

ENGAGE

- As you approach the text you may find these questions and thoughts to be helpful? I see two clear lessons for disciples in this passage:

1. Jesus doesn't really care what others think about a person, or how others value a person. He loves the outcasts and the unloved.
2. Jesus didn't concentrate on polishing the already righteous, but on rescuing the perishing. His mission is to the poor, the sick, the oppressed, and the brokenhearted.

Jesus loves you, whatever you've done. And calls you to follow him. Will you, like Levi, leave everything, get up, and follow him? If so, why not right now? He's waiting.

EXAMINE

Luke 5:1-11

Prior to the reading of the Gospel for the Day -- the call of the first disciples in Luke 5:1-11 -- the congregation will have heard two other texts which relate quite directly to it.

The First Lesson is the majestic text from Isaiah 6:1-8, the call of the prophet Isaiah. The Second Lesson is from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he alludes to his own call as an apostle (1 Corinthians 15:8). He speaks more fully of that in Galatians 1:15-16.

The call of the first disciples appears, naturally, early on in the ministry of Jesus. Up to this point, the main events have been Jesus' baptism (3:21-22), his temptation in the wilderness (4:1-13), his inaugural sermon and rejection at Nazareth (4:16-30), and a series of healings (4:31-41). More immediately, there is a series of events that includes his going to a deserted place to be alone, his being sought out by crowds of people, and his teaching in synagogues (4:42-44).

The story opens with Jesus beside Lake Gennesaret, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee. He borrows a boat on the lakeshore that belongs to a fisherman named Simon. From there he teaches crowds of people. They will not leave him alone, for they want to hear "the word of God." As the story unfolds, Jesus asks Simon to go out to the deep water and to put down the nets for a catch. Simon does so; there is a great catch of fish; the catch is so great that others have to help bring the nets ashore; and the story ends with Jesus' recruiting Simon and the others as disciples.

The names of those on the scene are provided. Simon is mentioned by name five times over (5:3, 4, 5, 8, 10), and on one of those occasions he is called Simon Peter (5:8). The use of the name Peter is a bit early here, for according to Luke himself, Jesus gave him that name at a later

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time (6:14). Nevertheless, it makes sense that it appears here, so that the reader of the gospel knows who Simon is. Missing from the account of those present is Andrew, the brother of Peter, who is called at the same time in the other two Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1:16//Matthew 4:18). In the Gospel of John he is actually called earlier than Peter (1:40-42). Other persons on the scene are James and John, sons of Zebedee, who are "partners with Simon."

Clearly the main figure on the scene, apart from Jesus himself, is Simon Peter. It is his boat that Jesus uses. It is he to whom Jesus speaks first, asking him to go into the deep water. Conversely, Simon Peter is the only person who speaks to Jesus. He addresses him as "master" (Greek: *epistatēs*, a term used for tutors and teachers) at 5:5. But after the miraculous catch, he addresses him as "Lord" (*kyrios*) at 5:8. Likewise, Simon Peter is the only one whom Jesus addresses directly, both when he tells him to go into the deep water (5:4). And, interestingly, even at the end of the story when he says "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (5:10), for in Greek the verbs are second person singular.

Incidentally, the "fish for people" (or "fishers of men" in the KJV, RSV, and NIV) metaphor does not appear in Luke, but only in the parallel accounts (Matthew 4:19//Mark 1:17). Luke's verb is *zōgreō* (simply "to catch"), while in the other accounts a noun is used, *alieis* ("fishermen," plural), addressed to both Peter and Andrew. The status of Peter is obviously important in Luke's account, and that is not surprising. Not only was Peter prominent in the traditions that Luke received concerning the earthly Jesus and his companions, but Luke knew that Peter was an important leader in the early church, as he narrates in Acts 1-11.

There are features to this story that resonate with other significant biblical motifs. One is that, when Simon is called, he resists, as do Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, to name but three (Exodus 3:11; Isaiah 6:1-11; Jeremiah 1:6). Simon objects to Jesus' command to go out to the deep water, but then he does as he was told to do (5:5).

Another is the exclamation of Simon, saying that the "Lord" should depart from him because of his being a sinful man (5:8). It is a common biblical motif for a person to feel unworthy in the presence of the divine (Exodus 3:6; 33:20; Judges 6:22; 13:22; Isaiah 6:5; Luke 18:13).

Finally, the miracle of the great catch is, like others in the gospels, more than one should expect. The exceeding of expectations appear in other miracle stories too, as in the Healing of the Paralytic (Luke 5:17-26), the Feeding of the Multitudes (Luke 9:12-17), and the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11).

Jesus has come into the world to reveal God and to redeem the cosmos. But he is known to us only through the witness of his apostles. The call of the first disciples marks the beginning of a movement that culminates in the founding of the church. The church did not come into

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existence through a group of persons who wanted to start a good, even benevolent, organization. From the gospels, we learn that it had its beginning with Jesus, who called certain persons to follow him. He created a community of disciples who heard him preach and teach, heal, and finally suffer, die, and rise from death on the first Easter.

The story of the church is reflected to some degree in this story itself. When Jesus calls, Peter is hesitant and thinks that what Jesus asks of him is both unnecessary and too demanding. Nevertheless, Peter responds, and he discovers that life has a surprise in store for him. By doing what Jesus asks him to do, he experiences an epiphany of God.

God often becomes manifest in the ordinary, even seemingly unnecessary events of a person's life -- events which nevertheless are in accord with some purpose that is or is not known. Throughout history the church has continued to exist and carry on its ministry in spite of the tenuous responses of its members. The ancient image of the church as a fisherman's boat tossed about on the sea, but sustained by the presence of the living Lord, is appropriate in every age.

The commissioning of Peter is of particular importance. He became a leader among the Twelve during the earthly ministry of Jesus (as at Luke 9:20, 33; 12:41; 18:28) and also as a powerful preacher and leader in the early church. Although he alone is addressed in this particular story, both he and the other disciples are commissioned by the risen Lord to carry on the mission of Jesus (see Luke 24:48-49; Acts 1:6-11). Finally, the witness of the disciples to Jesus, his words, and his deeds is to extend "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and that commission is being realized in the present

Luke 5:27-32

Tax collectors (KJV "publicans") probably weren't numbered among the poor. Their profession, if it could be called that, made many of them wealthy.

Rome's method of collecting taxes was to employ as tax collectors locals who knew who had money and where they kept it. A province was divided into tax districts. Locals would bid for the contract of collecting taxes in a district. The bid was the money they were contracted to pay the government; whatever they collected over that amount was theirs to keep. The chief tax collector (such as Zacchaeus in Luke 19:2) owned the contract for his region. Then he would employ others to collect taxes in the various villages. Tax collectors were widely regarded as thieves and robbers. Perhaps the Jews told "tax collector jokes" the same way we tell "lawyer jokes," we don't know.

Rome collected three principal kinds of taxes, (1) a land tax, (2) a head tax, and (3) a customs tax of 2% to 5% of value on goods being transported. A tax office or booth would be located near a city gate or port to collect the custom tax, though liability for this tax would have been

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primarily limited to those engaging in commercial trade to other areas[1] -- such as fishermen exporting dried fish or farmers shipping surplus crops to a larger city. If ancient Capernaum is to be identified with the ruins at Tell Hum (as I believe it should be), then the customs house would have collected revenue on the produce of the area as well as traffic that moved eastward along the road to Bethsaida Julias.[2]

Tax collectors were hated men. When I lived in Southern California I had a next door neighbor who was pretty vague about what he did for a living. "I work for the federal government," he told me at first. It turns out that he worked for the Internal Revenue Service but was afraid to let it be known lest he be ostracized by us and other neighbors. Back then the IRS wasn't as domesticated as it is supposed to have become since the [IRS Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998](http://www.bankrate.com/securetax/News/19990205a.asp)(<http://www.bankrate.com/securetax/News/19990205a.asp>). Back then the IRS could seize your records and money first and ask questions later. Back then the taxpayer was guilty until he could prove himself innocent. The IRS was nasty. No wonder my neighbor was vague.

But if the IRS can be distrusted in the US, think what it was like in Jesus' day. All a tax collector would have to do is threaten to report a person to the soldiers of Herod or Rome, and he could take what he wanted by extortion. This was a police state, and residents didn't have many civil rights unless they were citizens of Rome. Few were.

Rome itself was hated. Its troops occupied the sacred land, with a garrison even quartered at the northwest corner of the holy Temple precincts in the Fortress of Antonia. Roman justice may be honored by wistful classicists twenty centuries later, but close up, the Romans were the oppressors, the takers, the enforcers. They were hated.

Tax collectors who collaborated with the hated Romans were despised even more. They were viewed as traitors, turncoats, quislings. They worked for the enemy out of greed, a greed that sucked the people dry. Jesus' words about those who reject church discipline suggest the way tax collectors were regarded: "If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17). Tax collectors, wealthy as they might be, were shunned.

To eat with a Gentile or tax collector was considered by the strict Pharisees to render one spiritually or ceremonially unclean. Uncleaness was conveyed by touch and association. Even a house entered by a tax collector was considered unclean.[3] Tax collectors were both hated and avoided by respectable society.

So these *nouveaux riches* were considered beneath contempt -- but they did have friends. Other "sinners" might include Gentiles who lived in the community. They wouldn't be welcome in strict Jewish homes, but the tax collectors, already rejects themselves, readily accepted them. The term "sinner" was also used to designate individuals who didn't keep rules of purity as strictly as what was considered the standard. The Pharisees probably looked at a great portion of Jewish society as "sinners," since they didn't share Pharisee requirements of keeping every aspect of the oral tradition surrounding the Law. Apostate Jews or excommunicated members of a synagogue would be considered "sinners," as well as those who sinned willfully

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and heinously and did not repent. The Pharisee's prayer at the Temple put tax collectors alongside robbers, evildoers, and adulterers (Luke 18:9-12). Tax collectors were willing to associate with people that respectable Jews would have nothing to do with.[4]

Levi and Matthew (5:27)

The particular tax collector in our passage probably isn't the chief tax collector in his district, for he apparently spends his days in a tax office near the shore of the Sea of Galilee in Capernaum (see Mark 2:13-17), alongside the main road. The word translated "tax booth" (NIV), "tax office" (RSV), or "receipt of custom" (KJV) is Greek *telonion*, "revenue or tax office." [5] Levi is waiting to collect a toll on any goods transported past him as they enter the region ruled by Herod Antipas.

The tax collector's name is given in Mark and Luke as Levi, making it likely that he is a descendent of the tribe of Levi, from whom the priests and Levites descended. Look in the New York City telephone book today, and you'll find thousands of families by this name. Instead of a holy ministry of serving in the temple, this Levi is instead engaged in a most unholy trade -- at least as it was practiced in Palestine. Mark 2:14 also identifies him as the son of Alphaeus.

But the name he is best known by is "Matthew" (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in the list of the Twelve Disciples (Luke 6:14-16). Matthew's gospel in that list specifies him as "Matthew the tax collector" lest there be any confusion (Matthew 10:3). The authorship of the Gospel of Matthew is attributed to him by many scholars, both ancient and modern.[6] And it was not uncommon to have two names, or a name and a nickname. Peter is called Simon son of Jonah, Simon Peter, and Cephas (the Aramaic form of Peter). Saul and Paul both refer to the Apostle from Tarsus, Saul his Jewish name, and Paul (Paulus) the name he uses as a Roman citizen and traveler.

Leaving Everything and Following (5:27-28)

Jesus has been teaching again along the lakeshore at Capernaum (Mark 2:13). When he is finished, he walks over to the small tax office or customs house alongside the highway. Sitting inside is a despised man, Matthew Levi by name, whom Jesus has seen several times in the crowds as he has been teaching. Jesus looks at him, and says simply: "Follow me." The word in Greek is, *akoloutheo*, which means, literally, "come after" from *a*, copulative, and *keleuthos*, "road," properly, "walking the same road." [7]. Then it means "accompany, go along with." But it also has a specific meaning, "to follow someone as a disciple." [8] It goes along in the tradition of the Rabbinical master-pupil relationship. [9] Jesus' invitation is a two-word command: "Follow me."

Think what Levi feels like when he hears those two words tap-tapping like a door-knocker on his soul. He is being called to leave his lucrative trade as a tax collector to become almost a beggar, sustaining himself on the sometimes meager contributions made to his Rabbi or Master. In an instant he is being called from wealth to poverty.

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But I don't think the issue of poverty really enters into his decision. Only one thing matters, and it matters very deeply -- oh, so deeply -- to Levi. That Jesus has sought him out and selected him on purpose.

That Jesus would even engage him in conversation is a marvel. He is despised. He is hated. He has been ostracized from respectable society. And Jesus cares enough about him to stop by when not required by law to do so. Jesus accepts him. Jesus loves him -- the most unloved man in Capernaum. And Jesus calls him personally: "Follow me." Since he was a boy he hadn't imagined himself a righteous man. Now he is being called to accompany a holy man on his itinerant travels. How bizarre! How wonderful!

I don't think that the money has any allure for him in the face of this simple request: "Follow me." That he is wanted, needed, by his Prophet, this Miracle Worker, this incredible Teacher, is enough for him.

Luke records, "And he left everything, and rose and followed him" (RSV).

Oh, I'm sure he turns in to the chief tax collector the money he had collected and submits his formal resignation -- he is responsible enough to do that, surely. But when he stands up the decision has been made, the die is cast, he leaves his tax collection trade never to turn back. Instead, he follows Jesus. The word "followed" is *akoloutheo*, but now it is in the Imperfect Tense, which suggests beginning an action and continuing it thereafter, such as "he began to follow."

Jesus Dines at Levi's Banquet (5:29)

He replies to Jesus invitation by issuing an invitation to his new Master. "Jesus, I would be very honored if you would be a guest in my home this very night." Jesus accepts.

And so Levi scurries off to make preparations for a great feast, Greek *doche*, "reception, banquet." [10] This is no intimate dinner party for a few guests. Luke describes it with the word *megas*, "great." To his large house suited to a wealthy man, Levi invites "a large crowd of tax collectors and others."

Now if you and I were there, we might have sat stiffly in the presence of these jovial social outcasts. We wouldn't be comfortable in the least! These are out and out thieves, unbelievers, open sinners, social pariahs. No, we wouldn't be comfortable at all. We would wait until a reasonable hour, make our excuses, and leave with a sigh of relief.

But Jesus is comfortable. I can see him enjoying the occasion, getting acquainted with people who have been afraid to approach him before, now enchanted in his presence. He is eating heartily of Levi's sumptuous food, drinking of Levi's excellent wines, and thoroughly enjoying himself. His joy before them lights up this party of outcasts into an occasion that they will remember to their dying day. The afternoon when Jesus the Messiah ate dinner at the same

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table, shook their hand, put his arm on their shoulder, and embraced them in warmth and friendship. They will never forget, nor will Levi.

Levi has introduced his closest friends to his newest Friend, and is now ready to follow. The growing band of disciples -- Peter and Andrew, James and John -- who have despised him for collecting a toll on their fish exports may have been stand-offish at first. But when they see Jesus warmly accept him, they accept him, too, into this strange new fellowship of disciples called from all walks of life to walk with Jesus and learn his ways. It is giddy and glorious, and deeply moving to Levi, as he cleans up after the party. He is no longer Levi the tax collector. He is Matthew the Disciple, and it feels very good. Very good indeed.

Pharisees and Scribes Put Jesus Down (5:30)

But Levi's joy is mixed. Because he is the occasion for drawing more criticism to Jesus from the Pharisees and their scribes -- the teachers of the law that hold to their particular interpretation of the oral law. It must hurt to hear his new fellow disciples put down with the question, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (5:30)

Doctor for the Sin Sick Soul (5:31-32)

Jesus, who is no doubt intended to hear this loudly spoken put down, chooses to respond instead of let it pass. He turns to the scribes and Pharisees with a comment of his own: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:31-32).

No matter what is recommended by the American Medical Association, few people actually go to their doctor for an annual check-up. Instead, they go when they're sick, when they sense a problem, a growth, a weakness, an ache, an injury. There are few appointments made on a schedule -- with the exception of well baby visits in the first few months of life. Appointments are made because the patients have something wrong.

And so Jesus answers the Pharisees' criticism, "Doctors aren't for the healthy, but for the sick." And then he continues, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." If all were righteous, spiritually healthy, Jesus would have no necessity to pay a house call. But because we are not so righteous after all, because our souls are troubled and besmirched by compromise -- because of all this we desperately need Jesus to come and call us to something better than the filth we may be living in. We need him to call us to our best.

How long has it been since you've made an appointment to see Jesus? To talk to him about the things that are weighing you down? To risk him identifying the sins that you are all too aware of? Sometimes we resist going to the doctor because we're afraid he'll confirm what we already know. And so in our fear we try to avoid what we know is true. How about you? Isn't it about time to make an appointment with the Doctor?

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QUESTIONS

1. . Honestly, do you feel that God has been trying to tell you something lately?
2. Do you think that God wants to adjust the way you are serving Him or walking with Him?
3. What do you think God is trying to tell you?
4. We must tune our ear to listen to God, and we must trust what God says through the “Whispers.” What has God been calling you to do through the deep, quiet, internal “Whispers” in your spirit?
5. What did Jesus mean by the phrase, “From now on, you will catch men?” (Luke 5:10)
6. What is your primary method of fishing for men?
7. Do you think you need to learn additional ways to fish for the souls of men?
8. Explain in your own words the phrase, “They forsook all and followed Him.” (Luke 5:11).
9. Is there anything in your life you are holding on too tightly?
10. Is God calling you to give up something in order to follow Him completely?
11. When you reach the gates of eternity, what will be in your hands?
12. In Luke 5:27-28 Jesus called Levi to follow Him, whereas in verse 32, Jesus describes His call as a call to repentance. Levi responds immediately by leaving everything behind (Repentance). Describe how your life is a call to constant turning away from sin and toward Jesus.
13. Levi “got up and began to follow Him (Jesus)”. The remainder of Levi’s life would be characterized by following Jesus. Name ways that you are encouraged and can encourage others to constantly follow Jesus.
14. In verse 30 the Pharisees grumbled that Jesus and His disciples were eating and associating with sinners. What actions and/or behaviors of Christians do you most often grumble? Why?
15. Describe how the perspectives of Jesus and Levi differ from the Pharisees, concerning those present at the banquet. In what ways do our perspectives need changing to align more with Jesus?

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