

*Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / February 16, 2020 / Pastor Jeff Harrison*  
Following Where Jesus Leads Series

**Invitation to Introduction** (Mark 2:13-17)

**Special announcement**

Some months ago, our church family's members voted to expand who could serve as a deacon, and also to expand the deacon role to include things like hospitality and visitation.

So now I have the pleasure of announcing our first deaconess candidates, who come from our Spanish and English speaking ministries. They are Linda Alexander, Paola O'Hare, and Marta Viveros. Thank you ladies for your servant's hearts!

We'll have a brief business meeting in here on Sunday, March 15<sup>th</sup> after second service, where the members will vote on these candidates. If you have any questions or concerns about any candidate, please speak with an Elder well before the meeting. It's exciting to see God building His church through Spanish and English-speakers serving together!

**Introduction: Levi's background as an outsider**

And now as we come with anticipation to God's Word, let's ask for His help...

This is week two of our *Following Where Jesus Leads* sermon series. If you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the gospel of Mark, chapter 2. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Last week, we kicked off our series seeing that following where Jesus leads includes praying dependently. This week we're actually starting with a man who didn't follow where Jesus leads. His name was Levi, and Levi, along with the whole Jewish nation, endured hard times as the Romans occupied them. And some Jews from back then, like Levi, responded to the stress by betraying their countrymen and joining the Romans as tax collectors.

Now being a tax collector back then is not the same as working for the IRS today. In modern terms, being a tax collector back then is like this scenario... Imagine if a foreign nation took over America today, and then your neighbor bid money to work for the foreign power's tax system. Your neighbor then taking taxes from you and everyone else and then sending your money back to the occupying power, weakening America and strengthening the enemy.

And to make matters worse, your neighbor bid to become a tax collector so that they could charge extra taxes and keep that money for themselves, growing rich at the expense of you and your community. And if you or anyone protested this unfair system, the tax collector would report that to the foreign power, who'd crush your rebellion with their military.

That's essentially what the Jewish tax collectors of Jesus' day were doing. So the Jews despised them as corrupt traitors. Tax collectors, like Levi, were so despised that many Jewish religious leaders taught that a beggar shouldn't receive charity from a tax collector at his office, since it was dirty money, and also taught that if a tax collector entered a house, the entire house became unclean, and also taught that you could lie to a tax collector with no sense of guilt since it's like lying to a thief robbing you. To his countrymen, Levi is this kind of despised outsider.<sup>1</sup>

Now we're not national traitors, but like Levi, we've probably felt like an outsider. Sometimes we might not really be an outsider. If you're around my age, maybe you just kept Radiohead's *Creep* on repeat until you convinced yourself you're an outsider. But other times we feel like an outsider because sadly, other people have excluded us, though we did nothing wrong. And then other times, like Levi, we may have made a tragic choice that wrecked a relationship, and sadly, it's put us on the outside.

### **Teaching: Levi's amazing changes**

*Astoundingly, Jesus invites Levi (13-14)* – Let's see what God's Word says to outsider Levi, and to others who feel like him, in Mark chapter 2, starting in verse 13.

<sup>13</sup> Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. <sup>14</sup> As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth.

So Levi the outsider is at his station, collecting taxes. Probably just a typical day for Levi. People back then named Levi typically came from the Levites, the priestly tribe. As Levi sits at his tax booth, I wonder if he ever thinks about how life would be different had he chosen to serve as a priest instead. I wonder if Levi feels any regret about choosing wealth over his reputation and relationships. I wonder if Levi feels a sense of shame when a fellow Jew shoots

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<sup>1</sup> Information on tax collectors in this sermon's introduction is primarily from Mark Commentaries from Darrell Bock (NCBC) and Wessel & Strauss (revised *Expositor's Bible Commentary*).

him a look of disgust for his treachery and greed. Whatever Levi is thinking and feeling, as Jesus walks by, something unbelievable happens in the middle of verse 14.

“Follow me,” Jesus told him,

As Pastor Dave mentioned last week, Jewish religious teachers in Jesus’ day never approached a potential disciple and invited them to follow, it was always the other way around. Disciples would select a rabbi and ask for the privilege of being disciplined.

So in that culture it would be very surprising for a rabbi like Jesus to invite someone to be His disciple, but it would be utterly shocking for Jesus to invite a corrupt traitor like Levi.

This is Caravaggio’s dramatic painting of when Jesus calls Levi the outcast. Here Levi is seated at the table with some associates, counting their income. They are dressed in the modern clothes of Caravaggio’s time, likely reflecting their involvement with worldly concerns. Jesus, accompanied by Peter, bursts in and powerfully gestures to Levi, calling Levi to follow Him.

The two men on the left of the painting are so focused on counting their ill-gotten money that they don’t even notice Jesus. The two young men in the middle of the painting do notice, the younger one drawing back into Levi, while the older one, who is armed, leans forward, perhaps threateningly, as Peter gestures to calm his resistance.

Surprised, there in the middle of the seated men, is Levi. I like the detail that as Jesus calls, Levi still has his right hand on the coin he was counting before Jesus enters. While his left hand gestures to say “Who me?”.<sup>2</sup>

Gesturing like, “You’ve got to be mistaken Jesus, you must be looking for some other Levi, one who became a Levite serving God at the temple, not this Levi who threw that away and betrayed his nation over a love of money.” But Jesus is not mistaken, He’s inviting this Levi to follow. The painting captures that dramatic moment right before Levi decides what to do with the unexpected grace he’s being shown.

Does he hold on to the coin he’s counting? If Levi leaves his job someone else will quickly take his place. The end of verse 14 shows his response, “and Levi got up and followed him.”

As Levi takes Jesus’ astounding invitation, the traitor outcast becomes part of Jesus’ inner circle. You might know Levi by his other name, Matthew, one of Jesus’ 12 disciples. What amazing grace, and by the way, you can put yourself in Levi’s place in the painting too. If

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/c/caravagg/04/23conta.html>. Accessed online 2/11/20.

you know Jesus, Levi's story is your story, one of amazing grace. And if you don't identify as a Christian, you're like Levi in this moment, Jesus is extending His hand to you, inviting you to start a relationship with Him today.

Levi, invited with such overwhelming grace, is inspired to introduce others like him to Jesus too. Right away Jesus is using Levi's checkered past redemptively, as it provides an opportunity to introduce many outsiders to Jesus. Jesus is awesome like that. He loves redeeming even the broken things in our past, and He's still in the business of inviting modern day Levi's, so let's keep hoping, praying, and sharing with them.

*Levi introduces his friends to Jesus (15)* – Let's continue the story in verse 15.

<sup>15</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

In response to his newfound life in Jesus, Levi throws a big dinner party so that the tax collectors and other people labeled as "sinners" around can meet Jesus too. And these outsiders come, their curiosity piqued by this Jesus who called one of their own into His inner circle and who warmly welcomes them, unlike the Pharisees, who avoid the so called "sinners".

Verse 15 is this great scene as the tax collectors and other outsiders eat and talk with Jesus and His disciples. Like Levi, in response to Jesus' overwhelming grace in your life, you could throw an awesome dinner party where you introduce some friends to Jesus. If you've got gifts of hospitality, relational gifts, then perhaps following where Jesus leads means this for you this morning.

We need more hospitality in our busy, lonely culture, and because of Jesus we have more to celebrate than anyone, so let's release the extroverts! Throw an awesome dinner party where you introduce some friends to Jesus.

Now sadly, not everyone is happy with Levi's dinner party. The poopers of this party are some Jewish religious leaders called the Pharisees. They believe the Jews are under Roman occupation because the people aren't following God's law well enough. So the Pharisees came up with detailed, legalistic commands around all of God's laws. And the Pharisees pridefully avoid and even shun the people who don't follow their added rules, people like tax collectors and those labeled as sinners.

And here comes Jesus, inviting a tax collector into His inner circle of disciples and sharing table fellowship with all these tax collectors and sinners, and it's just too much for the Pharisees. They fear that Jesus' gracious acceptance will motivate these people to keep rejecting the Pharisees' legalistic rules, so they become party-poopers in verse 16.

*The Pharisees introduce conflict (16)* – <sup>16</sup> When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

So the Pharisees question Jesus, asking His disciples to explain why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Notice that the “tax collectors and sinners” are mentioned twice here in verse 16, and are also mentioned in verse 15. That emphasis is here because it was a big deal back then for a religious leader like Jesus to eat with tax collectors and sinners, because eating together back then symbolized intimacy and full acceptance.

So Jesus sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners clashes with the Pharisees' call to separate from sinners, to keep them as outsiders. I wonder if the Pharisees are looking right at Levi as they question Jesus' actions in verse 16.

We know that Levi is on the right path, following Jesus and introducing others to Jesus, but I wonder if Levi feels fearful as the Pharisees question. Maybe Levi fears Jesus realizing it was a mistake to call Levi, or that Jesus might at least tell Levi, “Hey, you've got to clean up your act more before you can invite others to meet me.”

*The Great Physician invites (17)* – Let's see how Jesus responds to the Pharisees in verse 17.

<sup>17</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and affirms Levi and his ministry gathering. Jesus begins with a proverb from that day, about how doctors spend their time among the sick. And then Jesus shares His purpose, that He's come to call sinners.

Jesus is saying that He's come to earth to help anyone who wants God's help, to invite them inside. Jesus welcomes all kinds of strugglers, like Levi, like me, like you, people who realize that we need God's help. And the irony of this verse is that the Pharisees are sinful too, but they don't realize their need for Jesus' forgiveness and help. Rather than trying to help

people struggling, in their pride the Pharisees avoid those not living up to their legalistic commands, effectively disinviting them from participating in God's kingdom, keeping them on the outside.

In contrast, Jesus offers everyone the opportunity to participate in God's kingdom, all kinds of sinful people who see their need and receive Jesus' grace. And so following where Jesus leads includes being in relationship with people who don't share all of your morals or your walk with God.

Now there might be wisdom issues for your situation. For example, if you're struggling with abusing alcohol, then you probably shouldn't head to the bar to share Jesus. But we can't separate from everyone who doesn't share all of our morals or our walk with God. That's not following in the way of Jesus, that's being a Pharisee.

I heard another pastor share a quote about this that challenges me: "If you only like people like yourself, then you really only like yourself." May we instead follow in Jesus' way, in loving relationship with all kinds of people. And when there's an opportunity, let's introduce our friends to Jesus.

I like how Jesus likens Himself to a doctor in verse 17, for Jesus truly is the Great Physician. As we struggled in this sinful, broken, diseased world, He didn't tell us to come to the clinic, He made a home visit to us. He gave us the hard but true diagnosis that we are mortally stained by the disease of sin.

But instead of keeping His distance from sick sinners like us, treating us like outsiders, He instead dines with all kinds of people, inviting us into His kingdom. And then He dies on the cross for us, giving us the cure that we need for our sin sickness.

And Jesus didn't send us a bill for treatment, no He paid the whole costly bill in love. We come to Him trusting that He died for our sins and rose from the dead, receiving as a gift that we're no longer on the "outs" from God. Through faith we're now insiders, beloved children welcomed warmly at His table, given His Spirit, His Word, and His people to help us to follow Him.

### **Next Step**

This morning we've seen that Jesus' amazingly gracious invitation to us can inspire us to introduce others to Jesus. So our next step this morning is to introduce our friends to Jesus.

Like Levi in the painting, as you experience Jesus' overwhelming grace, you could throw a dinner party where you introduce some friends to Jesus. Or join hands with some families here and bring a kingdom initiative, as Todd shared about this morning.

And if you feel too busy or overwhelmed for those kinds of ideas, introduce Jesus in the rhythm of something you're already doing: at work or school, with a hobby. We'll hear a testimony about that in a minute.

Or share Jesus here at church, to kids as an ELEVATE Sunday School volunteer, or with some new friends in our ESL classes. Or invite a friend to church, Easter is coming soon and is a great opportunity for that. Pastor Manuel will share more about that at Vision Night this Saturday.

May we all share Levi's vision, who after receiving a shockingly gracious invitation from Jesus, invites others, saying, "God has come into the world, He's going to be at my house tonight, come meet Him!"

God is still present through His Spirit. He'll be there at your house this week, your school this week, your workplace this week, and also in the classes and services here at the church building. Why not invite someone one of those places and introduce them to Jesus?

Now I'd like to introduce you to Hector and Ron's story. Guys, come on up. Would you join me in welcoming Hector and Ron to the stage? As they're coming up, let's ask God to show us who we could introduce to Jesus soon.

1. Hector, share about yourself, how you met Ron, and your shared interest.
2. Hector, share about the day you introduced Ron to Jesus.
3. Ron, share about how things changed for you and your business after you met Jesus.
4. Ron, you've shared with me about a conversation with a close friend after you trusted in Jesus. Would you share that with us?
5. Hector, you've got the heart of an evangelist, any final words to share with the church family about introducing our friends to Jesus?

Hector, thanks for sharing that, I sure am glad you introduced Ron to Jesus! Would you join me in thanking Hector and Ron? In the coming months, I hope we get to meet many more "Ron's" here as we introduce Jesus to our friends. Let's pray about that...