

Jesus Calls Levi / Comments on Fasting
Matthew 9:9-17; Mark 2:13-22; Luke 5:27-39

He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, “Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.” (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Levi may have been a general tax collector working for Herod Antipas. However, since he was situated at an office in Capernaum, Levi was more likely a customs agent, charging import duties on wares brought through this town on important nearby trade routes. It is remarkable that he abandons a secure and prosperous job to follow Jesus' call.

- Some taxes went directly to the Roman government, but tolls and customs taxes (usually levied at 2-3%, but multiplied for traders who passed through many territories) supported cities where they were taken. Tax gatherers were regarded as collaborators with the Romans and despised by religious people. Some commentators have argued that “sinners” may refer specifically to those who did not eat food in ritual purity, but the term probably refers to anyone who lived sinfully.

- Table fellowship indicated intimate relations among those who shared it. The Pharisees were particularly scrupulous about their rules on eating, and did not like to eat with less scrupulous people, like tax gatherers and sinners. Here they assume that Jesus, being a wise teacher, ought to share their religious convictions.

- The Law required fasting only on the Day of Atonement, but many other fasts had been added by religious Jews, especially by groups like the Pharisees (many Pharisees fasted without water twice a week, especially in the dry season). Fasting was an important practice to join with prayer or penitence, so it would have been unusual for disciples (prospective rabbis) to have avoided it altogether. A teacher was regarded as responsible for the behavior of his disciples.

- Wedding feasts required seven days of festivity, and one was not permitted to fast or engage in other acts of mourning or difficult labor during a wedding feast. Here Jesus makes an analogy about the similar inappropriateness of fasting in his own time.

- Jesus uses two ordinary facts to make his point about the inappropriateness of fasting in the present circumstance: (1) Older clothes had already shrunk somewhat from washing; (2) Wine could be kept in either jars or wineskins; the latter would stretch. Old wineskins were already stretched to capacity by fermenting wine within them. Consequently, if they were then filled with unfermented wine, the old skins would break when the new wine expanded.

Questions:

+ When Jesus said, "Follow me," what did Levi stand to lose and to gain by following him?
What do you stand to lose and gain by following Jesus? How will you respond to his call?

+ Why are the tax collectors and sinners following Jesus, but not the scribes and Pharisees?
What does it mean to follow Jesus? Are you following Jesus? If so, what's the evidence?
What does "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" mean? How does it apply to you?

+ In his response to the Pharisees question about fasting, what point is Jesus making, and why?
How does Jesus' parable (Mark 2:18-22) relate to his response to the question about fasting?
How does the parable apply to life in general? How does it apply to your life in particular?