

Rev Alasdair I. Macleod: Luke 5 - Called to follow Jesus

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Please turn back to our reading in the Gospel of Luke chapter 5 and the third of the stories that we read in verses 27 to 32 headed here Jesus calls Levi verse 27 after this he 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.

I've always loved hearing stories of people who were surprised by the Gospel, people who had never heard it before and who heard it for the first time and were blown away by it or people who had heard it before but who'd never really heard it before and who as it were heard it properly for the first time and were blown away by it.

I've heard stories of people giving their testimony, speaking about coming to church one morning or evening with absolutely no thought of responding to the Lord Jesus Christ saying well there's another dull preacher like myself, there's another dull evening or whatever it is in church and on that evening completely unexpectedly to themselves they heard the truth it spoke to them and they rose up and followed Jesus.

Maybe Levi on this particular day had no thought at all of following the Lord Jesus Christ, he wasn't even in church, wasn't even in the synagogue, he was sitting at his work and Jesus came and spoke to him and he rose up and followed.

He probably thought another dull day, another boring day dealing with the public who all hate me at the tax booth but on that boring day he met the least boring person in the universe.

[2 : 32] I think of an analogy in the Old Testament, remember the story of Jacob going to sleep one night when he's on the run, probably no thought that this might be one of the most important moments in his whole life and he thinks another boring night, another lonely night and he puts his head down on a very uncomfortable pillow and he has a dream about a stairway reaching to heaven and God speaks to him in a personal way making promises for his own life and making amazing promises for those who will be his descendants in the future.

Jacob might have said another dull night and it was one of the brightest nights he could ever have imagined. So my prayer is that for somebody here tonight this might be one of those occasions when you encounter Jesus, when you least expected him and respond to his call.

Now I want to look at this story in terms of call and response. Somebody I think it was today in the mass mentioned, was it yesterday, talk about call and response in the kinds of churches where people are called and respond or where somebody's preaching and from the pews you get hallelujah and amen and even keep going brother when you've been speaking for a whole load.

Well I don't expect that kind of response to my calls tonight but I want you to see that rhythm in this story as we have it actually, I think it's the rhythm of the whole Bible, it's the rhythm of all preaching that God is calling and we are called to respond to God's call.

So in this story I want you to see first of all Jesus calls and then secondly Levi responds, a call and a response.

[4 : 42] So let's think first of all of Jesus calling. I want to highlight four things about Jesus here.

He calls as the loving Jesus, he calls as the seeking Jesus, he calls as the demanding Jesus, he calls as the saving Jesus.

First of all the loving Jesus. Now without going into it in any detail because you all know this, Levi was a tax collector and tax collectors were hated in that culture.

They were working for the occupying Roman power and nobody liked them for what they were doing. For all kinds of reasons that occupation was unclean, again I won't go into the details and they weren't regarded as really proper Jews anymore and they were often guilty of extortion, you know, if nobody likes you because of what you do you might think well at least I'll lie my own pockets and get some sort of benefit out of this job where everybody hates me.

So they regarded us traitors and quizlings and regarded us thieves and extortioners and regarded us religiously unclean because of what they have to do.

[6 : 20] So Levi would have been held in absolute contempt by his fellow countrymen and women.

Part of a class of people who as you can see in the story are associated with people called sinners. We would say they're notorious sinners, we're all sinners but they would speak of the sinners and these were notorious, terrible, public, scandalous sinners.

You see in verse 30 the Pharisees say why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? They were lumped together with the worst of the worst in the eyes of the community.

Nobody liked them, nobody wanted to spend time with them, nobody wanted to be their friend, nobody wanted to be seen saying more to them than they had to do to deal with their taxes or tolls or customs duties or whatever it might be.

But here is Jesus. Here is Jesus seeing that man and loving that man. Here is Jesus in public going up and speaking to that man.

[7 : 39] Here is Jesus saying to that man, I want to be your friend. I want you to come and join my group.

Absolutely no contempt here in the heart of Jesus. But we often say that grace is love for the unloved and the unlovely.

And here is somebody who is unloved by everyone and regarded as hugely unlovely and yet Jesus loves this man.

It's a very impressive thing in the man Jesus Christ that there is no prejudice in him.

We all have to examine our own hearts about our prejudices, our prejudices about other people, other classes, other races, other whatever it might be.

[8 : 39] The world is full of all kinds of people and Jesus loves them all. God so loved the world that he gave his own son.

The world in all its variety, in all its disparity, in all its colours and classes and creeds and levels of education and wealth and all the rest of it.

And Jesus has no prejudice in his heart against anyone. Somebody has said, one of the scholars who is written on this, has said, for the first time in his life as a tax collector, Levi was not being treated as a piece of dirt.

Many people in our world today feel they're treated like dirt by other people for some reason. But Jesus never treats anyone like dirt.

So here's a loving call from the loving heart of the loving Jesus. It was love that took him to this world, nothing else.

[9 : 49] It was love that took him to the cross. It was love that nailed him and kept him on the cross. And it's love that keeps him speaking tonight through the gospel, through his own word, to me and to you, about his love for me and for you.

The call that came to Levi was demonstrably and publicly the loving call of a loving Jesus. How do we respond to that love?

It's also the call of the seeking Jesus, secondly. Jesus sees Levi sitting at his tax booth and he calls him there because Jesus is living in the real world.

Jesus is living, walking, talking, preaching, engaging, seeking in the work-a-day world. And it's in that context that he calls Levi.

He doesn't wait for Levi to come to him. He goes to find Levi. He doesn't wait for Levi to come to the synagogue next time he's preaching.

[11 : 05] I'm told by some of the scholars that I was reading on this that these people, like Levi, would not be welcomed in the synagogue.

You have people at the door here who welcome you in. They would have people on the door who would make sure that Levi didn't get in to hear Jesus and anyone else speak in the synagogue.

So Jesus goes to this man where he is and calls him at work. Now, it's an example of the Jesus who sought people then where they were.

And it's an example of the Jesus who still today through the gospel comes to us where we are and calls us where we are.

He doesn't wait for us to make ourselves ready for him, to prepare ourselves to be good enough to encounter him, but he comes to us where we are and we're supposed to say, just as I am, I come.

[12 : 19] It may also say something to us as a church and as churches about our own activity in seeking lost, perhaps in terms of our personal witness, you are involved in the work of the world.

And we are all called in whatever providence God has placed us in whatever situation we find ourselves to be the witnesses of Jesus Christ there, to speak to my neighbor, to speak to my workmate, to speak to my colleague, to be Christ's ambassador where everybody has placed me out there in the work of the world where most people won't find themselves in a place like this to hear the gospel.

So Jesus, as it were, through us because we are now there he is in the body walking around talking to people.

Now his body is in heaven. So we in the world are the body of Christ, as the Bible says, and we are called to be the body of Christ like Jesus going out and seeking to reach people where they are.

That can be true physically, but it's also important to think about how that's true psychologically, to speak to people where they are.

[13 : 54] Now I don't claim to be very good at that, but I'm in a congregation, in a city, where a lot of people are very good at that, where they talk about the culture and how the culture thinks and ways of reaching the culture of the cultures today, where people think so differently from even 20 years ago, never mind 100 years ago.

So the church needs to work, Christians need to work, I need to work, I try to understand where people are so that we might seek them where they are and go to them where they really are intellectually and emotionally and socially and psychologically and culturally to speak to people where they are, to begin where they are and enable them as far as we can to hear and be captured by the gospel.

In terms of the work of the world, I don't know how specific I can be in this illustration, but in Edinburgh, let's say in a particular church, a particular minister has a wife who like her husband is very interested in football, as many of us are.

It's maybe more unusual to have a wife as obsessed with football as her husband, but there you go. So she has, in the last couple of years, become the chaplain of a leading Premier football team in Scotland, even those of you who hate football would know straight away if I said the name of the team.

She's the chaplain of the women's team, the ladies football team of that particular Premier team.

[16 : 04] She is the chaplain to the women who play football and very good they are too. And she goes to their training and she talks to them and there are all kinds of things I don't know about what she does with them, but she's getting to know these girls who have no connection with a church and absolutely no knowledge at all of the Bible and the Gospel.

And every so often, every few weeks after training, she'll say to them, come for dinner tonight and a squad of 18 young women will go to her house for dinner after training and spend a couple of hours there eating and talking.

And recently, because they were going abroad to a prestigious tournament, she was asked by the club to accompany the players and the staff on their 10 day trip abroad, whatever it was, because she is so valuable, because she is so respected, because the girls like her and trust her and talk to her about issues they don't talk to anybody else and shoot about and there she is just beginning to speak to people with no connection with church about the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a very good illustration, I think, of somebody seeing, going for an opportunity and being used by the Lord Jesus Christ to speak to people without that initiative, people who would never have encountered the Gospel, the seeking Jesus.

Thirdly, it's the call of the demanding Jesus. You notice the way that Jesus says to Levi, follow me. It's a demand from the royal Jesus.

[18 : 06] Now I think this is Levi's conversion night. I forgot at the beginning to go into the discussion people have about whether he's somebody who's just been called to be a full-time disciple.

I don't think so. It's a little like some of these other stories, but it's also very different from them because Levi seems here to be becoming a Christian who then immediately wants his friends to meet Jesus.

This is an absolutely decisive change in Levi's life and everything changes from this moment and I'm certain it is his conversion story. In that conversion story, he hears this imperious call from Jesus who says, follow me.

You notice it's a call from a king. It's not suggesting, let's have a chat about whether it might be a good idea for you to think about whether I am who I claim to be, maybe there are times for that kind of discussion, long patient working with people who don't know anything about the gospel.

We don't know what Levi knew before this. Maybe he knew quite a lot from listening to people's conversations about Jesus. Maybe he was curious about Jesus.

[19 : 27] Maybe he was very open to Jesus and waiting for the moment when he could meet this Jesus. We just don't know, but we know that when this call came, Jesus uttered it as a command and Levi responded.

Notice how urgent the call is from Jesus. There's no time for delay. He's saying to Levi, the appropriate time for you to come to me is now, today, this very moment.

There's a sense of course, and with that, it's always true when you hear the gospel, isn't it? The time to come to Jesus is now, because Jesus is worthy that you come to him now.

To put it off is to say, he's not worthy of my faith tonight. I'll leave it for a while. But to see the worthiness of Jesus is to say, well, he's worthy of my faith and my love and my trust now.

He'll never be more worthy or less worthy. He's always the worthy Jesus, supremely worthy, and he deserves that I trust him now.

[20 : 42] Notice how focused on himself, how personal the call is. Follow me, demanding complete allegiance to himself.

It's one of the strands of evidence for the divine self-consciousness of Jesus. He says, listen to me. Come to me.

Drink of me. Follow me. He's saying that a man or a woman's destiny hinges on what they do with him, with Jesus.

So this is the imperious, royal Jesus saying to Levi, follow me. And follow me now.

There's no time to lose. Come to me. Then fourthly, he's the saving Jesus. It's the call of a saving Jesus.

[21 : 38] The word comes to Levi with power, clearly. Jesus calls him and leaving everything. He gets up and follows Jesus.

So the call draws this immediate response. I've heard of stories like that where somebody hears the gospel literally for the first time and becomes a Christian.

Now this is a wonderful thing that's happening here where the call comes with this efficacy. We talk about the efficacious call, the powerful divine call of the gospel.

And here is that irresistible call of irresistible grace coming from this irresistible Jesus.

It's an effective divine summons from the lips of Jesus and it comes with the power for Levi to respond.

[22 : 43] And I've heard people often tell stories about how the gospel came to them one morning or one evening or perhaps somewhere else in some other meeting.

Just with this directness as if it was just for them. They'd heard it hundreds of times. It had come in a general way.

But this night perhaps it came in a personal way, in an effective way, in a saving way. And they knew it was for them.

And they felt as if they were the only person in the church as if the preacher knew them and was just speaking to them.

They'd tell me everywhere I go not to use my poor wife as an illustration again, but just as once.

[23 : 43] Probably people, one or two people from back who probably heard this before I forget when they tell these stories. But we've never been abroad very much, hardly at all.

But we had friends who were going to go to Paris for three days. And they said, have you ever been to France? No. Ever been to Paris? No. Why don't you come with us?

We'll organise everything. And you can just come with us. So we went to Paris for three days. And Cathy really wanted to go and see, I don't know why, the Mona Lisa in the Louvre.

And eventually we got there and we found the right corridor. And there was the Mona Lisa on a wall. And I thought to myself, it's a bit small.

I thought actually Cathy was far cuter than the Mona Lisa. But never mind, there she is. And she's got tears coming down her cheeks.

[24 : 43] Is that something wrong? I never thought I would be here just a few feet away seeing the Mona Lisa for myself.

She was really moved, overcome by this moment. Remember a wee while later she was talking about the Mona Lisa again? And the privilege of being there.

And she said, wasn't it wonderful, she says, that it was just me. And obviously I was a few feet away. But she says it was just me and the Mona Lisa, the painting.

Just me and the painting. I said, no it wasn't. There was a crowd around. No, it was just me and the Mona Lisa. And then I showed her a photograph.

And there she is in front of the Mona Lisa, turning around to the camera. And people all round her. But as she remembered that moment, it was so moving to her for some reason that she felt that it was just her, they alone in this almost mystical, spiritual moment before that painting.

[25 : 46] And that's a wonderful thing when that happens in terms of the Gospel. That people are so gripped by what it's saying to them that they think it's just me.

I don't care about anybody else. I don't care even if tears are rolling down my cheeks. I don't care what anybody else says or thinks. This is for me.

This Jesus is for me. And I'm listening to Jesus tonight. As if for the first time I want Jesus, this Jesus, to be my savior.

And the Gospel is coming to you with saving power because Jesus is speaking it right into your heart and soul. And that's, of course, a thing to pray for all of us as we think about our friends, our families, people we'd love to see converted to pray that the Gospel would come to them with this personal, saving, effective, efficacious, divine power as a summons from the King coming with all the power of the Holy Spirit to enable that person to respond to Jesus.

So that's the call. But let's come secondly more quickly, I promise, to Levi's response to the call. Again I want to look at four things.

[27 : 11] How does Levi respond to Jesus? How should we respond to Jesus? Well he responds by renouncing, by following, by celebrating, and then over a period of time by serving.

First of all he responds by renouncing. He gives up his old life, leaving everything he rose and followed him.

And Jesus says in verse 32, thinking of Levi is a great illustration of this. I have come to call sinners to repentance.

He's saying that what Levi did is a dramatic, acted parable of what repentance is, that somebody leaves their old life behind and gets up and goes in a new direction.

That's repentance. The language is about a change of mind and attitude and it's about a turnaround of life.

[28 : 25] You've been going one way in one direction, obsessed with all kinds of things and you decide that your life has been misdirected and in all kinds of ways your life has been a mess.

And you want Jesus to turn your life around and so you repent of that life and lifestyle and you turn and you go in a new direction with Jesus.

This Gospel of Luke is full of Jesus speaking about repentance. I could take you to many passages but perhaps the most famous is in chapter 15 where you have Jesus speaking about the parable of the lost sheep and in verse 7 there's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who think they don't need repentance.

Then the parable of the lost coin and again verse 10 there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

And then you have the great story, the parable of the prodigal son, a demonstration of repentance in the life of that man, a story that you all know very well.

[29 : 56] A young man who decided to go in a direction that took him away from his father and away from his father's house and away from his father's restraints and constraints and took him away to be free and took him away with money to enjoy himself.

Then one day he finds himself with the pigs and he thinks this is madness and he comes to his senses and he decides that he's going to turn back.

He's going to go to his father's house and his father welcomes this repentant prodigal son. The father runs to meet him, the father hugs him and the father celebrates that this son who was effectively dead is alive again.

This lost son has been found and has come home. That's what repentance means for me and for you. It means coming home to where we really belong.

That we give up what is wrong in our lives by God's grace. That we give up the things that might hinder us loving and serving Jesus as we should.

[31 : 18] That we say I want shot of anything that will stop me trusting Jesus and living for Jesus. I want to leave the old life behind.

I want to go in a new direction with Jesus. I want to come home. I want to come home to where I belong. I want to come home to a father and to a father's welcome and I want to come home in such a way that I am home there forever.

So that's what Levi does. He gives up the old life and his life is turned around. Secondly, he responds by following.

This is the language of discipleship. He rose and followed Jesus. He begins a life of following Jesus.

The way that Luke tells the story here, he makes that very clear in the language that he wrote. He's telling us that Levi's leaving everything and getting up from that table was something decisive.

[32 : 34] But then that the following was something that started and went on and on and on. So he's saying, Levi in a moment decided for Jesus and in a moment he got up and he left the old life behind.

And then he started a life of following, following, following, following, following Jesus. A following that never ends throughout this life.

In fact, a life of following that we're told goes on in the book of Revelation as the people of God follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

And so Levi begins this life of following. It's a way of describing a Christian, I think. I know you use the language of following here in terms of going to the prayer meeting and so on.

But of course, you know it's broader than that. And following is language in the Bible for the whole Christian life of discipleship. That we follow this Jesus, for example, as our shepherd, wherever he leads.

[33 : 42] As his sheep, we follow him. We follow his lead. We follow his model. We follow his example. We follow his teaching. We follow his guidance. We want just to know where Jesus wants us to go.

We want to follow him in and into every single area of life. It's so important to follow the right person and the right people.

We know ourselves, don't we, with our children or grandchildren. We don't want them to fall into the wrong company and follow the wrong kind of people. The best person to follow whatever age you are is to follow Jesus.

It's a dangerous thing to follow the wrong person. I remember being at a wedding in Northern Ireland, it's a trivial story, but a wedding in Northern Ireland, a student wedding, and a self and a cafe are there and we're being driven to the reception from the church to the reception quite a distance by a couple of other folks.

We're following a car that knew the way and then we lost that car for a few seconds, as you do, and then we saw it again. We followed it and followed it and we're going into Belfast and we're going to the parts of the city that we didn't expect to go through.

[35 : 09] We're surprised and the car turns and we turn, the car turns and we turn and eventually we, in a part of the city that I thought clearly this is not where we're meant to be going, we draw up beside the car at lights and we look at them, they look at us, we don't know each other and we shot off one way, they shot off the other way.

They probably wondered who are these people who are following us and eventually we found our way. But it can be really dodgy, can't it, to follow the wrong person, to follow the wrong leader.

And here is Jesus, the person in the world, the person in the universe most worthy of our following him. He will never take us in the wrong direction and he will take at last to a destination that is spoken off in the Bible as the new heavens and the new earth where everything will be perfect and wonderful forever.

To follow Jesus in this life is to follow Jesus through death into the next life and is then to follow Jesus in a wonderful new world forever and forever and forever.

Start following Jesus and you'll never regret that you started following him. Even through the endless ages of eternity you will always be glad for the day that you started following Jesus.

[36 : 38] The third part of Levi's response, I'll just mention it, is by celebrating. He holds a party at his house for his previous colleagues.

He wants them all to meet this Jesus. Notice verse 29, and Levi made him a great feast. It's a feast in honour of Jesus.

He made Jesus a great feast. It's an evangelistic party and he invites his friends to this dinner party, whatever you want to call it, supper party and he wants them to meet this Jesus.

He clearly takes a step, somebody has said, with banners flying. Not in some kind of quiet spirit or resignation but with banners flying.

He wants everybody to know that he's met Jesus and Jesus has changed his life and he wants his friends to meet Jesus and he wants their lives to be changed by the same Jesus.

[37 : 44] Of course Jesus is criticised for associating with people like this but Jesus simply defends himself on medical grounds.

He says in the story, I'm a doctor, I'm the great physician, I'm the healer. Imagine a doctor who only wanted to see you when you were well.

What good would that doctor be? You want a doctor who wants to see you when you need a doctor and Jesus is saying, people like Levi need a doctor.

You Pharisees and scribes, well you're so good. I think it's said with heavy irony, you're so good you don't need a doctor.

But you always say that these people are sinners and they're spiritually sick. Well here I am, the answer to their terminal spiritual illness and I'm going to get as close as I can to these sick people because I want to make them well.

[38 : 45] That's what he's saying about Levi. I got as close as I could to this sick man and I have made him whole. So Levi celebrates his wholeness in Christ by holding this evangelistic banquet so that his friends can meet Jesus.

A lot we could think about how perhaps we can introduce our friends to Jesus too. Then fourthly and finally he responds not just by renouncing and by following and by celebrating but also by serving.

By beginning a life where he knows that he will serve Jesus because Jesus always makes that clear throughout the gospel stories that to follow him is to begin to serve him as not just a savior but a Lord.

Now Levi wouldn't have known what that service would involve necessarily in the future. He just knew that he was now willing to follow Jesus and to witness for Jesus and to serve Jesus in any way that he could.

He served him already with his banquet, evangelistically. Now he just wants to serve Jesus with the rest of his days.

[40 : 09] And again without going into the details I think it's clear from putting the gospel accounts together that this Levi is the same person who we read about in Matthew's gospel who is called Matthew.

If you read Matthew chapter 9 verses 9 and following you'll read a story that's exactly the story that the guys called Matthew and then in chapter 10 of Matthew you'll see a list of the disciples, the apostles and there is someone called Matthew who's a tax collector.

So you put the two together and for some reason this man either had two names or takes another name perhaps takes the name Matthew as a Christian.

I don't know but it's the same story, it's the same conversion, it's the same tax collector. Levi becomes known as Matthew and Matthew writes the gospel of Matthew.

So Jesus takes this man who clearly has all kinds of gifts maybe because of the job he's had he speaks one or two languages, maybe Matthew is a great note taker of the stories of Jesus or whatever but eventually Matthew's gifts are harnessed and serviced to Jesus so that he writes the gospel of Matthew and how many people have been converted through the gospel of Matthew and sermons on the gospel of Matthew all because on this particular day Matthew heard the call of Jesus and responded.

[41 : 53] And Jesus in a much more humble way I'm sure for all of us here wants us to yield our gifts and our talents and our time and our opportunities to him in service.

We might do something amazing, we might do something very humble, we might speak to somebody and not think much of it and then later on people will say when they hear somebody's testimony, oh that word from that woman led him to this and led to this and led to this and eventually that person becomes a Christian.

You were used as a chain in that and eventually that person becomes a world famous preacher and thousands are converted through this person.

Now you served, you were a link in a chain, you don't know where anything you do might lead, you don't know where even answer to your prayers might lead as you begin to trust Jesus and pray for the needs of others and the needs of the community, the needs of the island, the needs of the world.

Your prayer might be absolutely vital in some change happening in some life or some community that impacts and ripples down the generations.

[43 : 12] You don't know, all that Jesus wants you to do is say goodbye to the old, begin to follow him, celebrate what he's done for you and yield yourself in service to him and whatever he asks you to do, you do it for him and for his glory and who knows what the consequences might be for time and for eternity.

So tonight will someone here, please not hear the challenge of Jesus and the challenge of the conversion story and the subsequent life of Levi and say, I want like Levi to say to Jesus who's calling me tonight, yes, I will follow you.

I will follow you from this night, from henceforth and for always, you will be my savior and my Lord.

Do with me what you will and may you have the glory in my life for now and for the rest of my life in this world and then for all eternity.

And I will always thank you Jesus for the night that you called me to start following you. Amen. And I believe it there.