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BIBLE ADVENTURES SCRIPT:

A1965 ~ The Calling of Levi Matthew.

Welcome to Bible Adventures. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow. Jesus is Lord of all.

There's a sad English saying that has lasted from centuries ago, which says: "The only two certainties in life are death and taxes". A recent addition to it is: "but at least death doesn't get worse every year!" This sentiment may have been how the Jewish people felt about their own tax system at the time that Jesus was living in Galilee. Someone had to pay for all the Roman soldiers overseeing the law and order of their land.

The people had to pay income tax, property tax and head tax. On top of that, they were also liable for import and export duties, and bridge and road taxes. As well as all these Roman taxes, the Jewish people were to tithe their income and men 20 years and older paid a head tax to the Temple. This double head tax upset the Jews the most. In the hope of getting a political denunciation, they asked Jesus: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?"

The rich Romans were officially the Jewish tax controllers but they employed either slaves or lower class people as their tax-gatherers. These people are referred to as the publicans in the New Testament and stationed at every bridge, along the roads and at the entrances to the cities. Naturally it is human nature to try to avoid paying tax, particularly when one thinks they are already paying too much. So people tried to avoid paying tax whenever they could. As a result, every bale of hay had to be unloaded from everyone's carts, and all contents tumbled about and searched for any person trying to avoid their tax bill. Even letters were opened. These actions must have given people trying to conduct business a severe test in patience!

The Roman government expected to be well paid, as did the tax-gatherers in the provinces. All wanted to make money from the poor people. Of course, the cost of the collector's large wages had to be added on top of all the other taxes. Another favourite trick of the Romans was to advance the tax to those who were unable to pay, and then to charge high interest rates on what had become private debt.

The tax collectors were considered to be the 'lowest of the low' in society. Their dishonesty put them down there with the harlots, heathen and murderers. The teachers of the Law used their authority to refuse to allow tax collectors to give evidence in a Jewish court of law or give gifts to the Temple.

Yet when John the Baptist was preaching out in the wilderness, some tax collectors came to him to be baptized. They asked John what they should do. He said for them to collect no more tax than what was legal to collect. This happened just before Jesus came to John to be baptized in the Jordan River.

Around the time of Jesus' ministry, the Roman Empire was going through a great financial crisis and many people went into bankruptcy. The burden of taxes became heavy for everyone. Jesus established His new covenant at such a difficult time, showing the Holy Spirit's power to bring about God's purpose in the form of a new church age.

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Indeed, well might the scribes and Pharisees have been angry that Jesus took a publican to be one of His disciples. But just look at the amazing difference the forgiveness of a person's sin can make!

Levi Matthew, who had previously been a cheat and a thief, changed for the better when a disciple of Jesus. He is credited with writing the first Gospel book of Matthew in the New Testament, shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It's also thought that he wrote the first edition of his book in the Aramaic language for the Jewish people. Later, a Greek edition was produced and widely circulated.

The city of Antioch in Syria had a leading place for Christianity to grow and the Gospel of Matthew may have been written there. The book reflects Matthew's background knowledge of the history of Judah and the fulfilled Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah through Jesus Christ. All Christians since that time are indebted to Matthew for his invaluable work on this Gospel.

In some places in the Gospels Matthew is called Levi and in others Matthew.

Soon after becoming a disciple of Jesus, Matthew desired to help all his fellow publicans hear Jesus speak. In Chapter 9, it's recorded that Matthew had a big feast at his house and invited all the other publicans and social outcasts to come. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked Jesus' disciples why He ate with such undesirable sinful people. The Pharisees considered all at the feast to be unclean and would not sit down to eat with them.

Jesus replied to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician (or a doctor), but those who are sick do. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

This event is also recorded in the Gospels of Luke, Chapter 5, and Mark, Chapter 2, where it says that many followed Jesus from this point onwards.

In Luke, Chapter 18, Jesus taught a parable to people who were sure of their own goodness and could despise everyone else: Two men went up to the Temple to pray. The first man, a Pharisee, told God how very good he was and all the things that he was doing for God. The other man, a tax collector, in a humble attitude asked God to be merciful to him because he was a sinner. Jesus said that the tax collector left the Temple right with God but not the Pharisee. “For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great.”

Another tax collector who found faith in Jesus and changed his ways in the Bible was Zacchaeus. This favourite Bible story for children is found in Luke, Chapter 19. Jesus went to the city of Jericho about 25 km northwest of Jerusalem.

Zacchaeus was rich because he was a chief tax collector there. Yet he was a short man and he couldn't see Jesus because there was always a crowd of people milling around Him. So Zacchaeus devised a plan: he would climb a tree and watch from there as Jesus passed by.

When Jesus came to that exact spot, He looked up into the tree and called Zacchaeus to come down. Jesus wanted to stay at Zacchaeus' house that day. The people in the crowd weren't very pleased with Jesus' decision. Tax collectors were never popular with the people who had to pay them.

But Zacchaeus surprised them all. He stood up and told Jesus that he would give half of his belongings to the poor, and if he'd cheated anyone, he would pay them back four times as much. Jesus responded to his offer, “Salvation has come to this house today, for this man, also, is a descendant of Abraham.” Jesus' purpose was to seek and save people lost from God.

Zacchaeus' offer of restitution was in line with the payback for stealing sheep, as listed in the book of Exodus, Chapter 22.

In Luke, Chapter 20, Jesus was in the Temple teaching and preaching. The chief priests and teachers of the Law questioned Him about a number of things. They even paid some men to act sincerely but really question Jesus in an attempt to trap Him. One of those questions they asked was: “Is it against our Law for us to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?”

Jesus saw through their trick and said to them, “Show me a silver coin. Whose face and name are these on it?” “The Emperor’s,” they answered. Jesus told them, “Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God.”

Each person who is able to should pay their taxes promptly. The merchants and shopkeepers cannot make a living if there is no stable economy, coin money, legal tender, a justice system and lawful contracts. Government officials who administer these things need to be paid too.

The Apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to Timothy, Chapter 2: “I urge that petitions, prayers, requests, and thanksgivings be offered to God for all people; for kings and all others who are in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceful life with all reverence toward God and with proper conduct. This is good and it pleases God our Saviour, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth.”

There’s an old saying that we get the government we deserve. And this may be true, until people start praying for their government and its officials as much time as they spend criticizing their government.

Sometimes Jesus used the tax collectors as examples of ordinary society.

Jesus explained the new teachings He was bringing were the opposite of the Old Testament teaching of hating one’s enemies. In Matthew, Chapter 5, Jesus taught us that we are to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us.

The reason He gave for doing this was so: “you may become the children of your Father in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil.”

Jesus continued: “Why should God reward you if you only love the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that!”

“And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary?” “Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

These teachings can make one ask: are there some sins that are worse than others in God’s sight? The simple answer is “No!” Although God absolutely hates certain types of sin, we must remember that all and any sin separates us eternally from our God, who is holy, just and good. There are no big sins that He judges while overlooking smaller sins. The tax collectors were often tempted to inflate the value of property and other costly articles so they could charge on these and collect more money for themselves. Greed is the downfall of all who want to get rich quickly.

In the same way, the merchants and shopkeepers were tempted to cheat people when weighing out their goods by using false scales. Proverbs, Chapter 11, says: “A false balance and unrighteous dealings are extremely offensive and shamefully sinful to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight.” God sees everything and knows when wrong has happened, even if the receiver doesn’t.

For a person to know what is right and then not to do it, this is a sin! A guilty conscience can spoil any gain achieved but doing what's right honours the Lord. A clear conscience is always more valuable than any amount of worldly possessions. Our conscience is proof that God exists and has planted His moral law within our souls. And unless we continually ignore its warnings, our conscience is like a faithful watchdog over our lives.

A Bible verse to remember is Matthew, Chapter 5, Verse 6, which says: "Happy are those whose highest desire is to do what God requires; God will satisfy them fully!"

The drama is from The Bible In Living Sound.

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