**Jesus met a Tax Collector**

Matt 9:9-13 Mark 2:13-17 Luke 5:27-32 #45

There was a Jewish tax-collector named Levi. He was hated by almost everybody, not because he was a Jew, but because he worked for their oppressors, the Romans. The taxes he collected were from his own people and given to their enemy.

Everywhere Jews moved so too did Roman soldiers with their swords and spears – reminding everyone they are in charge. The Jews are the people of God. Their king is God. So why submit to some pagan emperor who thinks he is a god. But they had no choice. Romans punished. They were cruel. Serious offenders were killed; some by

the dreaded crucifixion. They nailed them alive to wooden crosses and hung their corpses outside the city, as brutal warnings to any would-be rebel.

Levi needed a job. The money was good. Protection was built into the contract in the form of two armed Roman soldiers. There he sat each day at his tax collector’s table. Plenty of clients. Each of them brought their hard-earned cash to him, some seething with anger. He was not the problem, but he became a target for verbal abuse. “Sinner”, “Traitor”, “Outcast”, “Cheat”. No protection from name calling. The soldiers didn’t care any more about him than about any other Jew. They were paid to extract cash.

Levi ran out of friends, except for other tax collectors and social rejects. They hurt, badly. But once in that trade there was no way out. Their reputation was all bad. And when you consider that Jews measure each other by how well they keep the commandments of God then tax collectors were rated way down the scale along with other common sinners. Levi was trapped. Even if he wanted out, he was locked into a cage of everybody’s hatred.

One day he was sitting at his tax-collector’s table and he saw a crowd gathering. As they came closer he recognized some of his clients. Peter and John and Philip, all fishermen. They paid their tax along with abuse. Others had all vented hate for the Romans. Fear rose in him. Could they be a mob? The start of a revolt? His soldiers snap to attention. There could be violence.

Then he saw the reason for this crowd. Jesus from Nazareth. He was a popular miracle worker. Some hope He will free them all from the Romans. Where would that leave Levi? Alone. Religious leaders are also in the crowd. These upper-class gentlemen are his worst critics. They put themselves at the top of the social order so no way they will come near a tax collector. He should be safe for now.

Then Jesus stopped and started walking straight towards Levi. What’s happening? He did what any tax-collector would do. Check his files - under “J”. No, Jesus didn’t owe any tax. So why is He approaching me? He has many men with Him looking very unhappy and murmuring bad attitudes about him and his employers. He was used to facing these one at a time, but this is scary. But their views don’t seem to be shared by their front man, Jesus. He is smiling and looking straight at Levi, who was hanging onto his table and remembering Jesus’ reputation for over-turning tables like his, coins and all. Everyone else glares with fists clenched. Would he be their first victim in a revolt? A signal from Jesus and he was a carcass for the vultures. They keep their distance like he was a bad smell.

Jesus makes a move – forward – still smiling - and He greets Levi - with respect. Levi is confused. This is either a bad joke or this Jesus is committing social suicide. No way anyone who has gained as many fans as Jesus would waste them all on the likes of him. He dares to think that Jesus is for real. He doesn’t have a category for this treatment. Long buried emotions begin to well up inside. Every other Jew either avoided him or came to him under threat. This Jesus, also a full-blooded Jew, under no coercion whatever, in full public scrutiny, comes right up to him and stands there with a big friendly smile on His face. What does He want with me? What He said next broke Levi right open. Like a heavy solid vault deep in his gut just burst open and out flooded a river of warm feelings.

Jesusbends over him and says, **“Follow Me**”. His heart takes over. He stands straight up. He meets His gaze. Nothing else matters. He was being accepted, loved by this respected man, Jesus. He steps past his booth, away from the money, his livelihood, past the guards, his protection, his security, and he does exactly as he is told. He follows in step. The crowd is still murmuring, but all he hears resounding in his heart are those two words, “Follow Me”. And that is exactly what he does.

“Where are we going”? He dares to ask.

“To your place”, Jesus replied.

“But there are only tax collectors and sinners there and you are….”.

“Don’t care”.

“Can’t we leave it until tonight when everyone else has gone home?”

“No”.

“What do you want to do at my place”?

“Have a party”.

“Who with”?

“All your friends”

“Oh”!

He arrived home and stepped inside with Jesus, to the astonishment of his family. He announces, “We are going to have a party. Send out the invites”. Now Levi had a big house. Tax collecting paid well. But no way he can fit in the big crowd that gathered outside. However that was not going to be a problem. Nobody who thought they were somebody would dare step inside his house. Word went out and soon his house was filled up with fellow tax collectors and other sinners and social rejects. And right in the middle of them reclined Jesus. Cracking jokes, taking a few drinks, laughing, eating, and generally hanging out with Levi’s friends.

Meanwhile, outside, an argument broke out between some Pharisees and other religious leaders, verses Jesus’ disciples. They had also left everything to follow Jesus. But being friends with tax-collector traitors was not in their contract. Or was it?

“**Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”** The Pharisees ask.

The disciples are stuck for words; “We don’t, or ah we do because Jesus does. No, we don’t, because you only eat and drink with your friends and these fellows are not our friends. At least they didn’t used to be. In fact, we hate them”.

The disciples look inside. Jesus has His arm on me. Another Pharisee, looking at Jesus, wants to know. **“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”** The disciples don’t have a clue.

Jesus butts in. **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick”.**

That answered the Pharisee’s question, and it also answered Levi’s question about why He came.

Sick. That’s it. He was sick. Sick with condemnation; sick with guilt; sick with hatred; sick with loneliness; sick with rejection. He was wounded, in pain, a reject in his own society. There they all are glaring in through his shutters with their judgements like he was some animal in a cage. But reclining between them and him is Jesus. It is like He is absorbing all their hate into Himself and radiating back out to him love – a love deeper than his guilt and pain; a love that heals his wounds deep inside.

Jesus is here as doctor of his bleeding heart.

These are sacred moments not to be interrupted by another Pharisee glaring his judgements from the doorway. Jesus speaks directly to him.

**“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice’**”. This is a quote from their own scriptures. Not able to bear the sight of mercy being shown to a sinner they back off, to their synagogue, to do their cleansing rituals. This day they had become polluted by coming right to the doorstep of a sinner. They performed their sacrifices, but no mercy was found in their hearts.

Late evening outside, in the dark, the last of the crowd were still arguing.

But inside, in the light, with Jesus, tears are flowing. Levis’ friends have all decided to turn their lives around, to stop cheating and lying and taking bribes, and to ask forgiveness from their wives. Hearts are softening. The presence and words of Jesus are cleansing guilt**.** Jesus speaks up. **“I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”** He says.

Jesus disciples crept inside and sat quietly in the corner. They couldn’t answer the Pharisees’ questions. Late into the night Jesus got up. He took Levi’s hand and led him to Peter and Philip.

“Peter, stand up and embrace your new brother. He has been made clean”. He said.

Peter stood. Tears filled his eyes. “Lord I am a sinner. I have hated Levi. I am guilty. Please forgive me”.

Then Peter held out his arms and embraced Levi. Tears wash away deep prejudice and hatred. Once a reject now a brother.

That is how Levi become a member of that small band of brothers. Each one of them cleansed, released, healed, and forgiven by their new Master, Jesus.

# **Jesus met a Tax Collector** “Get real” questions

1.

1.What was Levi’s ethnic group?

2. What was Levi’s job?

3. Who were his employers?

4. Where was he on the social scale?

5. What attitude did most people have towards them?

6. What label did religious leaders give to men of his profession?

7. In what profession did Jesus come to Levi’s house?

8. Into what relationship did Jesus invite himself?

9. What attitude does God desire to have towards sinners?

10. What part of Levi and friends did Jesus heal?

doctor bottom friend hatred hearts

Jew mercy Romans sinners tax-collector

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|  | **Questions of the story** | **Personal questions** |
| 2. | Where was Levi on the social scale? | Where are you on the social scale? |
| 3. | What were the attitudes of most public towards Levi? | What attitudes have you experienced towards you? |
| 4. | How was Levi trapped? | How do you feel trapped? |
| 5. | How was he hurting? | How are you hurting? |
| 6. | What surprising attitude did Jesus have towards Levi? | What attitude does Jesus have towards you? |
| 7. | Where and with whom did Jesus meet with Levi? | Where will Jesus meet with you? |
| 8. | What did mercy look like to Levi? | What will mercy look like for you? |
| 9. | How did Levi and his friends respond to Jesus? | How will you respond to Jesus? |
| 10. | What did Jesus do for Levi? | What do you believe Jesus will do for you? |