

# AN OFFER YOU CAN'T REFUSE

Luke 5v27,28.

I'm going to start by mentioning two movies which are poles apart – and yet a scene in each has given me a title for my message this morning.

The first is *'Becoming Jane'* starring Anne Hathaway and James McAvoy, which Liz and I watched on TV this weekend. It is based on the early years of Jane Austen and it makes the case for her fiction being rooted in her own life experiences. At one point she turns down an offer of marriage from a rich man she doesn't love (Mr Wisley) but who would be the answer to her financial needs and those of her family. No, she loves Tom Lefroy! But both her mother and Mr Wisley's rich aunt, Lady Gresham, make it clear to Jane that young ladies *do not* turn down offers of marriage from gentlemen. *It was an offer you can't refuse.*

The second movie is Mario Puzo's *'The Godfather.'* In part 1 Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) is visited by his godson, the singer Johnny Fontane. (Al Martino) Fontane asks for his help to secure a film role that will boost his career, which is on a downward spiral. The head of the film studio has already refused Fontane. Corleone tells Johnny he's take care of it. *"I'll make him an offer he can't refuse."* In the mouth of the Godfather it is a sinister statement. What he really means is this: if the movie man doesn't do what he is told he's dead meat.

Today we will be looking at an offer *you* can't refuse. Only, in the mouth of Jesus it's the most glorious offer of salvation.

We have already seen how this early period of Jesus ministry was full of life-changing *one-to-ones*. We have looked at three in Luke chapter 5:

- Simon Peter, *Jesus' Big Catch* - after a miraculous fishing expedition.
- *The man who wanted to be clean* – someone in the advanced stages of leprosy.
- A paralyzed man who was healed, but who came to realize that there was a condition even more crippling than physical paralysis - sin.

No two were the same. That's how it is. No two people are identical. We all have a unique journey *to* faith - and then we have a unique journey *of* faith. We will see this again today as we look at Levi - who received an offer he couldn't refuse.

**Luke 5v27,28: 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.** Luke connects this incident with the healing of the paralyzed man. Levi is the same person called Matthew elsewhere. People at that time were often known by different names. So maybe there is no significance in him being called Levi here. But it could be deliberate. Levi was a

distinctively Jewish name. Perhaps it is used here to highlight how far this man had gone away from his faith roots.

**He was a tax collector... sitting at his tax booth** None of us enjoy getting letters from the Inland Revenue telling us how much we have to pay. None of us like receiving our annual Council tax invoice. In New Testament times it was no different. The Roman occupying power was into taxation in a big way. Their roads, civil service, government and Roman law and order were expensive. So there were three statutory taxes: *ground tax* (one tenth of your crop of grain, a fifth of wine, fruit and oil); *Income tax* (one per cent of your income) and *Poll tax* (one days' wages per year); this was just for the privilege of breathing. But there was more. Much more!

Import and export tax was due (up to twelve percent of the value of the goods) and purchase tax on anything bought or sold. Harbour dues were particularly hated by local fishermen. A tax was also paid when a traveller entered a walled town and when he traded in the market. In fact travellers had a hard time. If you had a cart, in addition to being taxed for using the road, there was a tax on your cart and a tax on *each* wheel, *and the* axle – as well as the animal that drew your cart. There was a tax on crossing bridges and using rivers, on ships. Tax was a big issue in Jesus' day hence the trick question Jesus was asked about paying taxes to Caesar. (See Matthew 22v15-21)

So Levi was not a popular man! But tax men like Levi were reviled, not just because people hate paying taxes but, because they exploited the people. They were expert extortionists. They had developed devious ways of fleecing people. When repentant tax collectors asked John the Baptist what they must do he replied: "*Collect no more than you are authorized to do.*"! (Luke 3v13) Jewish tax collectors were regarded as collaborators because they worked for the enemy. In Levi's case, he worked under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, a puppet ruler of the Romans. They were also debarred from places of worship; their only friends were fellow outcasts.

**Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me."** Given this man's status as an outcast everyone must have been amazed. Not least Levi. Jesus was inviting Levi to be one of his disciples.

Can you feel the impact of this on Levi? Can you see what it means still? Because Jesus is saying "Follow Me" this morning.

## **1. When Jesus says "Follow Me" it is the call of grace.**

Levi wasn't someone who deserved it! You wouldn't have picked him out as a likely recruit. This was the call of grace. But it always is. We have our ways of grading people as respectable or disreputable, but God says all have sinned and fall short of His glory. We deserve justice but God gives us what we don't deserve - mercy. And He can do this because Jesus got what we deserved so that we might have mercy.

Every time Jonathan Aitken is introduced on the radio he is described as “*the disgraced former Tory Cabinet minister*”. He infamously committed perjury in a libel action he had brought. But he is a very different man now – because of God’s grace. His book ‘Pride & Perjury’ tells the story of his mighty fall and way he became personally aware of Jesus Christ for the first time.

Jesus is saying “Follow Me” this morning. You can’t say, “*I’m not good enough!*” That is what qualifies you! If you think you are good enough then you won’t be able to hear his invitation.

## **2. When Jesus says “Follow Me” he makes the first move.**

Jesus approached Levi not the other way round. Levi knew that a huge gulf lay between himself and someone like Jesus. He couldn’t initiate anything. It is the same with us and God. He always makes the first move. We may *think* we are searching, calling out to him. But it is only because he has been seeking us first. This week, a friend was talking with one or two of us about how, even though he has not put his faith in Jesus yet, he has moved a long way in his thinking about Jesus over the past year. He asked: “*Does this mean that the Holy Spirit is on my case?*”

Into his early thirties C.S. Lewis did not even believe in God. But in his autobiography, in a chapter called ‘Checkmate’, Lewis says “*God closed in on me,*” and, “*I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt... Really, a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully. Dangers lie in wait for him on every side. For the first time I examined myself with seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatred. My name was legion. ... Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about “man’s search for God”. To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat.*”

## **3. When Jesus says “Follow Me” it is a personal invitation.**

Levi couldn’t be mistaken about who Jesus was inviting. Yes, sometimes Jesus *did* issue a general invitation. “*Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden,*” and “*I am the light of the world, he who believes in me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*” But with Levi it was a personal invitation. It is this which often strikes people still. The gospel comes with such a personal impact that it seems God is speaking just *to you*. It might be through preaching. It might be by one of the gifts of the Spirit like a word of knowledge or a prophecy. It might even be a film – it was in my case at the age of 18.

## **4. When Jesus says “Follow Me” it requires a response.**

This was not the moment for Levi to ask for more time; he’d had plenty of time to think. You see, this wouldn’t have been Jesus’ first meeting with Levi. They had probably known each other for years. These were small towns. Everybody knew

everyone else; families lived side by side for generations. Levi had heard Jesus and watched him. And now Jesus was saying, “**Follow me.**”

This was his moment. *Everyone has a moment.* Make sure you don't miss it. I have seen people tottering on the brink and then turn away and never have another moment like it. Some did this very thing when Jesus issued an invitation to them. (Luke 9v59) But not Levi! This was an offer he couldn't refuse. **v28: And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.** He got up straight away.

Here is the thing – God works in your heart to make you want to respond. You find you have a desire to follow Jesus. You might think, “*Wow! Where did that come from?*” It came from God Himself. He is at work in you - revealing your need and then offering Himself as the only answer. You may think that this is about you choosing Jesus, but it starts to feel more like *it is Jesus who has chosen you.* This is an offer you can't refuse!

Levi's life was never the same again. He became one of the Twelve. He spent the next three and half years with Jesus. Later he even authored one of the four Gospels. It was only the start of an amazing journey. It was for me too, and for others here. It can be for you.

**John Wilthew. March. 2010**

## Message Summary

### AN OFFER YOU CAN'T REFUSE Luke 5v27,28.

Levi was collecting taxes for the occupying Roman authority. He was despised and hated yet Jesus invited him to be one of his disciples. Feel the impact of this on Levi, and consider what it means still.

**When Jesus says “Follow Me” it is the call of grace.** Levi wasn't someone who deserved it. You wouldn't have picked him out as a likely recruit. This was the call of grace. But it always is. We have our ways of grading people as respectable or disreputable but God says all have sinned and fall short of His glory. We deserve justice but God gives us what we don't deserve - mercy.

**When Jesus says “Follow Me” he makes the first move.** Jesus approached Levi not the other way round. Levi knew that a huge gulf lay between himself and Jesus. He could not initiate anything. It is the same with us and God. He always makes the first move. We may think we are searching but we only do so because he seeks us first.

**When Jesus says “Follow Me” it is a personal invitation.** There could be no mistake about who he was inviting. Sometimes Jesus issued a general invitation. e.g. “*Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden?*” But with Levi it was up close and personal. It is this which often strikes people still today. The gospel comes with such a personal impact that it seems God is speaking just to you.

**When Jesus says “Follow Me” it requires a response.** This was not the moment for Levi to ask for more time. This was his moment. Everyone has a moment. We have seen people tottering on the brink and then turn away and never have another moment like it. Levi responded immediately and followed Jesus. His life was never the same again.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:** *First read Luke 5v27,28 and the summary:.*

1. In what specific ways do you feel you've been on the receiving end of God's grace?
2. What signs might indicate that God is “closing in” (C.S. Lewis's words) on someone? What about *your experience* before you put your faith in Christ?
3. How might God speak very *personally* to someone today?
4. This incident records Levi's first steps in following Jesus. But the rest of his life involved doing the same. Over recent months or years what new steps forward has following Jesus involved for you?
5. You may want to discuss the theological issue behind this incident: does God choose us or do we choose God? (See note below)

**Note for leaders.** This incident raises the theological issue of *irresistible grace*. It illustrates two parallel themes repeated in the Bible. On the one hand *Jesus chooses Levi to follow Him*, while on the other *Levi chooses to follow Jesus*. There are some who like to emphasis one over the other. They say “*It is your choice*”: it is entirely up to you whether you choose to follow Jesus or not. Someone else says, *No*, it is God who chose you; salvation is all of grace – you are spiritually dead and incapable of faith; it is all God's grace not your decision. On occasions this has been taken to extremes resulting in a distorted view of God. On the surface the two themes cannot be reconciled. But they are both there in the Bible. Both are true. We are responsible before God for our choices, especially for our response to the gospel; and yet we can only believe because of God's choice and initiative. Some say this is a contradiction – that you can't have both. In his 'Systematic Theology', Wayne Grudem argues that it is a mystery (or paradox) but not a contradiction. To say “*God chooses*

*me and God doesn't choose me*", is a contradiction, but to say "*God chooses me and I choose God*", is a mystery.