follow him. Amen.



## **Mission Statement**

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## **Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz**

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp)
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**PRAYER:**

Jesus, you called Levi to follow you. He was one of many whom you called and still call to follow you. Enable each one of us to respond to your call today so that we can follow you.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!