

Follow Me

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[0 : 00] Well, with your patience and the Lord's help, let's turn back together to the Gospel of Luke chapter 5 and read verses 27 and 28, the calling of Levi.

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth and he said to him, follow me. And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

So these are just two verses in the Bible, which tell the story of the day that everything changed for Levi, who we know from elsewhere in the Bible was also called Matthew.

Although these are just two short verses about a man who lived a long time ago in a faraway place, I think there's a lot that each of us can learn tonight from this account and seek to apply to our lives here on Lewis in May 2024.

Just to get us thinking, I wonder how many of us feel immediately uncomfortable when we read these verses. What does it actually mean to leave everything and follow Jesus?

[1 : 05] I struggle with this idea to actually leave everything. Surely not, but then maybe. Some of you know that I'm an accountant and therefore often dealing with planning for the future, saving for retirement, cash flow, forecasting, things like that.

And apologies in advance for the accounting illustrations that we're using tonight. But I do think that this is a question that we all struggle with at some level. What does it mean to leave everything and follow Jesus?

To gain the whole world and lose our soul or instead to forget the world and follow Jesus? The rich, strong ruler struggled with this and he went away from Jesus sad.

Is it possible for us to struggle with this verse and then happily commit to following him? Hopefully, as we consider the verses for a short time, we can start to see how they apply to us tonight.

So I'm hoping to break this study into three sections. Firstly, the context. Verse 27 starts after this. After what? If we can look at the context of the story where Jesus was, what had been going on, what it meant to be a tax collector in those days, then hopefully the story will start to come alive to us.

[2 : 14] Secondly, leaving everything. What does that mean? And thirdly, followed him. What does it mean to follow Jesus? So firstly, the context. This event happened early on in Jesus's ministry.

Most of us probably know that his hometown was Nazareth and in chapter 4, verses 16 to 30, we read of Jesus being rejected in this town following a ceremony preached where he claimed that a prophecy in the Old Testament was specifically about him.

Following this, Jesus moved to Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee, which was about 40 miles away, and he set up his base for ministry there. He taught there and did many miraculous signs there, showing that he was no ordinary preacher, but had in fact been sent by God.

To give a summary from chapter 4, 31, Jesus drove out an evil spirit. He healed many, including Simon Peter's mother-in-law. He sought quiet places to pray to his heavenly father.

He taught Peter to let down his nets for a catch in the middle of the day, leading to a catch of fish so large that the nets began to break. He called his first four disciples, Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John.

[3 : 25] The first mention in the chapter actually of leaving everything and following Jesus is about them. He healed a leper. He healed a paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof, and he forgave sins.

This all went on in and around the busy town of Capernaum, and the more that that went on, the more the people flocked to be close to Jesus, crowds and crowds of people.

People were speculating. The religious leaders were investigating. Everybody wanted to know more. And Luke 5.26 is a culmination of all this.

Amazements seized them all, and they glorified God, and were filled with awe, saying, We have seen extraordinary things today. But Jesus wasn't finished with the extraordinary for that day just yet.

And in the middle of all this was Matthew, a Jew working for the Romans who had conquered his own people, the Jews. Not a good way to make friends. This next part is purely conjecture, but hopefully seems reasonable to you.

[4 : 27] Matthew was sitting in his tax collector's booth. It's likely that this was in the center of the town. Easy access for everyone to pay their taxes. He would almost certainly have heard some of the commotion.

But there he was in his lonely booth, stamping forms, being obedient to the Romans, despised by them, and also by his fellow Jews, because nobody likes a traitor.

The Romans and the Jews. Did the tax collector's booth feel a bit like a prison? How he ended up like this? It seems likely that at some stage, Matthew had made the calculation that he would be better off as a tax collector than living with his fellow Jews, for whatever reason he thought that the money he could make as a tax collector was of more worth of greater profit than staying loyal to his own people and following their God.

How is this decision working out for him? We don't know what he was making of all the commotion in the town that day, or in the days and weeks leading up to it. But is it possible that he saw four men carrying their friend on a stretcher along the street?

And a wee while later saw that man who had been on the stretcher walking, or maybe even running, back carrying his mat, praising God. Perhaps he even hears from someone close to the healed paralytic that not only is Jesus an incredible miracle worker, but that he claims even to forgive sins.

[5 : 52] Did Matthew long to have his sins forgiven? Could he remember back to being a young Jew when he was taught the Scriptures? Perhaps Sam 32, which we sung just now, was there any hope for him?

Verses 3 and 4 of that Sam say, When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me.

My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat. But did Matthew have a spark of hope that if even a helpless paralytic could be healed, perhaps there was some hope of redemption for him as well?

What joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight? Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty?

I'm not sure of your story here tonight, but with Jesus there's always hope. Another Matthew Henry comments on this story that there is no heart too hard for the Spirit and grace of Christ to work upon.

[6 : 59] Not any difficulties in the way of a sinner's conversion insuperable to his power. So whatever was going on with Matthew, I think it's safe to say that no one other than Jesus saw what was coming in verse 27, as the crowds no doubt followed him from the house with a broken roof.

What a shock for everyone, not least Matthew, as Jesus simply stops and says to him, Follow me, but here he was in the defining moment of his life with a decision to make.

As Jesus spoke to him, was this the moment when Matthew made another calculation? He realized that even if he did gain the whole world, it would amount to nothing if he lost his soul.

What about you? Have you made this calculation? Do you remember things you were taught when you were young, but now you maybe think you're past the point of no return? I remember asking someone to a church event one time and he refused saying he'd done far too many bad things to go to church.

We can sometimes look for defining moments in our life too quickly. We're too influenced by TV dramas with great music and close up shots of enlightened eyes, but sometimes the of God doing a new thing in our life or the lives of those around us.

[8 : 12] Today is not always the same as yesterday and tomorrow is promised to nobody. Matthew risked a lot by leaving the wrath of the Romans, a not very welcoming group of fellow disciples, no clear direction of where Jesus would take him, but one thing in you, this was his one chance to follow Jesus and he wasn't going to let it pass him by.

Suddenly everything had become very simple. Again, what about you? Can you imagine taking that step of faith if you haven't already? Taking that step and responding to Jesus and following him? Have you considered the calculation of where true prophet is to be found, not in chasing the hopes and dreams of this world which cannot satisfy, but in trusting and following Jesus?

You know, we're all making calculations all the time. Calories, is this cake really worth eating? I'll be deciding that at the end. Making money, am I getting value?

Spending my time, should I be doing something else instead? And all these decisions show where our priorities lie. For the Christians here, we also are making calculations all the time and you could boil it down to thinking, is this sin worth it?

[9 : 27] It never is, but the very heart of temptation is that there is something we desire, but we know we shouldn't have. What is our calculation? What do we desire more?

Jesus says, blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. There are only two words recorded of what Jesus said to Matthew at that moment.

Perhaps that is all that he said, follow me. This was not simply a human invitation, but a divine command. So not only did Matthew accept the invitation, but he obeyed the command.

It's important to remember the fact that ultimately, Matthew did not choose Jesus, but Jesus chose Matthew. Jesus is the hero of the story, not Matthew.

Jesus is the rescuer and saviour. However, this doesn't mean that Matthew didn't do the mental profit and loss of calculation in relation to the worth of his soul, or that he didn't take the literal step of faith as he walked out of the tax collector's booth.

[10 : 29] He made the positive response of following Jesus. And so must each one of us, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is actively seeking out people who are lost in their sins and offering them salvation, even here tonight.

But there must be a response. And in this section, we want to consider something what that looks like. He left everything. This is huge, but what does it actually mean? A few different ways of thinking about it.

First one is our security. Perhaps one way to think this through is to think about the rich, ruler who we read about in Luke chapter 18 verses 18 to 30. This man seemed to have everything going for him.

He was young, he was rich, in a position of leadership. He was asking the right questions. Some might even say that he was good living. He received the same invitation from Jesus to follow him, but he went behind.

He couldn't part with his riches. He found his ultimate security and happiness in his riches and couldn't let them go. What about me and you?

[11 : 35] Where do I find my actual security and happiness? I know the answer I'm meant to give, but what is actually the case? How do I figure out who I'm looking to for security and happiness?

My favorite line to sing at Christmas time comes from the carol, oh little town of Bethlehem, with the line, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Jesus is the only one able to fulfill our deepest hopes and calm our greatest fears. He is Lord over all, and he's a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

The other night I was watching a new documentary on the French footballer, Kylian Mbappé, and what a player he is. The pace, the strength, the accuracy, and the smile, he seems to have it all.

And the French people put their hope in him, until he missed a penalty in the European Championships in 2021. Suddenly many people were against him, and even though he has come back incredibly since then, one day, not too far away, he won't be able to run so fast.

[12 : 40] His strength will fail him, and the hopes of the French people will move on to someone else, not so with Jesus. He will never let us down, never leave us on our own.

And even now, even now, is with each one of us who trust in him by his Holy Spirit. Isn't it the most amazing truth that the greatest detains in villages of Israel?

And what a wonder it is that he's still doing that through his Holy Spirit, even tonight in Carly, a wee village on the very edge of Europe, even in people's homes for those watching online.

He's seeking out people. What a wonder. What a saviour. How did Matthew see in Jesus that caused him to leave everything? What did he hear in the tone of Jesus' voice?

Somehow, in that moment, Matthew could see that in Jesus, he had all he needed, and so could afford to leave everything behind. The calculation, or recalculation of Matthew, from when he first

became a tax collector to now leaving everything.

[13:43] This isn't blind faith. It is a calculation. It's seeking profit, happiness. Just going to give the best return, gaining the world or gaining Jesus. The reality that we all need to grasp is that we can't have both.

And when did I or you last really look at Jesus? Not just the commotion around him or the busyness and frustrations of church, but really consider him, consider his power and authority, perfection and compassion, his humility and his strength, his sacrifice of his own life.

Hebrews 12 says that we should look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

But Jesus isn't seeking to add to our burdens or our things to do list. This is foundational. Jesus is offering rest, not duty. One paraphrase quotes him in Matthew 11 asking the people, are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion?

Come to me, get away with me, and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me.

[15:03] Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Another way to think about leaving everything behind is to think about our ways of thinking, our world view. That we need to leave that behind. We may think that we might never be good enough to follow Jesus, or that we might have the opposite view.

We might think that we're quite okay as we are, and we have no need to follow him. A classic view of, we'll be along the lines of, I've lived a decent life, haven't hurt anyone, I've given to charity when I can.

Surely God will accept me. Or another view, perhaps more prevalent here on the island, might be, I can never do enough to be accepted. All my efforts are like filthy rags before God, so there's no hope.

None of these ways of thinking, however prevalent or embedded in our psyche, find their basis in the Bible. We are saved by grace alone, in Jesus alone.

[16:07] He is the only way. So we must leave all our preconceived, inbuilt prejudices behind, and follow him. Another way of thinking, who we currently follow, and the world is full of these terms in our social media age.

People that we choose to follow, and people who want to be an influencer themselves online, because they admire so much the influencers they have chosen to follow. Who do you follow? Who do you allow to influence the way you look at things, and leaving everything behind to follow Jesus? We have to allow his influence, his authority, to impact every area of our lives.

And thirdly, maybe it's possible that we are being asked to literally leave everything behind, all of our security and comfort, all that we have built up in life, that in reality could be gone in a moment if war were to break out or the financial markets collapse.

Once we are being called to go to another country, or another part of this country, to serve the Lord. And this will have its cost. I remember talking to a retired missionary, he said, how he and his wife struggle financially on a low pension, when some of their friends are retired with healthy pensions.

[17:22] And the devil can try and discourage him with this thought, was it worth it? He didn't say this, but knowing him a little, I'm pretty sure that he would be able to say with Paul and Philippians 3, but whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss, because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, whatever the cost.

This might sound radical, but surely it's essential, because what's the alternative? Ask just to be double-minded and filled with doubt. And James 1, 6-8 says, the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He's a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Surely we don't want that to characterise us.

All the heroes of history and of fictional stories celebrate people who had a clarity in their vision, who went after the one thing. Are we prepared to do that, or would we prefer to live lives of comfort and compromise?

[18 : 37] We all know what the right answer is, but are we prepared to follow through with it in order to truly know Jesus? And I'm asking that question of myself just as much as I'm asking each of you.

When you think about it, what would you be prepared to leave everything behind for? Do you or I actually care that much about anything or anyone? And the crucial thing to remember in all this is that in leaving things behind, we're not going to now be isolated.

We're following Jesus. He is with us, and we're never alone. We want to the last point, which is follow me.

So what does it actually mean to follow Jesus? This was the command from Jesus, and we read that Matthew left everything to do this. But what does it really mean for us today?

A few thoughts. Firstly, this is all of God's grace. Tim Keller said, God's seed by his grace, he does not leave us as we are.

[19 : 38] The same amazing grace that saves us is the same grace that leads us on. Another quote I heard recently was, the way in is the way on.

And so as we look to follow Jesus, we never leave the gospel truths and principles behind. All that we're really doing is applying them to our lives more and more. And this isn't bad news.

It isn't, you must do better news to the Christian. It's not, try harder news. This is good news, the best news. Following Jesus is the best thing both today, tomorrow, all of life, and ultimately for eternity.

So as we consider a few points as to what this means, ask yourself, am I following Jesus? The first thing I think about then is, this is a decisive action, being born again, becoming a Christian.

If the old is gone, the new has come, we're a new creation. That doesn't mean we suddenly have all figured out, but it does mean that we're on a completely new track. And although it might take some time for some folks to kind of realize what has happened, eventually everybody comes to the point that we should become a Christian to realize that change has taken place if the old has gone and the new has come.

[20 : 52] And critical to this decisive action is the need for repentance. We need to each admit our sin. To admit our sin is our biggest problem and that we're totally unable to help ourselves.

We need to be sorry for our sin. To realize the offense it is to our good Creator God and to feel regret for it. And in all this we see Matthew, he repented of his sin and was born again.

And although Matthew would only realize this later, we can know this now, that our sins and the punishment we are due to pay because of them can only be taken away by Jesus.

So we A, admit that we're sinners and we need God's help. We B, we believe that Jesus paid the price for our sin when he died on the cross in our place.

And C, we commit. We commit to following him all our days. So it's as simple as A, B, C, admit, believe, commit.

[21 : 50] Then we think we've got to come to realize that I am not in charge. I'm following him. So I'm not the one making up the rules. I heard someone say that when we pray the Lord's prayer, we pray your kingdom come.

And that then means that we're praying my kingdom go. In Tim Keller, he said, when you come to Christ, you must drop your conditions. You have to give up the right to say, I will obey you if I will do this.

If, as soon as you say, I will obey you if that is not obedience at all. You're saying you are my advisor, not my Lord. I will be happy to take your recommendations and I might even do some of them.

No. If you want Jesus with you, you have to give up the right to self-determination. Self-denial is an act of rebellion against our late modern culture of self-assertion.

But that's what we're called to and nothing less. So when we think of following and we think of leaving things behind, the next opportunity where the grass may or may not be greener, no, we're called to commit to where God has placed us.

[22 : 58] But there should also be a willingness to hold onto things of this world lightly and perhaps actually move on in seeking to serve and follow the Lord. The risk with talking like this is that sometimes maybe all of us have felt at different points that we really want to leave everything behind to get away from all the pressures that we face.

But that's not what Jesus is talking about because part of following Him is facing up to our God-given responsibilities with His help. However, that doesn't mean that He won't call us to move or that moving for a range of factors is somehow wrong.

The key is in discerning our hearts, which are corrupt above all things, the key is putting Him first. And that reminds me of the song that says, all of my ambitions, hopes and plans, I surrender these into your hands.

Jesus, all for Jesus. At a recent conference, I heard the line that followers of Jesus must be willing to be like losers, to appear like losers in the eyes of the world.

We might be capable of doing many things, but our resources of time, wealth and energy mean that we can only do so much. Are we willing to sacrifice world again and life experiences for the sake of following Him?

[24 : 12] Can you think of ways that that principle might apply to you? And how do we take these big picture thoughts and apply them to daily life? Well, we need to learn and follow His behavior, to learn to set our minds on things above where Christ is.

And Colossians 3 is up to your of life, is showing us a few verses from Colossians 3 to consider. Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you?

Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these, the wrath of God is coming.

And these you too once walked when you were living in them, but now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk from your mouth.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you've put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

[25 : 12] Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another.

And if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. These verses are immensely practical.

And that's before we get to verse 18 and following. I'll let you read down for yourselves. Two points. We've got to put off, we've got to put to death with the help of the Holy Spirit.

We've got to leave behind and actually put it to death the way that we used to live and think and speak. And against that we put on as we asked to do. And the answer comes compassion, kindness, humility and patience.

[26 : 15] These are the big things of following Jesus. Not immediately noticeable perhaps, but always beautiful and pointing to Jesus and not to ourselves. So the principle becomes practical.

Compassion is shown in kindness. Humility is shown in meekness. And the reality of our being God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, is that we put sin to death with a cold ruthlessness, wherever we find it, threatening to intrude into our thoughts, our words and our actions.

These are the ways of Jesus. And we need to learn from them because they don't come naturally, particularly if we've ever been wronged. So what does it look like to follow Jesus when you think of the rest of this evening and tomorrow and the week ahead as far as it's planned out?

How will it affect what we look at on our phones, our devices and our TVs? How will it affect how we speak to our family, how we interact with colleagues and those in our communities?

What about our walk with the Lord? Do we have a plan for our Bible reading over the coming week or month? Who do we talk to? Who do you talk to about following Jesus? And that's quite different from who we talk to about the church news.

[27 : 32] How do you move from reading the Bible to praying to God? These are questions it's good to consider. And as you think of, like I say tonight and tomorrow, we're making it specific and real now.

What do these things look like? And then what time lifestyle? The idea that we decide on the budget that we need for this phase of life and that the rest we give to God.

And if our income grows, our giving grows rather than the size of our house or our car or our bank balance, you may think that that sounds a bit crazy and extreme.

But are we even struggling with these questions? Are we just going with the flow of the world without thinking at all? Following Jesus is a whole different world view. And we're following Jesus and we're doing that individually, yes. But also we're not on our own. We're in a group of like-minded people, like the disciples, and often we get it wrong and sadly sometimes we wrong each other.

[28 : 28] And Colossians 3 deals with that as well in terms of bearing with each other and forgiving one another and encouraging each other with thankfulness in our hearts to God. But we're not alone and we shouldn't seek to cut ourselves off from those we differ from.

Matthew wasn't the only person called to follow Jesus and neither are we. The disciples were a great cross section of the community of the time and we should expect our churches to be similar. Matthew had a lot of baggage and that would have needed a lot of grace from the other disciples. Grace that was only possible by looking to Jesus, the Savior of each sinner, each equally helpless and hopeless without Him, all made up of people who fail and stumble but with the help of the shepherd, they keep going.

And lastly, our destination is clear, the home of Jesus, to be with Him, our great hope and reward in the reality of heaven where all sin will be gone and whatever cost there may be in following Jesus, He paid a greater cost to enable us to follow Him.

Jesus left the glory and the comfort of heaven to come to earth so that we might follow Him back to heaven. He took up His cross to die for us, His enemies. He took our sin and our shame onto Himself that we could be made clean and have this new life.

[29 : 48] And God the Father Himself did a calculation that He so loved the world that He would send His one and only Son to save us and the Son came to do this, leaving everything in order to fulfill this ultimate rescue mission.

And ultimately, He is the one who keeps us. In fact, Psalm 23 shows us that His goodness and mercy follow us. So we have this all-encompassing grace around us, leading us, keeping us, sustaining us and following us.

And lastly, what about Matthew? Has He let the door of the tax collectors' booth swing shut behind him? What was He thinking? And what would He think in less than three years when this Jesus, who He had been following, died on a cross outside of Jerusalem, rejected by men and rejected by God?

Did He realize that the only way it was possible for Him, Matthew, to find such acceptance with God was for Jesus, God's own Son, to be rejected by God Himself?

And as He saw that risen Jesus that first resurrection day and received the Holy Spirit a few weeks after that, did His hearts... I wonder if He would agree with the hymn writer who wrote, My heart is filled with thankfulness, to Him who bore my pain, who plumbed the depths of my disgrace and gave me life again, who crushed my curse of sinfulness and clothed me in His light and wrote His law of righteousness with power upon my heart.

[31 : 27] My heart is filled with thankfulness, to Him who walks beside, who floods my weaknesses with strength and causes fears to fly, whose every promise is enough for every step I take, sustaining me with arms of love and crowning me with grace.

My heart is filled with thankfulness, to Him who reigns above, whose wisdom is my perfect peace, whose every thought is love. For every day I have on earth is given by the King, so I will give my life, my all, to love and follow Him.

Well, thanks for listening and we're going to close now by singing that hymn.