

Levi- Luke 5:27-32

- One of the interesting facts of human behaviour is that we don't like change.
- We like to establish ourselves in certain patterns,
- And then remain comfortably in them.
- You may or may not have noticed that nearly everyone in church,
- Sits in roughly the same seat week after week.
- And it's not only in church.
- I've been on numerous boards and councils,
- And I'd say that almost everyone without exception sits in the exact same location at every meeting.

-We're like penguins returning to our favourite nesting sites.

- And yet change is a reality of life.
- We may not like change,
- We may resist change,
- But even if we think we're not changing,
- Change is taking place around us and therefore we are being changed.
- Whether willingly or unwillingly,
- Consciously or unconsciously we're changing.

- Change impacts us.
- The real question we need to ask ourselves however is not,
- Am I being changed?
- But who or what is changing me?
- As followers of Jesus,
- Our desire ought to be that God is working the change,
- That through his Spirit,
- God is bringing changes to our lives and the lives of those around us.
- That rather than being influenced, moulded and shaped by the world around us,
- By the movies we watch,
- By the books we read,
- By the people we meet,

- We'd be influenced, moulded and shaped by God our loving Creator and Lord.
 - That we'd be putting our relationship with God first,
 - And by being obedient to his Word,
 - Everything else would flow out from that.
 - Can you see how that would bring great changes in your life?
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- Over the next four weeks I want us to look at four people who were changed,
 - By coming in contact with Jesus.
 - Because if we're to change to be the people God created us to be,
 - It'll only be Jesus who brings those changes about.
 - We'll be looking at four people and seeing how their contact with Jesus,
 - Dragged them out of their comfort zones and changed their lives.
- Nicodemus was a religious leader who feared what others would say.
 - But his beliefs were turned on their head.
- A woman at a well was a victim of relationships,
 - Who nonetheless avoided her responsibility,
 - But she leaves Jesus changed and faces her fears.
- Peter proclaimed high ideals of loyalty but was a flaky performer,
 - After three years with Jesus though he lives up to his nickname the 'little rock'.
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- And today we start with Levi or Matthew as he was also known.
 - Levi had a lucrative job as a tax collector.
 - Just down the road from where we once lived there was a tax collector.
 - I baptised one of his kids.
 - I even rang him once to get some tax advice.
 - You didn't do that with a tax-collector in Jesus' day.
 - They had reputations that we'd reserve for Mafia standover men.
 - Now I don't think too many of us enjoy paying taxes,
 - But at least we can say all the money goes to our government,
 - And then they distribute it for the good of the whole country.
 - Tax collectors in Jesus' day collected for a foreign government.

-And the only thing the Roman rulers were interested in was getting what they were owed.

-They didn't care how it was gained,

-Just so long as they got what they wanted.

-The tax collectors were privateers who collected the taxes and took a slice for themselves.

-In Jewish society they were doubly hated.

-One because they collected tax for the invaders,

-And two because they took an extortionate amount for themselves.

-Any casual observer would have understood perfectly the Pharisees challenge of Jesus;

“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?”

Luke 5:30

-Everyone knew what low life the tax collectors and their like were.

-Now I'm sure most of us also know of people who are just like the Pharisees,

-Those people who have a very high moral and ethical standard which they keep,

-And expect everyone else to observe.

-In fact most of us quite comfortably slip into the positive characteristic of the Pharisee.

-Most of us are pretty nice, law abiding citizens.

-We don't hang round with riff raff or criminals.

-We're not traitors to our nation or exploiters of our countrymen.

-But look what Jesus says about those type of people;

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³² I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Luke 5:31-32

-If you feel everything is sweetness and light in your life then Jesus has nothing for you.

-So maybe I should ask,

-In what ways are you not like the Pharisee but like Levi?

- In what ways can you identify with the man Levi?
- Can you imagine what his life might have been like?
- What tensions he had to live with working for the Romans,
- Yet being a Jew?
- If we scratched below the surface of this story and looked into the heart of Levi,
- What would we see?
- Would it be the hardened, cynical traitor that the people imagined?

- Or was he something else again.
- Was he just an ordinary bloke caught up by the decisions he'd made at an earlier stage in his career?
- Did he have pangs of conscience?
- Did the slights and barbs sting more than he was willing to let on?
- The Pharisee in us is quick to look for the blackened heart of the delinquent,
- Rather than the bruised heart of the sinner,
- A heart that Jesus came to change.
- And as Levi sat by that dusty Palestinian road,
- He probably thought Jesus was just another taxpayer,
- Just another face on the street who would stop with resentment,
- And pay their due with contempt.
- But Levi comes face to face with Jesus,
- The merciful Son of God.
- And as he sat there in his tax booth,
- Jesus utters the words that will radically change his life;

“Follow me,” Luke 5:27

- Again imagine what's going through Levi's mind at that moment.
- It was a pretty direct but simple command 'follow me.'
- What is it that makes Levi get up, leave everything and follow Jesus?
- Maybe he was sick of the job,
- Maybe he was sick of the jibes,
- The only thing we can be one hundred percent sure of was,

- That he followed because he was invited.
- His life was changed because Jesus asked him to change.
- He got up because Jesus asked him to,
- He left everything because Jesus asked him to,
- He followed because Jesus asked him to.

- Can I ask you to reflect back over your life with Jesus,
- And ponder the things that Jesus has asked you to do?
- As I read this story of Levi,
- What strikes me is the air of freedom and release that Levi experiences.
- Maybe it's a subtle thing,
- But there's no hint of Levi asking Jesus if he could have some time to think about it,
- No suggestion Levi conferred with the other tax collectors to see if this was a good idea or not,
- He just gets up and walks away from his table.

- But that's not all,
- Because Levi then throws a massive banquet for Jesus at his home.
- What leaps to my mind is the picture of a person who has had enough,
- Who's floundering in the sea of life,
- And who's tossed a lifeline and hauled to safety.
- Before their meeting Levi's life was stretching out before him,
- Bleak, dreary and hopeless.
- But as Jesus and his lives cross a whole new future arises,
- And Levi, with incredible thankfulness,
- Snatches hold of that future and throws a party to celebrate.

- And this is no quiet get together to farewell everybody,
- This is a full blown, no expenses spared, knees-up,
- To revel in a new beginning and to invite others to join in.
- I reckon Levi is so thankful to Jesus for the fresh start he's offering him,
- That he invites all his friends from work,

- All his colleagues,
- His family,
- Everyone he has contact with to share it.
- Just imagine who'd turn up to a tax collector's party.
- There would have been other tax collectors and their families,
- There probably would have been other less desirable characters too,
- Roman soldiers and government officials.
- And this huge banquet just takes off in honour of Jesus.

- Levi is completely changed.
- At the invitation of Jesus he's no longer a tax collector.
- Has that been your experience of your relationship with Jesus?
- Has he turned your life around?
- Or has he invited you to follow but your still weighing it all up?
- Maybe you're not quite as bold or desperate as Levi but you're still tossing it around.
- That's okay.
- But let's not forget the other characters who are in this picture.

- In the face of excitement, joy and an expressed passion,
- There lurks another group who are not impressed.
- Look down there at v.30.
- It's bad enough that the Pharisees and teachers of the law find fault and criticize,
- Their problem is with Jesus,
- But they're so locked into their own narrow and sad little lives,
- That they dodge confronting Jesus with their petty whingeing,
- And instead complain to his disciples.
- They won't allow themselves to come within changing distance of Jesus.
- They accuse the disciples,
 - “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?”
- But Jesus won't let them get away with that.
- They may have wanted to avoid their lives intersecting with his,
- But Jesus confronts them with a veiled challenge to examine their own lives,

-And see where they really are;

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³² I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Luke 5:31-32

-Is it just these tax collectors and sinners who are the sick in need of a doctor?

-Or is the self-righteousness of the Pharisees just that,

-A self-righteousness which blinds them to the needs that Levi has recognised in his own soul?

-If the Pharisees had been offended by Levi's professional life,

-They should have joined in the celebrations, shouldn't they?

-Because here was a man who was letting go of his past,

-Who was convicted of its failure to deliver all it promised.

-Here was a sinner who repented.

-Shouldn't that have brought joy to the heart of the Pharisee?

-Wasn't that what they wanted people to do?

-Like Jesus the Pharisees wanted people to change.

-But they wanted people to change and be like them.

-But to be like them was not a change for the better.

-If people were influenced by the hypocrisy of the Pharisees,

-If people converted to the legalism of the teachers of the Law,

-Then they would've found themselves in a position before God as serious as the one Levi left behind.

-We have in this story an illustration of the fact,

-That we're always faced by influencers for change.

-There are two influencers present here,

-Jesus and the Pharisees.

-There are two influences coming to bear,

-God and man.

-In Jesus,

-God was offering Levi a new life,

- A change that would lead to eternity.
- In the Pharisees we see the pressure of humanity trying to set up an alternative way to God,
- A way that's manufactured by us and focuses on what we can do for God.
- But there's another worldly influence besides the Pharisees,
- A reverse view that would try and squeeze God out.

- Do you think all of Levi's tax collecting friends and colleagues,
- Would've been pleased with his decision to follow Jesus?
- I'm sure there were probably some saying,
- 'You're mad Levi,
- 'Look at everything you're giving up.
- 'You've worked so hard to get where you are today.
- 'Why toss it away for an uncertain future?'
- The world was stepping in and trying to squeeze Levi,
- Between the false spirituality of the Pharisees,
- And the deceiving materialism of his colleagues.
- But it's God that wins out.
- Levi bows to the changes that God brings to his life.
- And in following God's call,
- In following the invitation of Jesus,
- Levi is demonstrating the glory of God.
- In giving up everything and following Jesus,
- Levi is showing the power of God to bring real positive change into a person's life,
- The power of God to break the shackles that hold us to a petty existence,
- And give us a better future as we follow after Christ.

- Levi's story is a reminder to all of us that change will happen,
- Change is always happening,
- But we need to be aware of who is doing the changing.
- Jesus holds out the same invitation to us as he did to Levi.
- It's an invitation he offers each and every moment of our life.

- At each and every decision point in our life,
- Jesus says 'Follow me.'
- And when we follow him,
- We'll open ourselves up to the changes that God has planned for our lives.
- Many of these changes will bring disruption, disturbance and danger.
- Levi's change brought pressure to bear on him and his friends,
- But with these challenges,
- Will also come the experience of the blessings God pours upon those he invites into his family.
- As we follow the invitation of Jesus we'll see our hearts and lives changed,
- And all we need do is be like Levi and follow when Jesus calls.