

JESUS CAME TO CALL SINNERS TO REPENTANCE

Luke 5:27-39

Key Verse: 32, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Jesus healed both a man with leprosy and a paralyzed man by his power and compassion. Jesus also declared the forgiveness of sins for the paralyzed man. In today's passage, Jesus calls another disciple to follow him. Already Jesus had called the fisherman Simon Peter, along with his two fishing buddies—James and John—to follow Jesus, and to start fishing for people. These fishermen were uneducated, working class men. In today's passage, Jesus calls a man from a very different occupation to follow him—a tax collector. This message has 3 parts: Jesus calls Levi; Jesus calls sinners; and, the expected character of a follower of Jesus. May we each hear Jesus' call to follow him and to live as his disciples.

First, Jesus calls Levi (27-28).

After enabling a paralyzed man to walk by the grace and power of God, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, who was sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Levi is also known as Matthew. He became one of Jesus' twelve disciples, and Christian tradition tells us that he wrote the Gospel of Matthew.

Actually, it is quite astonishing that Jesus chose such a man to follow him as his disciple. Fishermen were hard-working, respected men who earned their living by hard, honest work, like farmers, hunters or carpenters. Levi, on the other hand, was making money by taxing his own Jewish neighbors to give their hard-earned money to the Roman government, which was ruling over them. Of course, the Roman government gave them protection and other benefits, so it was proper for them to pay taxes. In fact, Jesus later taught that they should pay taxes to Caesar. But the general sentiment of Jewish people toward Roman rule was unhappiness, disdain and contempt. It really troubled the average Jew to have to pay taxes to the Roman government, since they believed that God was their Ruler, not Rome. So tax collectors were regarded as despised sinners, who sold their consciences to make money for Rome, contributing to the oppression of their own people. They were branded as terrible, immoral people, along with prostitutes.

But Jesus did not despise or hate Levi. Jesus didn't think that he was beyond help or incapable of living a life that could glorify God. Jesus called this very unlikely man to be his disciple. Jesus saw him with faith and the hope of God, that he would become a great man, if only he redirected his heart to God, by following Jesus. Jesus was ready to shepherd him and show him the way to the kingdom of God. Jesus saw into Levi's heart that he was longing for deliverance from his empty and miserable life. Jesus knew that he was longing for freedom from his prison of guilt, shame and futility. Perhaps Levi looked at Jesus with a feeling of shame whenever Jesus walked by his tax booth and proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God.

This week I visited someone at the Christian shelter Pacific Garden Mission whom I've been helping for some time. He hears God's word preached every day. He likes the Christian message. I asked him if he believes in Jesus as his Savior. But he is not sure his sins can be forgiven.

Humanly, he looks somewhat hopeless, although he is working a job. Jesus gives me hope for him, because Jesus has hope for him. Jesus saw Levi with hope. Anyone can be changed if they only hear and respond to Jesus' call.

Jesus said, "Follow me." What did that mean to Levi? The word can be a beautiful word or a very challenging word. To follow means that someone must be willing or have desire to pursue what the leader is offering. This involves trust. Can you trust in Jesus? Can you follow Jesus? Twitter and Instagram have so many followers. But are the popular people worth following? Are they worth trusting? Are they worth our imitation or admiration? Do you know who are the 7 most followed persons on Instagram? They are: Cristiano Ronaldo, Kylie Jenner, Lionel Messi, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Selena Gomez, Ariana Grande, and Kim Kardashian. Who are they? If you don't know, it's ok. They are athletes, models, singers and actors. Are they worth following? Not really. Is Jesus worth following? Absolutely. I said the word "follow" can be beautiful. That's true if you recognize the blessing of the one you are following. There are many blessings of following Jesus such as peace, joy, meaning, hope and especially salvation, eternal life and an inheritance in his kingdom.

I also said the word "follow" is a very challenging word, since it involves trust and surrender. To follow anyone or anything you have to give up some of your control. After all, you have decided to follow the lead of someone or something. Have you decided to follow Jesus? There is a famous Christian hymn which I just learned comes from a folk melody from India. You probably recognize the song: "I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, No turning back."

The Bible says that Levi, after hearing Jesus' call, "got up, left everything and followed him." These are the same words that are used to describe the response of Simon Peter, James and John after the great catch of fish. They decided to follow Jesus after seeing the miracle of fish. Levi's faith was even more sincere, since he didn't have to win the lottery to motivate him to follow Jesus. He just heard Jesus' words, "Follow me," got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. Surely he knew who Jesus was and what Jesus was saying. It was not an invitation to go to the grocery store or for a random walk along the streets. Jesus was calling him to a new life, a new way, a new job. Jesus was calling him to leave his security in this world to have treasure in heaven. And Levi accepted the challenge and the gamble, and decided to follow Jesus. Have you accepted Jesus' beautiful and challenging words, "Follow me"?

Second, Jesus calls sinners to repentance (29-32).

Levi or Matthew, was so happy for his newfound, exciting life as a disciple of Jesus that he threw a party at his house for Jesus and his fishermen disciples. He also invited all his tax collector friends. He must've thought, "If Jesus accepts me, he will accept my friends. I want to share the joy of my new life in Jesus with all my friends, and relatives and neighbors." So he threw a great banquet. Maybe it was a coat and tie dinner with good food and entertainment. Perhaps, he provided nice robes for Jesus and his disciples, since they didn't have a nice wardrobe. Or, he just let them come with their jeans and t-shirts, that is, with their dusty 2nd-hand clothes which they bought at Salvation Army.

There were some party-spoilers there. They were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law—the religious leaders. I don't know how they got into this party, since they didn't even like to hang out with Levi's type. Maybe they were just watching from a distance, or they had their own table, apart from the others. Anyway, they found opportunity to complain to Jesus' disciples saying, "Why do

you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" It was a criticism not only of them, but of Jesus as well.

They were accusing Jesus and his disciples of "guilt by association." This means that if you hang out with criminals, you are assumed guilty of the same crime. This was the separatist idea of the Pharisees. Christians can also be guilty of this attitude which the Pharisees had. We sometimes separate ourselves from others whom we don't regard as a good influence. This reminds me of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army is not just a place to buy 2nd-hand cheap clothes. It is also a church. In fact our Easter conference place of Camp Wonderland is owned by the Salvation Army. William Booth was a man of fiery, clear gospel faith. He said, "Go for sinners, and go for the worst." So he would go to bars and brothels to preach the gospel. Let me say, unless your faith is strong like his, I don't recommend you do that. Jesus could do that, because he was not swayed by the sinful behaviors of drunkenness and sexual immorality. Rather, Jesus always kept his heart and devotion to God. Furthermore, Jesus saw people with the eyes of God. He saw their spiritual need. He saw their spiritual sickness. He came to heal, rescue, save and deliver.

So Jesus replied, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Again, Jesus' words are so beautiful and yet so challenging to all people. The beauty is that Jesus is the Doctor and he wants to heal our sinsicknesses. Jesus wants to help us out of our helplessness. Jesus came to rescue us from our prison of sin. Jesus came to deliver us and set us free from our condemnation, guilt and shame. What a beautiful mission Jesus came to fulfill!

At the same time, Jesus' words are challenging: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." The irony here is that no one is truly righteous. But those who think they are righteous, think they don't need Jesus' help, and therefore, they cannot be helped and saved by Jesus. Only one who recognizes that he or she needs deliverance, salvation and rescue will cry out to Jesus in faith for his help and mercy. So the challenge is to admit my sinfulness, confess my sins, renounce them, and trust in Jesus and follow him, just like Levi did.

Do you recognize that you are a sinner? That is the first step in coming to Jesus. Here is the harder part: do you confess and renounce your sins before Jesus to receive his forgiveness and new life? Maybe your sins are chronic or habitual, and you know you can't give them up and you can't change yourself. That's true. You can't change yourself. That's Jesus' business. He is the Doctor. We are the sick ones who need healing. First, a sick person must go to the Doctor. Then, the sick person must accept the Doctor's diagnosis and course of healing. It's not enough to go to the Doctor and then ignore his words and directions. We must trust and follow the Doctor's orders. If you think you can solve your own sin problem, that's like rejecting the Doctor's orders. Sick people cannot heal themselves. That's why we have doctors. Everybody has sinsickness, and Jesus is the Sin Doctor. So we must trust him. We must bring to him our sins and guilt and shame. He will heal it. That's his job, his business, his work, his expertise. That's why he came. That's why he died for us. Thank you, Jesus, our Great Physician.

Third, the expected characteristics of a follower of Jesus (33-39).

The critics had more to say to Jesus. They weren't moved by his mercy toward sinners. They said, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking." There is nothing inherently sinful about eating and drinking, since we all

need to eat and drink to stay healthy and survive. What they didn't like was the party spirit of the disciples. Jesus' disciples seemed too carefree and not spiritually disciplined enough. Of course, we know that they were not yet disciplined in prayer, and they did not fast like the ascetic disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees did. That was a serious problem to them.

Jesus did not say that we should not fast and pray. In fact, in Matthew 6 Jesus said that his disciples were expected to give to the needy and fast and pray. But they were to do these things in private before God, not before people to show off.

In this event, Jesus answered them, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

There is a time to fast and a time to eat and drink. At a party or a wedding, the guests or friends are expected to be joyful, not gloomy. This is one of the characteristics of being with Jesus. Jesus is the bridegroom, and we, the church, are his bride. A wedding is a union of husband and wife. Jesus and his church are united in a commitment and covenant of eternal love. It is a joy to love Jesus and to be loved by him. Jesus is the joy of living. Joy is also a fruit of the Holy Spirit, along with love, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23a). Joy is one of the characteristics of following Jesus. How is your joy thermometer? Time for an attitude check: Do you complain or grumble more than you praise and thank God? If so, it's time to turn your eyes and heart to Jesus and thank and praise him. Sing a hymn. Take captive grumbling thoughts and find reasons to thank Jesus for his grace and mercy. The time to fast is when we are far from Jesus in our mind, heart or spirit.

Jesus went on to teach a parable: "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.'"

Why did Jesus suddenly talk about new garments and new wine? I'm sure that Levi's party included many people in nice clothes and much wine to go around. Jesus, as the Master Teacher, used visible illustrations from what they could all see right in front of them.

Jesus contrasted the old with the new. New patches are not torn off of nice clothing to repair an old garment. That wouldn't match. It would also destroy the new garment. New wine is not poured into old wineskins. New wine is said to be bubbly and causes expansion in the wineskin. This would destroy the old wineskins. So a new garment replaces an old one. And new wine requires a new, flexible wineskin to expand in.

Jesus brought a new way with his new teaching. It requires that his followers are flexible to change their own ways to accept his new ways and new teachings. Jesus' followers need a new mind. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Jesus brought a new way, a new life, and a new covenant for his followers. Apostle Paul talked about putting off the old and putting on the new in Ephesians 4:22-24, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful

desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were stuck in their old traditions. So they could not accept the new teachings and new way of Jesus. It is also our tendency to get comfortable with old habits and old ways, thinking they are better. Old is not necessarily bad. In another passage Jesus talked about bringing out of our treasure box new treasures as well as old. But here Jesus is saying that clinging to the old can be a real hindrance to the new.

The old way was the written code of the law of Moses. The new way Jesus brought is the new way of the Spirit (Rom 7:6). Change is always challenging to adapt to. For example, if we changed the seating in our church, people would come in and think, “What’s going on here? This is strange. Why did we change the seating? What was wrong with the old way? Where should I sit?” We also expect others to come to Jesus just like we did or to grow as a Christian just like we did. That might happen, but it might not. In fact, as the world changes, methods of outreach and bringing people to Jesus are also likely to change, even though the gospel does not change. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8).

My wife and I each have one faithful Bible student at Northwestern. It took us over six months of weekly invitations to students to meet them. I began to wonder if there might be a more effective way to bring students to Bible study. Perhaps it’s the big generation gap we have with students. Perhaps we need to consider new ways of outreach, such as social media, or figure out what students respond to better. Sometimes doing things over and over the same way can be faithfulness. Other times it can simply be habit or what we’ve always done. Even though the gospel doesn’t change, we sometimes need creativity and innovation that comes from a heart of joy and newness.

I’m thankful that we had all young messengers for our Easter conference, who all spoke their own messages with their own inspiration and creativity and faith. We saw God’s blessing and life-giving work at the conference. I’m thankful for many signs of blessing, joy and newness in our lives and in all the ministries in our church. We are praying for a new generation of Christ followers to follow Jesus and call sinners to repentance in his name.

Jesus calls us to follow him in repentance, joy and newness. May God lead us as we follow him in repentance, trust, and surrender. May God give us a spirit of joy and newness as we follow Christ. Amen.