

## Living Word Small Group Study Guide

March 22-28, 2020

### Sermon Series: This Changes Everything

#### Week Four: "From Levi to Matthew"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

#### **Suggested Opening Prayer:**

*Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.*

*Lord God, source of all truth, wisdom, justice, and love, lead me throughout this day of service to you. Help me constantly to rest my life upon the eternal foundations of your love and presence. Save me from haste and confusion, from wrongful desire, and the net of evil. Through the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, enlighten, instruct, and guide me all the day long. In the name of Jesus, Amen.*

#### **Sermon Series Theme:**

Throughout the Gospels we find that when people encountered Jesus they were changed; and for the better. That same transformation is available to you, a change for the better, when you encounter Christ in your life.

#### **This Week's Sermon Theme:**

Levi/Matthew moves from greed and a willingness to cheat others to one who would steadfastly lead and record his experience in this Gospel. Does your focus on your possessions prevent you from following Christ in the way He calls?

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** Matthew 9:9-13 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

#### **For Group Discussion:**

##### ***What does the text actually SAY?***

*The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.*

Where is Matthew sitting when Jesus sees him? (9:9)

What does Jesus say to Matthew, and how does Matthew respond? (9:9)

Who joins Matthew and Jesus at dinner at Matthew's house? (9:10)

What group of people sees this dinner and objects to the guest list? (9:11)

How does Jesus characterize those who are in attendance at the dinner – healthy, or sick? (9:12)

What Scripture does Jesus command the Pharisees to go study more deeply? (9:13)

What two groups of people does Jesus contrast in His response to the Pharisees? Which does Jesus say He has come to call? (9:13)

### ***What questions does the text raise for us?***

*The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are "I wonder" questions that the group might want to pursue together.*

Clearly, there is some stigma on the role of tax collector. We might wonder, why were tax collectors so despised?

As with the perhaps more familiar stories of the call of Peter and Andrew, and James and John dropping their fishing nets to follow Jesus (see Matthew 4:18-22), Matthew immediately drops everything to follow Jesus. We might wonder, what could possibly entice someone to make such a decision?

It makes sense that Matthew knew other tax collectors to invite to dinner with Jesus – but we might wonder, who are these "sinners", and what had they done, or what was wrong with them that they are labeled this way in the story? We might wonder, is there a specific group of people in view here? Isn't everyone a sinner? Who exactly is this story talking about?

With no description, we might also wonder, who exactly are these Pharisees? Were they at the dinner, too? How did they either see it or find out about it later? What was the big deal about eating with either of these groups of people – tax collectors or 'sinners'?

We might wonder, would the tax collectors and "sinners" have been offended that Jesus refers to them as "the sick", who need a doctor? Why does Jesus refer to them this way? What kind of healing does Jesus imply by referring to Himself as their 'doctor'?

Jesus seems to assume that these Pharisees are familiar with the Scriptural quote, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice", but that they do not really understand it. We might wonder, how DID these Pharisees interpret that Scripture, then?

We might also wonder about Jesus' implication that the Pharisees are the "righteous" He did not come for, but the people He is eating with are the "sinners" He DID come for. Does that mean the Pharisees really WERE righteous? Furthermore, didn't Jesus come for EVERYONE? That might make us wonder, what would have made the Pharisees welcome at the dinner?

### **Commentary on the text:**

*The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.*

See also: Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32; Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15; Hosea 6:6; Romans 3:10

The story of the calling of Matthew and the subsequent dinner at his house occurs in all three “synoptic” gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. However, in Mark, he is referred to as “Levi, son of Alpheus”, and in Luke, simply as “Levi” (see Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-32). Most scholars agree that upon becoming a follower of Christ, Levi must have taken on the name of Matthew, and that when he wrote his Gospel, he used his Christian name in the story rather than his original name of Levi, whereas Mark and Luke tell the story using his original name. Elsewhere in Mark and Luke, whenever the disciple is named, he has the name “Matthew”. Only the Gospel of Matthew specifically calls Matthew “the tax collector” in the list of the twelve apostles (see Matthew 10:3 vs. Mark 3:18 and Luke 6:15), making the equivalence between Levi/Matthew, the tax collector, and Matthew, the disciple, clear.

Tax collectors in first century Palestine were widely despised as greedy and self-serving, preying upon the Jewish populace. They often extorted more than was required for the taxes they collected, and kept the excess. Furthermore, it was widely believed among those Jews who attempted to live by the Jewish law that tax collectors also violated commandments concerning interacting with Gentiles, making them “impure”. Finally, they were seen as collaborators with the Roman occupiers of their land, traitors to their own people. It would, truly, have been scandalous in the community for Jesus, as a Jewish rabbi, to call a tax collector to be among His followers.

Still, Jesus does call Levi/Matthew, and like those first called by Jesus, the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, and John, He responds immediately. We should note that in Matthew’s telling of the story, Jesus has already been in ministry, performing numerous healings and miracles, and even having delivered the famous Sermon on the Mount. It is likely that, unlike the first disciples, Matthew knew about Jesus, had heard the stories of His interactions with other members of the lowest, despised castes of Jewish society, and perhaps even was aware that the established religious leaders, the Pharisees, were unhappy with Him. While we do not have the specific story of the invitations to the dinner party, Matthew must have recognized that through His willingness to call him into discipleship, Jesus would be willing to eat with His other tax-collector friends, as well.

The label “sinners” here probably refers to other non-tax-collector colleagues and associates of Matthew, who were “contaminated” according to Jewish purity laws due to their close association with the tax collectors. Possibly, they were other ethnic Jews who had abandoned the concept of obedience to the Jewish law, thereby placing themselves outside the Jewish covenant community. That Jesus would share table fellowship with such people really was astounding, because sharing table fellowship implied complete acceptance. From the Pharisees’ perspective, this would amount to Jesus, too, abandoning the law and rejecting God’s covenant community.

By quoting Hosea 6:6, Jesus places the focus of His ministry squarely on the concept of mercy and compassion. Even though the Law also demands sacrifices be made for sin, Hosea insists that failure to extend mercy and compassion makes obedience to the laws concerning sacrifice an insufficient expression of true faith. Jesus’ ministry is all about extending unmerited favor to the unworthy – hence, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners”. Paradoxically, although the Pharisees see themselves as “the righteous”, in challenging them to delve into the meaning of Hosea 6:6, Jesus suggest that perhaps they, too, are among the “sinners”. In truth, as Paul later writes, “there is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). Hence, Jesus calls everyone into relationship with Him.

The point of Matthew's calling, and the subsequent dinner party, is that no one is so despicable that they are beyond the love of Jesus. Jesus came to Matthew just as he was, and Matthew's life would never be the same. Through his encounter with Jesus, Matthew gave up his greed and his focus on possessions, to join the movement dedicated to the proclamation that mercy, compassion, and forgiveness are available to all, through Jesus.

### **Final Thoughts for Discussion:**

*The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.*

What parallels can you think of in modern-day society that might be equivalent to a tax-collector in Jesus' day?

Are there specific careers today that you think glorify possessions and wealth?

Are those careers scandalous, or widely accepted among us? How does that change how we read the story of Matthew the tax collector?

Who could the church be in ministry with that might be perceived as "scandalous"?

What hold do possessions have on your life?

In what way would releasing that hold be a counter-cultural thing to do?

What could you let go of that would result in a closer walk with Jesus?

### **Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Holy and loving God, guide us to discover the things in our lives that are holding us back from fully following Jesus. Teach us what it means to love mercy, and not sacrifice. Give us the grace to seek the lost, and the courage to be scandalous. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*