

Chapter 21

A Publican converted

Matthew 9. v. 9

Mark 2. vv. 13 and 14

Luke 5 vv. 27 and 28

As you know already, the Romans ruled over the Jewish people in the days when Jesus was on earth. The Jews then were no longer independent, but they were subdued by the Romans and were obliged to obey them. No wonder then that the Jews hated the Romans. They longed for the time when they would become free as in days gone by. They longed to see these foreign oppressors thrust out of their land. Furthermore the Romans made the Jews pay taxes.

We too have to pay taxes, and that is quite normal, since we give this money to our own government. But if ever foreign soldiers were to hold sway over us and we had to pay taxes to the enemy, then it would be quite a different matter. Then we would give that money much against our will, for then it would not be used for the benefit of our own people, but the enemy would make use of it for his own ends.

So you can well imagine that the Jewish people gave that money with hateful and resentful hearts. They had to give it, however. They were forced to do so.

Now there were also Jews who said to the Romans: "You need not collect this money yourselves, we will do that for you. We will help you in this work." So these were Jews who gave help to the enemies of their people.

Of course these Jews did not work like

this for nothing, no, they made quite sure that they made a good deal for themselves out of it. Yes, in this way they were really stealing from their fellow countrymen. They gave to the Romans what they had a right to, and the rest they kept for themselves. In a short time these traitors became rich, very rich indeed. But theirs was not honestly procured money, but stolen money. These Jews were called PUBLICANS. Publicans then were thieves and enemies of their own fellow countrymen.

Of course the Jews hated the publicans even more than they did the Romans. Nobody ever spoke a friendly word to them, nobody would help them if they got into difficulties. Everyone had the greatest contempt for these friends of the Romans. If they met a publican, then they would spit disdainfully on the ground, and turn away their head. And in fact the publicans were indeed evil, despicable people who were not deserving of a friendly word. They deserved the scorn and contempt of the whole nation.

Just outside Capernaum on the main road to Damascus, the capital city of Syria, there was a custom house. This road was part of the great trade route from Syria to Egypt. Along it travelled the caravans which transported goods

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from the one country to the other. The merchants also had to pay taxes to the Romans.

In that custom house was a man, a publican. His name was Levi, but he was also called Matthew. Levi and Matthew then were two names for the same man. We shall call him Levi in this story though, because that is the name used in the Bible.

Levi had a good position there. It was busy, and he could earn a great deal of money. So you can well imagine that Levi soon became rich. He did not mind at all that the Jews in Capernaum hated him, that he was despised by them. So long as he could take money, he was happy. That was all he worried about. If they looked at him in scorn, then he smiled grimly to himself and thought: "I will catch you yet. I will demand more money." In his heart there was hatred and anger towards his fellow-countrymen.

Loved? ... No, Levi was not loved. He never had one friendly word; nobody ever greeted him in the street. He had no friends. Of course, the other publicans in Capernaum had dealings with him. They invited each other in turns to feasts. By other people however he was hated and despised. But he had got used to that.

Look, there he sits in the custom house. In front of him on a table is piled the money which he has taken. Perhaps he is trying to work out how much money he has earned that day. Time and again he looks up the highway to see if any other merchants are coming from whom he can make still more money.

Suddenly his attention is attracted by the distant sight of a large group of people approaching. Now, what can this be? This is somewhat unusual. When the group draws nearer though, he sees what it is. It is the new Prophet of



Levi in the custom house

Nazareth surrounded by a crowd of people.

Doubtless he also has heard tell of Jesus. He has heard people talk about the many miracles done by Him.

He becomes curious. Not that this Prophet matters much to him. No indeed, what has he got to do with Jesus? Nothing! To get money is his main object. Levi has no thought of going to Jesus or of seeking Him, for he has other things to do. He has neither time nor inclination for anything else.

But now that Jesus is passing by the custom house, he would just like find out what this wonder-working Prophet looks like. Now he has a fine opportunity to have a good look at Him. Furthermore, in this way it costs him no time or trouble.

Already the foremost members of the group are walking by the custom house. Most of them do not even look, but simply pass on, but in the eyes of those who do look, he can see hate and contempt. Perhaps some of them spat disdainfully on the ground. But he answers those angry glances with a malicious smile.

Here comes Jesus Himself.

Suddenly, Levi has a shock, for when Jesus gets to a spot directly in front of him, He stops immediately and looks at him. Yet in those eyes Levi sees no hate, no contempt, but love and compassion.

Love? ... He had never expected or even looked for that. The hard exterior of unconcern

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and indifference with which he surrounds himself breaks down. Everything changes within him. He is affected in the depths of his soul.

Love? ... Oh, Levi could weep over it. Why? Oh, he cannot explain it, but he sees his life at that moment in quite a new light. He deserves to be hated and despised by the people. He has invited it. He can see now that it is not the people, but he ... he himself who is to blame. What?

Love? ... No, he doesn't deserve it. Oh, why does the Prophet look at him with love and pity? Why? ... Levi doesn't know why. He cannot understand it, for he is not worthy of it.

Money no longer matters to him, no, he loathes it. He is ashamed of his whole life, he loathes himself. He is ashamed of his evil ways. But into his heart there also comes love. Love for this unknown Jesus, who looks upon him, upon such a great sinner as he.

Then, when Jesus says to him, "Follow me!", he stands up at once, leaves the custom house and follows Him. He is drawn irresistibly to Jesus.

Oh, boys and girls, it is still the same when God turns a man to Himself. Hate and enmity towards God lives in our hearts too. We always think God is wrong. When adversity comes, we are angry with God; then we grumble about it, yes, sometimes we curse God. Though it may not be with our mouths, yet in our hearts there well up ugly, angry, evil thoughts. We blame God for everything.

But if the Lord renews our heart, if the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts, then all is changed. Then it is no longer God who is blamed, but then we fall down guilty. Then we come to know ourselves as great sinners against the Lord, who are worthy of hell. Then it

becomes to us a miracle that we are yet alive, that God has spared us and thus borne with us.

Do you know anything about this too? Or can you not understand a word of it? I hope and pray with my whole soul that you may be brought to know it.

Levi had become a sinner before God and man. He would never have learned this of himself, no, he would have carried on in sin till the day of his death, but the Lord Jesus taught him through the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus drew him to Himself.

There he walks following Jesus. His eyes are wet with tears. They are tears of grief and sorrow for his past life of evil and godlessness.

Matthew 9 vv. 1 – 13

Luke 5 vv. 29 – 32

Mark 2 vv. 15 - 17

The publican Levi lived in one of the finest houses in Capernaum.

Soon after he had been called from the custom house by the Lord Jesus, he prepared a great feast. In the largest room there were long tables on which the most delicious food was spread. Around the tables were set low couches. We sit up to table on chairs, but in the East it was not so. There, the guests lay on broad couches supported by one of their arms. These couches were something like divans. Their heads pointed towards the table, whilst their feet projected a little beyond the couch.

In the banqueting room of Levi's house that day, many guests are lying round the loaded tables. Who are these people?

No, they are not Scribes or Pharisees. Do

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you think that they would eat in the house of a publican? Just imagine it! Neither will the other Jews from Capernaum do such a thing. Who then can they be? ... Well, they are the publicans from Capernaum and its surroundings. And among all the publicans, those friends of the Romans, is also the Lord Jesus with His disciples. He does attend the feast, yes Levi has given Him the place of honour at his table.

All at once the sound of footsteps is heard near the door. Various people enter the apartment. Look, there they stand, dressed in long white clothes. Oh, what have they come for? ... Who are they? ... More guests? Not a bit of it! They are Pharisees and Scribes. Their faces show a gruff dissatisfied appearance. Yes, when they see the Lord Jesus sitting there in the midst of publicans, then they become offended at His behaviour. They look at Him mockingly. They think "Now, if that is such a righteous man, he would not eat with all those publicans and sinners." They are greatly offended by the Lord Jesus. They would never do such a thing. They would be ashamed to do so. You can see, He is just like His fellow guests. Birds of a feather. They would never make friends with the enemies of their people. Their anger and indignation grows apace. Their contempt for the new Prophet of Nazareth increases.

At last they can bear it no longer. They dare not reproach the Lord Jesus Himself about His behaviour, but they murmur against His disciples who are also present.

In angry tones they ask of them: "How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners?"

How must they answer? Formerly they too would quite certainly have refused to do it.

But now, well their Master has come and they have followed Him. They do not perhaps know the answer themselves. Evidently they looked embarrassed and gave no answer to the Pharisees' accusations.

But they have no need to justify themselves. Jesus will answer for them. He has heard what the Pharisees said and he answers quietly, "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Do you hear that, boys and girls? The Lord Jesus does not say that what the Pharisees so scornfully accuse His disciples of is not true. Indeed, those publicans are great sinners. When the Pharisees remark on this, it is quite true. But it is just as though the Lord Jesus says: "It is just for such bad, ungodly people that I have come. It is such that I will save from sin."

Now you see, the Pharisees cannot understand this. They are too pious, too righteous to make friends with such people. Such people are far too low for them.

In these simple words, however, there lies a warning for the Pharisees. The Lord Jesus is not the Saviour of the righteous, for they have no need of a Saviour. But sinners, lost sinners, they are the ones He will save from endless ruin. Them He will redeem from the wrath of God.

Matthew 9 vv. 14 - 17

Mark 2 vv. 18 - 22

Luke 3 vv. 35 - 39

All at once, more men enter the house of Levi. No, they are not angry, but they are certainly surprised. They cannot grasp the meaning of the

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Lord's actions. Who are these men? ... They are disciples of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord Jesus.

They can well understand why Jesus should speak to publicans, for their own master did that too. Publicans came also to John the Baptist, and he told them that they must repent. John dealt very sternly with the publicans.

And now to see the Lord Jesus treating them as friends, that they cannot explain. Their master reproved the publicans, and Jesus ate and drank with them. That is why they are so surprised, and why they look so questioningly.

The hearts of the Pharisees are full of hate towards the Lord Jesus, but it is not so with the disciples of John. The Pharisees tackle the disciples and blame them, but the followers of John go straight to the Lord Jesus. The Pharisees murmur and complain, but the disciples of John ask for an explanation. Just listen.

They say to Jesus: "Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?"

They mean: "Our master has taught us to weep and to mourn over sin, but thy disciples mourn not at all."

Then the Lord Jesus gives them an answer also. He says, in effect: "'How can My disciples mourn whilst the Saviour is with them. Later, when I am taken from them, when I shall be nailed to the cross, then my disciples will be sad."

The Lord Jesus said still more than children, but you will not be able to understand that yet, so I will not relate it.

Can you see now, that the Lord Jesus receives more and more opposition? That is because they do not understand Him. He is truly the Messiah, the Saviour.

That godless Levi never returned to the custom house to continue his work. When he was converted he could no longer remain a publican. He became a disciple of Jesus. Later he became known as Matthew, and he wrote the Gospel according to Matthew.

Remember these things!

This story has something to say to us. Are there some heedless boys and girls among you? ... Are there those among you who take pleasure in sin? ... Oh, then do not think "I am too sinful to be converted", for that is not true. That is what the devil would have you believe. It is for sinners that the Lord Jesus came. Do not think however that it doesn't matter how we live, no, for in Ecclesiastes 12 it is written: "God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil." But if you are the greatest mockers in the neighbourhood, do not despair.

Oh, ask God to discover to you your sins. Ask Him to give you Godly sorrow for sin. Ask Him to make room in your hearts for the Saviour.

We must become sinners before God. Then we must needs be taught to see sin for what it is. And never forget, we never learn that of ourselves, we learn it only through the Spirit of God. May the Lord grant you this through grace.