

## Quisling Levi

[Luke 5:27-32](#)

Jesus' Extended Family  
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It was said of Abraham Lincoln, while he was President, that people either admired him immensely or hated him wholeheartedly. With Lincoln, there was no middle ground. Both North and South knew just where he stood on slavery, so even before his inauguration seven states had already seceded from the Union. At Lincoln's death, however, almost everyone agreed that his greatness lay beyond politics. Walt Whitman said that Lincoln was the "grandest figure on the crowded canvas of the nineteenth century." Leo Tolstoy compared him to Jesus: "Lincoln was a Christ in miniature," he wrote, "a saint of humanity whose name will live thousands of years in the legends of future generations."

But if there are similarities between Christ and Lincoln, there are also vast differences. One is this: Lincoln has long since been raised above controversy; Jesus Christ has not. Jesus remains as enigmatic as ever. His name is a household word, but there is no broad, universal consensus on who he is or what he stands for. Jesus attracts and Jesus repels, and his treatment of Levi illustrates both attitudes.

Jesus certainly attracted this tax collector. No sooner does Jesus say "Follow me" than Levi submits his resignation to the district director of the IRS, locks the office door, and walks off the map into uncharted territory. I have the feeling there must be more to the story than Luke is telling us. Surely this wasn't their first encounter; one doesn't jettison a lucrative career just because a total stranger walks in the office and says, "Follow me." Elsewhere the Gospel writers tell us that they are giving us the highlights of Jesus' ministry, not the minute details. Therefore, we can safely assume that there is more to Levi's story, that Jesus has been cultivating Levi for several weeks or even months, and that this invitation to follow Jesus comes at the climax of a longer relationship.

Still, we have to ask why Levi turns his back on a profitable livelihood to go after a penniless preacher. Levi, after all, was on his way to becoming a very wealthy man. Tax collecting was a franchise. Roman citizens contracted with the government to collect taxes in a given area, and they in turn sub-contracted the operation to locals like Levi. As a result, the system lent itself to graft and extortion, but as long as Rome got what it required, the contractors and sub-contractors were free to collect as much as they could get away with, and keep the surplus. So Levi, one of the sub-contractors, must have had a tidy fortune already stashed away in a Swiss bank account, with plenty more on the way. And he walked away from it all to follow Jesus. Why? What was the attraction?

At the risk of oversimplification, Jesus attracts people because he accepts us just as we are. He never leaves us as we are, but he accepts us as we are. Earlier in this chapter a leper approaches Jesus. Lepers back then were shunned and despised because leprosy was thought to be God's punishment for sin. Lepers were social outcasts, because if God were punishing them, no respectable person would have anything to do with them. But listen to the conversation between the leper and Jesus, as recorded in the Jerusalem Version of the Bible: "ESir, if you want to, you can cure me." Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said, "EOf course I want to! Be cured!" That's the Savior who accepts people just as they are. He doesn't wait for them to turn over a new leaf, or join the church, or give ten percent of their income. In the leper's case he didn't even wait for him to repent of his sins. Jesus responded immediately and enthusiastically: "Of course I want to cure you!" Jesus acted with out-and-out grace. Jesus accepted him just as he was.

His invitation to Levi was, if anything, even more shocking. Levi, a Jew, was collaborating with the hated Romans who had conquered and occupied Palestine almost one hundred years earlier. During World War II we called such collaborators "quislings," after Vidkun Quisling, a Norwegian politician who betrayed his country to the Nazis and became its puppet ruler. Quisling did his best to make Nazis out of his fellow Norwegians, but his efforts were a total failure. Following the war he was held responsible for sending a thousand Jews to concentration camps, and he was executed in October 1945. Levi was a First Century quisling, and his fellow-Jews hated him for it. As far as the religious leaders were concerned, Levi was beyond repentance, because repentance required that he identify every instance of graft, every person defrauded, and every penny collected dishonestly. And since it was unlikely that Levi kept two sets of books, there was no way he could satisfy the official conditions for repentance and forgiveness.

But Jesus accepted him. More than that, Jesus made him one of his twelve apostles, one of his closest and most trusted associates. And that was Jesus' attraction. He forgave people before they repented, he gave them his trust before they earned it, he recruited them with all their dirty linen, and he offered them his unconditional love.

That was his attraction; it was also his downfall: "The Pharisees and the scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, 'EWhy do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'" (Vs. 30) And before many months go by their complaints will harden into hostility, and their hostility will nail him to a cross. Because what was a compelling attraction to some was to others a gross abomination. You simply could not convince the orthodox pastors and theologians that Jesus was acting for God when he healed lepers and partied with quislings. No, they expected such sinners to be penitent if they wanted divine favor, to make full restitution for their sins if they desired to have their prayers answered, to learn all the right words and to agree to all the right doctrines before they could get into God's good graces. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was standing religion on its head, and they hated him for it.

Levi loved him for it. And he could hardly wait to have his friends over, to introduce them to Jesus, and to go on record as a follower of the Nazarene.

Years later, if tradition is correct, Levi went as a missionary to North Africa, and while there he composed a document in honor of the one who so lovingly accepted him. That document is still being published in thousands of languages and dialects. You could call it the Gospel of Levi, but we know it as the Gospel of Matthew, for Matthew is Levi, and Levi is Matthew. So, did Levi repent of his former behavior? Yes, but only after Jesus took him into his extended family. Then, knowing he was loved unconditionally, Levi did a one-eighty. He repented, he changed, he turned and walked in the steps of Jesus his Savior, and in time gave us the first book in the New Testament.

If you're not sure you belong in Jesus' family, if your sins loom like a great wall between you and heaven, Levi invites you to his party. Jesus is there, and when he sees you coming, he will say with all the authority of heaven, "Of course I want you in my family! Come, follow me."