

JESUS: “With Crooks and Sinners”

Luke 5: 27-39

- 27** Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth.
“Follow me,” Jesus said to him,
- 28** and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.
- 29** Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house,
and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.
- 30** But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect
complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”
- 31** Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.
32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”
- 33** They said to him, “John’s disciples often fast and pray,
and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”
- 34** Jesus answered, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?
35 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them;
in those days they will fast.”
- 36** He told them this 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.
- 37** 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.
- 38** No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins.
39 And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’ ”

Introduction

“It isn’t the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” And the Bible is clear about this. “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (that’s Romans 3:23). We human beings have compiled a long and sorry record as sinners and each one of us has proved that we are utterly incapable of living the gracious lives that God wills for us.

Levi was just such a man. A more unlikely candidate for the office of apostle couldn’t have been found. He was a Jewish man who had cuddled up to the Roman authorities taking the job of collecting taxes, probably dealing in bribes and extortion as well. Tax collectors were barred from the synagogue for this disgrace. They were seen as the worst of sinners along with thieves and murderers. Yet when Jesus called Levi, we see the gospel in action. Jesus has the power to see in us not only what we are (sinners deserving the wrath of God) but also what we could be (redeemed children of God). Jesus knows you and me perfectly well and still calls us into a saving, transforming relationship.

I. Lost then Found, Rejected then Accepted (vs. 27-29)

“Jesus saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth.” Boos and hisses should rise up from the crowd. Levi was employed by the Romans to exact a variety of taxes on the people. A tenth of grain, a fifth of fruit or vine, an income tax, 2% import/export tax, tax on pack animals, even the number of wheels and axles on their carts, market place, travel, roads: there were many, many taxes (not much has changed half way around the world and 20 centuries later). No doubt Levi was one of those customs officers who taxed all goods and commodities as they entered and left his territory. He was permitted, contracted to collect as much as he could, make the prescribed payment to the Roman officials and keep the rest for himself. Needless to say, the Roman tax system was opened to all kinds of abuses.

Then Jesus comes along teaching and preaching and says, “Follow me!” Responding to Jesus and his message, it says Levi “got up, left everything and followed him. And then he held a great banquet for Jesus at his house.” He invited all of his friends. “And a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.”

Levi responded to Jesus as the Lord would want each of us to do – he followed his Lord immediately and then called his friends together to meet him. In following Jesus, Levi becomes Matthew, a new life, a new name. The root of Levi means “take.” The root of Matthew means “give.” Levi was used to taking the taxes from people. Matthew has now received the gift of Christ for his life.

Yes, he lost a comfortable, lucrative job but found an eternal destiny. He left the tax books and ill-gotten gain behind him. But I am glad he brought his pen with him. Matthew wrote down, recorded, collected so much of Jesus’ life and teachings. Just think of the countless number of people who have read and been blessed by the Gospel account that bears his name, the New Testament biography of Jesus, the book of Matthew. When Levi left the tax collector’s booth that day, he gave up much in the material sense. But Matthew became heir to a spiritual fortune.

When did Jesus first call you? Perhaps he is calling you to follow him today. What did you know to leave behind to follow him? Each one of us here this morning probably has something to let go of, something that keeps us from following the Lord. What talents and gifts did you bring with you into your faith in Christ? God wants to use you and your experiences and abilities to share his love and compassion with others. Jesus offers the Good News of God’s grace, forgiveness, and life in Christ to continue to change you and give you a new name.

II. Resentment Grows (vs. 30-32)

“But the Pharisees and teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’

O how Pharisees wrap their sin in respectability! Doing good deeds in public can allow pointing at the sins of others. Jesus will have no part in it. The Savior-Messiah does not spend time with the proud and self-righteous. He spends time with people who sense their own sinful ways and who know they are not good enough for God. Jesus calls everyone to renounce sin and to recognize it for what it is. But not everyone is willing or open to do that.

Grandma Lillian was telling her two grandsons a bedtime Bible story. Then she asked them if they knew what the word *sin* meant. Seven-year-old Keith spoke up: “It’s when you do something bad.” Four-year-old Aaron’s eyes widened. “I know a big sin that Keith did today.” Pharisees start at a very young age, don’t they? Quite incensed and annoyed, Keith turned to his little brother: “You take care of your sins and I’ll take care of mine.”

In essence, Jesus says, “What’s the matter with you people? Why wouldn’t you delight in seeing a sinner forgiven, a sick person healed, a wounded one made whole? Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I have come to invite outsiders, not insiders – an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out. You take care of your sins and I’ll take care of theirs.”

III. Put the New in the New

Jesus tells them 3 things in a parable: “No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one.” That would be dumb! And, “No one pours new wine into old wineskins.” What a waste that would be! “And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’ ” Those who like old wine won’t try the new; their minds are already made up. “The old is good,” they say.

For the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, fasting was a major form of piety. They thought Jesus and his disciples lacked respect for God with their obvious lack of religiosity. But, the newness of Jesus was about spirituality connected with, not separate from matters of the heart. Jesus brought the newness of God’s grace to challenge the oldness of self-righteousness in the law.

You can’t mix what Jesus brings with the old ways without creating a destructive mix. Obviously, the religious leaders were keeping an eye on (spying on) Jesus and his disciples. Oh, how that still happens in religious communities today. Jesus was less concerned with the externals in relating to God and more concerned with nurturing the condition of the heart and the treatment of others.

Driving his point home, Jesus refers to a wedding celebration, often a scriptural description of God's relationship with his people Israel. Isaiah 54 has it: "For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected," says your God. "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back" (Isaiah 54:5-7).

Jesus asked them, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?" Of course not. "But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them;

in those days they will fast." Here is Jesus' first hint of the Cross. And yes, there is room for fasting as we wait for our promised redemption.

Conclusion

So here we are this morning, sinners in need of God's forgiveness, the sick needing a doctor to prescribe healing medicine. Do you recognize the Pharisee in yourself? When proud and self-righteous, will you let Jesus challenge and change you, put you in your place?

Or, do you recognize the Levi Matthew in yourself? One who has sinned deeply yet has received God's grace and new life in Christ? When you hear Jesus say through the Word of God, "Follow me," there are only two qualifications to the invitation: 1) that you recognize, admit and confess that you're a sinner in need of forgiveness, and 2) that you want to know and follow Jesus as Savior, the one who died in your place for the forgiveness of your sins. And to know and follow Jesus as your Lord, the one you wish to learn from and grow in faith, grace and life.

"What is he doing eating with crooks and sinners?" they complained. Jesus came to the party at Levi's house and to our lives to offer forgiveness, to usher in new life in God's grace. Let us pray with and for one another.