

• *Matthew, formerly Levi – one of the great conversion stories of the Bible*

Luke is still following Mark's Gospel. In our present passage Levi (also called Matthew) is summoned to be converted and to join Jesus' ministry-team ¹, and a conversation takes place about fasting and about 'new wine and new wineskins' ². The conversion of Levi is one of the great conversion-stories of the Bible. He was later given the name 'Matthew' (which means 'gift of Yahweh') and was either the author of our Gospel of Matthew or perhaps the author of an earlier version of it.

¹ 5:27–32; see Mark 2:13–17

² 5:33–39; see Mark 2:18–22

Levi's sin was great

• *A much hated corrupt collaborator*

Levi's sin was great. The tax collectors were a much-hated group of people. They worked for the Roman colonial government and were necessarily intensely disloyal to Israel. They were collaborators with the pagan rulers. They squeezed as much money out of the people as they could. The Romans worked out how much tax they wanted from a particular area and then sold the job of collecting it to the highest buyer. Anything more that the tax collector could get from the people was his to keep. Viciousness and corruption were part of the job.

A classic example of how suddenly a man may be converted

• *Wickedness to ministry*

Levi is a classic example of how suddenly a man may be converted. Jesus leaves the house ¹. As he is walking along the road he sees Levi at the tax collecting-point. He is actually in the midst of his sin ². In one step Jesus calls him to salvation, to discipleship, and to ministry alongside Himself ³. Levi moves from wickedness to ministry in one move. There was no preparation, no preliminary attendance of the synagogue. Actually tax collectors were not allowed in synagogues. The saving grace of God needs no preparation. Our first coming to salvation is like the creation of the world. In the midst of darkness, God says 'Let there be light'.

¹ mentioned in 5:19

² 5:27
³ 5:27

A classic example of how salvation turns our life around

• *Grace at work – a miracle in seconds*

Levi is a classic example of how salvation turns our life around. When Levi responds to Jesus there is immediately a great change in his life. He abandons his job as a tax-collector ¹. Immediately he has a great concern to share with everyone what has happened. He is a rich man – as the tax collectors always were. So he uses his wealth to arrange a public banquet. He invites everyone. Other tax collectors are there ². Pharisees are there plus the scribes who are associated with them.

¹ 5:28

² 5:29

The grace of God offends religious people

• *Religion does not like grace!*

The grace of God offends religious people. There is a difference between faith and what I like to call 'religiosity'. One of the differences is this: religion does not like grace! These Pharisees get upset when they see Jesus being so gracious to men and women like Levi. 'How can someone be saved so quickly?' they say to themselves. 'Why does Jesus associate with such wicked people? Surely they ought to repent first and there ought to be a long period when they clean up their lives before we should associate with such people!' So they rebuke Jesus: 'Why are you eating and drinking with tax collectors and such sinful people?' ¹.

¹ 5:30

• *Doctors help the sick – Jesus saves sinners!*

Jesus is ready with an answer ¹. He has come for such people. Doctors help the sick! A Saviour saves sinners! God does not work by legalism; He works by grace.

¹ 5:31-32

The grace of God creates new ways among the people of God

- A question about fasting answered
- A new work of God needs to express itself in new ways
- Jesus does what the situation requires right now!
- God is always moving us on!
- We go where the grace of God is leading us today!

The grace of God creates new ways among the people of God. The next story ^{☞1} is connected with the amazing grace of God that has just been seen in the life of Levi. It begins with a question about fasting. Jesus' critics refer to three 'denominations'. There are the disciples of John the Baptist; there are the Pharisees; and there are the disciples of Jesus ^{☞2}. They are three distinct groups. The two older groups have regular times of fasting, but not Jesus' disciples! Why does Jesus not follow the ways of the other well-known religious movements in Israel?

Jesus gives two answers. First: it is not an appropriate time for fasting ^{☞1}. Second: new cloth which has not yet shrunk cannot be used to patch old clothes ^{☞2}. New wine needs new wineskins ^{☞3}.

The point of these little parables is that a new work of God needs to express itself in new ways. The amazing grace of God seen in the life of Levi and others is the 'new wine' of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ is ever fresh. God does not change; He is always a God of grace and mercy even to the worst sinner. But the story of the Church of God always has new developments. Jesus is not following the Pharisees. He is not following the disciples of John the Baptist (who it may be noticed have stayed a bit traditional and have kept their own denomination distinct from Jesus' disciples). He is acting directly under God and is doing what the situation requires right now!

Pharisees do not like grace and they do not like newness. But God is always moving us on. The grace of God can act very suddenly. Jesus is simply walking along the roadside when He feels led by the Holy Spirit to summon Levi to Himself. His group of disciples are a new movement in the kingdom of God. They are not simply following the old ways of the Pharisees. They are not even following Jesus' relative and friend, John the Baptist. New wine requires new wineskins. God is likely to do something new at any moment. We are not under traditions exactly (although they spring up very easily); we are under the direct leading of God. We do not have to follow other peoples' rules about fasting. We go where the grace of God is leading us today!

☞1 5:33-39

☞2 5:33

☞1 5:34-35

☞2 5:36

☞3 5:36-39

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