

*"After these things..."* What things? Jesus has just healed a paralytic man, and forgiven his sins. The last thing we read is that the crowd was amazed, glorified God, was filled with fear, and said, "We have seen strange things today!" Well, the strangeness wasn't about to end, because the very next things we read about Jesus are also very strange things. He made a call, He received a complaint, and he justified His company. That's what I'll be referring to today: the call, the complaint, and the company.

First, the call. *"He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi..."* also called Matthew. A tax collector. His job was to collect taxes from the Jews, and hand them over to the Romans. This made him, by default, and enemy of the Jews. And here comes Jesus, the King of Jews. His people are the very ones that Levi is taking money from, and giving it to their oppressors. They were immediately considered traitors, the scum of society, aiding in the oppression of their fellow people. Not only was he a tax collector, but at the moment, he was *"sitting at the tax office."* These offices, or "booths", as some translations render it, were in very public places. They were easily seen, so they could be easily accessible. If you're a Roman and you want to build a tax office, you're going to make it as visible as possible. Now if Jesus really wanted Levi despite his occupation, He could have at least waited till he was done with his shift. He could have called him secretly. He didn't need to bring attention to the fact that He was going to have a tax collector for a disciple. Imagine a pastor going into a bar in the middle of the night, picking out someone in group of nasty-looking people, and saying, "I want *you* to serve on the church board." They might be a very nice person, perfectly qualified for the position. But the optics are just weird. Jesus calls him while he's sitting at the tax office, which tells us an important truth: Jesus is never ashamed of the decisions He makes. He is never ashamed of the people He calls. Even when we don't have it all together, He wants people to know that we follow Him; it means that they have the same opportunity. Jesus doesn't look at our situation to determine whether to call us. So what does He look at then?

Levi wasn't the only tax collector at this office, and he certainly wasn't the only one in Israel. In fact, some versions render this clause as "sitting among the tax collectors". Why was Levi called? I've often heard that the variance and humbleness of the disciples' previous callings show that anyone can follow Jesus. While that may be true in a sense, we'll read in a few chapters about some people who came to Jesus and said, "Lord I will follow you!" And then Jesus said, "Really?" And they thought about it, and said, "...No." (I'm paraphrasing). So what does it take then? May I suggest that all it takes is a willing heart of obedience? And not just to this call. We can't live our lives in a carnal way, and suddenly flip on an obedient switch when He calls us into ministry. It doesn't work that way. Think about the call of God through the ages. He called Noah because he was a blameless and upright man. And He was met with a simple obedience. Then He called Moses, and was met with a very reluctant obedience. But a reluctant obedience is better than none, just like in Jesus' parable about the two sons, one who said he wouldn't and did, while the other said he would and didn't. God is willing to fight for our obedience. He's willing to reason with us for a time. But there needs to be at least a little bit of faith. A little bit of desire. How do we know Moses had this? Because forty years earlier, he killed an Egyptian taskmaster while he was essentially trying to deliver Israel one at a time. Jonah is another one who was extremely reluctant. He was called as a prophet, and seemed to be an obedient one, until God called him to Nineveh, and he ran the other way. But God knew there was too much at stake. One hundred twenty thousand people (and much livestock) were depending on Jonah's obedience, so once again, God was ready to fight for it. It's unfortunate that Jonah didn't enjoy the fruit of his obedience, but all through the story we see evidence of the connection between God's heart and Jonah's. He knew exactly what was causing the storm, and how to stop it. He knew what to pray in the belly of the fish. And even at the end, when he was angry

with God, it was because, “I know You are a gracious and merciful God.” What was happening? God knew that deep down, there was a dormant heart of obedience that needed to be stirred.

On the flip side, when someone told Jesus, “I will follow You wherever You go,” Jesus ignored the outward show of enthusiasm, looked straight at the man’s heart, and told him, “Look, you seem excited, but when we’re out there sleeping under the stars with rocks for pillows, you’re not going to last.” He responded to the heart, not to the words or the tone. The other two men said, “I’ll follow You, but first let me bury my father.” Or, “but first let me bid farewell to those in my house.” Jesus looked straight at their hearts, and said, “Your excuses sound okay on the outside, but there’s a deep issue here. You’re treating this decision like a dilemma. ‘Should I follow Jesus, or fulfill my obligation to my family?’ I’ll never ask you to abandon your familial obligations. But even if you truly were in that situation [like some find themselves in today], where your family will not have you if you follow Me, you should *still* choose Me first.” So it’s clear on both ends of the spectrum that God doesn’t look at our situation or appearance when He calls us. He only seeks a simple heart of obedience, and that’s what Levi had.

*“He left all, rose up, and followed Him.”* We don’t know how Levi got into this situation. He may have been down on his luck, in desperate need of an income, when this opportunity came up. He may have been coerced into this job. He may have really been a traitor, who has since rethought his decisions. We don’t know, but it really doesn’t matter. What matters is how he behaves in his situation. Was it a sin for him to collect taxes for the Roman empire? Jesus Himself said to *“render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”* As long as our station in life isn’t one of sin, it doesn’t matter how society perceives it. We always have the opportunity, and really the responsibility, to conduct ourselves with integrity. What matters is what God perceives. That’s why I believe Levi was noticed by Jesus, when no one else in that society would have ever considered him.

Guess who else Jesus called. A man named Simon the zealot. A zealot was a member of sect whose goal was a world Jewish theocracy. Obviously, they weren’t too thrilled about being under Roman rule. I don’t know if he was there at this point, or if he joined later, but they were certainly both disciples for a long time. It must have been an interesting dynamic to say the least. But if Jesus has followers everywhere, and we want to be called and used by Him, then we need to be okay with anyone He puts us with. It’s funny the way He sets these things up. If there’s a particular people group that we don’t like for some reason, and we want God to use us, guess who we’re going to be dealing with next. With David, it was the Philistines. With Naaman, it was his ordeal with Elisha and the Jordan river. With Jonah, it was the Ninevites. With Levi and Simon, it was each other. With Peter, it was the gentiles. With all of His disciples, it was the Samaritans. With Ananias, it was Saul; and after that, it was with the rest of the disciples who were afraid of Saul, until Barnabas finally broke the ice. There’s no room for exclusion on our part when God’s kingdom includes all kinds of people.

Speaking of people we deal with, Jesus has a crucial decision to make now. One job I would have hated to have is Jesus’ campaign manager, or His PR guy. I don’t think He would ever listen to me. He’s just made a very public, very unpopular decision to add a tax collector to His inner circle. Now He needs to gain the people’s trust again. He needs to rebuild His reputation. He should go to the synagogue and rub elbows with the Pharisees. Or go to the courts and expound the law with the Scribes. He’s good at that sort of thing. He needs to tout His wisdom so that maybe people can understand that Levi was an exception, and that Jesus knew what He was doing when He called. So naturally, His next move is to go to a feast in Levi’s house, and eat with *“a great number of tax collectors and others.”*

And this leads us to the complaint. The *“scribes and Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, ‘Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’”* I actually have a very similar question for Levi. He was a tax collector who got a call from a prestigious Rabbi to be His follower. And as if that wasn’t a big enough break, now He’s coming to his house. What do we do when someone important comes to our house? What do we do even when someone unimportant comes to our house? We clean up! We put on our best face. We get out the good silverware. We present anything we have that looks good. We don’t invite our unseemly coworkers and friends from the club to come and greet this person. Yet that’s exactly what Levi did. Somehow he was comfortable bringing all these tax collectors and sinners into his house, in front of Jesus Himself. It makes me wonder if we do the same. If we’ve responded to His call, what have we done with those around us who haven’t yet? Are we afraid or ashamed of being associated with them? Or do we bring them before Jesus in whatever capacity we can? Do we share the gospel? Do we bring them to church? Maybe we don’t even get a chance to interact with them anymore. Do we pray for them? This is why we pray for the lost. We pray for the backslidden. We lift them up in prayer and bring them before Christ that way. When Levi was called, rather than being puffed up by it and thinking there must be something special about him, he was instead humbled by it, and desiring that what Jesus did for him, He would do for all his friends. If nobody but Jesus could see that Levi would obey His call, then who can see whether anyone else would? Even if they don’t respond right away, they’re better off around Jesus than they would be anywhere else.

This complaint was directed at His disciples. But what was their response? What was Joseph’s response when he was accused of evil? What was Moses’ response when Aaron and Miriam spoke ill of him? What was the response of the three young Hebrew men when Nebuchadnezzar threatened them? What was Mary’s response when she was berated for anointing Jesus’ feet with costly oil? The only response in any of these examples was when the three young men said, “Oh king, we don’t need to respond.” But what happened in each case? God took up their cause and spoke for them. When someone complains against us, we must remember that we have an Advocate Who justifies us. We don’t need to defend ourselves against complaints of this kind. All our defense is found in Him, and in His word.

The same thing happens in this case. The complaint comes against the disciples (including Levi), but the response comes from Jesus: *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”* This is what forms the community of believers. This is our community. Nobody goes to a hospital and expects to see it full of healthy people. Yet for some reason there’s a common misconception that a church is supposed to be full of good people. Apparently it’s not a new idea, because these scribes and Pharisees also seemed to think that Rabbis, and other religious authorities, had no business associating with sinners, as if they were on a higher plane. It’s what prompted Jesus to tell the parable of the Pharisee who prayed with himself, and the tax collector who went away justified. He first gives an example that makes their question sound ridiculous. Would they have asked a physician why he associates with sick people? They wouldn’t, because they understand the purpose of a physician. They understand that their responsibility is to use their knowledge and experience to restore people to health, or at least tell them how to be restored. What they didn’t understand was the purpose of a religious authority, or a person who’s mature in the faith. Their thought process was a selfish one. Having achieved their status, their goal was to advance it however they could, rather than advancing the faith of those who had little.

We can all grow much stronger by growing together than by growing apart. This is why we’re constantly warned against isolation, and encouraged into fellowship, throughout the Bible. Whatever desire Levi

had for the things of God before, I doubt they were fostered in that tax office as much as they would be now, in the company of Jesus and the other disciples. Each of them had a role in the growth of the church. Not only does each one have their own gifts and talents, but their own experiences as well. No one knows it all. We don't know much about Levi after this, but we do know that he wrote the book of Matthew. He presented Jesus as the King of kings, and he used a lot of Old Testament references to do it. Where did he get this unique perspective from? He was able to draw from his connection with both the Roman empire and the Jewish nation. Luke, as a physician, was able to draw from his experience with mortality and human frailty to present Jesus as the Son of Man. What about us? We heard last week about the man who was paralyzed. I love the way the narrative is presented. Jesus says, *"arise, take up your bed, and go to your house."* And then the narrative says that the man *"rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God."* The thing that was his bed became just something that he had been lying on. Matthew's embarrassing old job became a point of reference in his writing. We sometimes think of our gifts as progress, and our trials as setbacks. Like we've somehow lost time because of a tough situation that's happened to us (not one that we did to ourselves). It's only a waste if we don't acknowledge and embrace the potential opportunities these trials present. Even if we don't understand them in the moment, remain open to it. No individual can understand everything, but if we combine all our talents, all our experiences, all the wisdom that God has imparted to us individually through various means, we become a more complete body of Christ.