



Luke 5:27–32

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‘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 those who are ill. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’

Reflection

In his own words, Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). And Luke sure is ticking off the ancient stereotypes for us. The poor, the outcasts, prisoners and the oppressed. Those suffering from fevers, from all kinds of illnesses, long-term lepers, paralytics and the demon possessed. Today, Luke turns to perhaps even worse than these, a turn-coat traitor, a tax collector named Levi. Let’s hear his story from

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tance.’

Nobody has ever loved the tax man. Not today, and certainly not in first-century Palestine, the setting of today’s passage. Back then, tax collectors were despised. Capernaum, like all of Galilee and much of the ancient world was Roman occupied territory, and Rome’s great armies were funded by taxation. And so, far from going to pay for hospitals and schools your taxes ensured that your enemies maintained a tight grip on your land.

The Romans auctioned off the collection of taxes to the highest bidders. By farming out the collection of these taxes, the Roman governor could count on receiving a fixed sum from the beginning of the year and not deal with the hassle and expense

of collecting the taxes himself. But Rome did not care how much tax was collected, only that they received their cut – which opened the door to fraud and extortion.

Enter Levi, his Jewish name condemning him as a turncoat traitor to the Romans. We read in verse 27 that after Jesus healed the paralytic he,

went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth.

Capernaum was the last village on the road running northeast across the Jordan from Herod Antipas' territory, Galilee, to Herod Philip's territory, Gaulinitus, and on to Damascus. In other words it was admirably situated for one of Herod Antipas's

customs posts and no doubt Levi took full advantage.

And yet the same power that lifted the paralytic from his mat now lifts Levi out of the sinful lifestyle that he's embraced. That power is the word of God applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit – the same power that convicts the hearts of all sinners who turn to Jesus in repentance and faith.

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To the public indignation and secret delight of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus enlists a follower from a member of a class that his society despised as the worst of sinners. Which isn't even to

mention what happens next, verse 29,

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.

And so the Son of God comes dining with tax collectors and sinners. And historical context adds spice to the meal. You see, table fellowship in the ancient world was a serious matter. Jews would not even dine with non-Jews, let alone with notorious sinners. And yet Jesus makes it his habit of relaxing in the wrong sort of company. And we can imagine the talk that soon followed,

30 ... 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?'

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law may have directed their question at his disciples but Jesus answers them directly. Why does he relax in the company of 'sinners'? Why is he breaking all manner of religious and cultural divides to spend time and minister to Gentiles, lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners? And all those who live on the margins of society and are suffering most visibly the outward effects of sin's curse?

31 Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to

repentance.’

And so in five short chapters we’ve seen the poor, the outcasts, prisoners and the oppressed; those suffering from fevers, from all kinds of illnesses, long-term lepers, paralytics, the demon possessed and even a tax collector. ‘I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’ All that now remains is for Luke to add to this list (as he will do in the rest of the Gospel): women, the religious elite, Jews, Gentiles, Jesus’ closest friends in the world, Jesus’ mother, brothers and sisters, rich young rulers and all sorts of people with power and prestige – all alike in their sin and in desperate need of the salvation that is only available in Jesus Christ. ‘I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’ Luke will go on to

demonstrate the irony of Jesus' statement. There are, in fact, no so-called righteous – except those so 'self-righteous' that they have become blind to their sin.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost which includes us all. It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. And the point Luke will press home in his Gospel is that the whole world, all of humankind, is desperately ill. Sin's effects are terminal. Like Levi, we're in league with the enemy and judgment is sure. Our only hope is to follow Jesus, to leave everything behind – the lusts of our flesh, the desires of our heart, the corrupted compromises of our culture – and to follow Jesus.

Think

The good doctor Luke in his Gospel brought all his skills to bear to point out that the symptoms of sin strike at every level of society. No-one is exempt. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And in today's passage Luke touches a nerve that sits very close to sin's core – our self-righteousness. Our self-righteousness, our pride, can lead to the kind of spiritual blindness that can deny Jesus no matter the evidence before us. Just look at the Pharisees and teachers of the law – highly trained theologians who've witnessed first-hand the miracles and teachings of Jesus, the son of God himself in the flesh! And yet their self-importance, their self-righteousness and their pride blinds them; and it is a reformed tax collector who ends up sharing the good news of

the Gospel with half the town over dinner, while they begin to hatch a plot to do away with the Son of God because he's begun to draw bigger crowds than them.

Pray

There's an old Persian proverb that says a humble person is like a tree, all its branches bending down towards the ground, heavy with fruit. It is only dead, fruitless trees that stand tall and proud. Pray today for a transformation in your life like the one which came over Levi. The self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law would go on to murder Jesus in cold blood. But the humble Levi would go on to change his name to Matthew, and write the first Gospel in our Bibles, the one with by far the largest repository of Jesus' ethical

teaching, the famed Sermon on the Mount which would go on to forever change the values of the Western world. All because Levi got up, left everything behind – his sinful nature, his greed, his former way of life, everything – and followed Jesus. Pray today, with God's help, that you and I would too.