

The Bridegroom Came for Sinners

This morning we come to the centerpiece of Jesus' calling of His disciples, which began in **5:1** and runs through **6:16**. Here, Jesus further clarifies the nature of His coming and calling of those to follow Him (**v. 32**). This clarification comes within the context of the continuing rise of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, which provides the backdrop for Jesus to contrast the newness of His coming with all that has come before. Truly something new has appeared making, as the author of Hebrews says, "the first one (covenant) obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (**Heb. 8:13**). .

It is the newness of the revelation of Jesus Christ which has inaugurated this celebration, which can only be described as the arrival of the eschatological Bridegroom (**v. 34**), which we will return to in just a moment.

But first let's begin setting the context of our story. Remember that in this section of the Gospel of Luke we are reading about the calling of the disciples, whom Jesus chose to follow Him. We are told in **v. 27** that after events of Jesus healing the paralytic that Jesus approached a tax booth where he saw a tax collector named Levi. In the same story told in Matthew's Gospel, this individual is first named Matthew (**Matt. 9:9**) and in Mark's Gospel he is "Levi, the son of Alphaeus" (**Mk. 2:14**). Matthew either had two names from birth, or more likely, he changed his name after his conversion much like when Saul changed his name to Paul (**see Acts 13:9**).

We don't really need to say a lot about how the Jews felt about tax collectors because not much has changed for almost 2,000 years in how the populace feels about them. A tax collector in the Roman Empire would be comparable to the modern-day mafia. The whole taxing system was shot through with corruption with tax collectors paying the highest bid to gain the ability to "muscle" huge profits for themselves. They would travel with police "protection" to extort large sums of money from hard-working individuals causing a huge burden upon anyone who was confronted by them.

So when Jesus walks up to the tax booth to speak to a tax collector named Levi, and further calling someone like Levi to be His disciple – to "leave everything" and follow Him (**vv. 27-28**) - once again we see Jesus acting in such a way that is so contrary of what any of us expect for a "Man of God." We must always keep in the back of our mind what Jesus says to His disciples in **John 15:15**, "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

We all have a sense of what Levi must have felt being finally set free from the enormous pain and guilt of hurting others by the call of Jesus. When Jesus came into your life and broke the self-made shackles of human idolatry, when that light flooded the darkness of your evil heart, you felt the need to celebrate. And this is exactly what Levi did – he through a great feast in his house, celebrating with Jesus a heart set free (v. 29). And who naturally do you invite to such a grand celebration if you are a tax collector, but other tax collectors (v. 29). In fact, a large company of tax collectors came to celebrate Levi’s retirement from corruption.

Everyone was filled with great joy at Levi’s new lease on life, except of course the Pharisees and scribes who had slithered into the party (v. 30). Now, once again we need to watch what is important to the hearts of the Pharisees. What are they looking at, and more importantly, what are they completely missing? You would think that those closest to God would be filled with absolute praise that God would show mercy to a tax collector to bring someone such as this into His Kingdom. After all, if God would save someone like this, who has spent his whole life destroying the lives of others, then perhaps God would be merciful to someone like a Pharisee who spends his life trying to help others. But that is not in the heart of a Pharisee. Instead, the Pharisee cannot see past his own righteousness to see the brokenness of another sinner. Notice how the Pharisee sees Levi and his company when they ask Jesus’ disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (v. 30).

How do the Pharisees view Levi and his friends? They are categorized as the “unsavory” type of people who live on the “other side of the tracks.” In religious terminology, these tax collectors were “unclean” and to associate with them, especially at a meal, would be to contaminate yourself. Now try and think like a Pharisee for a moment. What are they saying? They are taking the religious distinctions between clean and unclean, which were reserved for the temple – those things which belonged to the worship of God – and applied them to themselves. The Pharisees themselves were holy and they needed to avoid contaminating themselves with those who were unholy, the tax collectors and sinners. They saw themselves as “clean” before God and therefore it was necessary for them to avoid all contact with those who were ritually unclean before God.

Now, imagine living in that society where you are viewed that way by those who are supposed to be leading you to God? It is no wonder that when Jesus finally appears into that “den of vipers” and shows love and compassion to sinners that Levi and his friends would think it is a time of celebration.

When you look upon this scene, note how different Jesus looks at Levi and his fellow sinners. When you see this, you will begin to grasp how Jesus looks at you. Notice that Jesus does not disagree with the Pharisees assessment of Levi and his friends – they are sinners (vv. 31-32).

But where the Pharisees can only appraise the situation, Jesus has the power to change the situation. Once again, what the Law is impotent to accomplish, Jesus was sent to our world to transform our lives and to bring us to God.

But Jesus did not come for the Pharisees, those who are already well and in no need of a physician. This morning, if you are filled with a sense of your own cleanliness before God, thinking you have already arrived in a position of righteousness, especially as you compare your life of good works as compared to those unclean sinners out there, then know for sure that Jesus did not come to this world for you. If you are already well this morning, you have no need of a physician. But if you have a sense of your own moral bankruptcy – those who Jesus calls, “poor in spirit” (**Matt. 5:3**) and a need of your complete helplessness before a holy God, then there is need for celebration. Jesus did not come to call you who are righteous, but sinners to repentance.

But those who are righteous in themselves see no need to celebrate when one sinner repents and follows Jesus. Leave it to the Pharisees to bring up “fasting” at a party (**v. 33**). Have you ever been ready to sit down at a buffet and some miserable soul at the dinner table brings up the need to start “our diet” tomorrow? The Pharisees once again miss the whole opportunity to rejoice in the LORD. They view the act of fasting as a means of “getting right with God” instead of a time set aside to concentrate on nothing else but your relationship to God. Fasting, for the Pharisee, was a work you do to make yourself “clean” before God.

Jesus once again penetrates the true evil of the heart of the Pharisee proving that because the Pharisee is so blinded by his own self-righteousness he cannot see when God is present before his very eyes (**v. 34**). What the Pharisees don’t realize is that the promised Bridegroom has appeared and it is time to celebrate (**cf. Isa. 25:6-9; 61:10-62:5; Rev. 19:1-10**). Why would those whom the eschatological Bridegroom has finally appeared before choose to fast and mourn at His coming? The Bridegroom has now appeared to take the hand of His chosen bride in holy matrimony. The last thing you do at this moment is mourn!

But Jesus says, there are dark days ahead, when the Bridegroom will be taken from His bride and in those days mourning and fasting will be entirely appropriate (**v. 35**). What is Jesus referring to? Jesus is speaking of His crucifixion (**cf. 22:15-18, 32; 24:17-20; etc.**), when Jesus will be violently taken from His disciples by the very ones who are already conspiring for His death. But what the Pharisees and even Jesus’ own disciples don’t understand at this moment is that while sorrow will soon fall upon all those who love Jesus there is coming a new day when Jesus will arise from the dead, return to His disciples, ascend to Heaven and pour out the ever-comforting Holy Spirit upon them at Pentecost (**Luke 24:32, 41, 52; Acts 2:11, etc.**). In that day, something marvelous will take place (**24:28-31**). Their mourning will

once again be turned to dancing and they will no longer fast now that Jesus is fully with them forevermore. Instead, Jesus will break bread with them – He will literally, break the fast – as He does with us every LORD’s Day.

But something far greater is going on here than what merely gives Levi a cause of celebration. Jesus describes what this is by two parables (**vv. 36-38**). The nice thing about parables is that you really don’t need to explain them. What is clear from the first parable is that you don’t patch an old, delicate garment with rigid material. Once the patch begins to shrink and fades after a few washings, the garment will tear and the patch will no longer match the old. Further, no one in the ancient world would put new wine, which hasn’t fermented yet into old wineskins. An old wineskin is already stretched to its limits. Once the new wine is poured into them, it will need room to ferment and expand. When it does, not only will you lose your favorite wineskin but the fermented wine itself will be wasted. What is Jesus saying?

Jesus is describing the newness of what it means now that He has come into our world. The Pharisees cannot see this because they are blinded by their own goodness. For them, the old ways are better (**v. 39**). They can maintain their own righteous standing as long as they have rules to follow. They are high achievers and it doesn’t really matter what list of rules you give them, they find it easy to put a checkmark next to every one of them. And as long as they can check off their good works, as they define them, they really have no need of help from anyone, especially Jesus.

The Pharisees represent the problem with the Law, which Paul describes in one marvelous sentence in **Romans 7**:

Romans 7:9-11 ⁹ I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; ¹⁰ and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; ¹¹ for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

The Law doesn’t have the power to transform anything because it is something that we touch. All it can do is evaluate us before a holy God. All it can do is make distinctions between what is clean and unclean. For someone who is already well, the law makes perfect sense. But for the rest of us who are sick and in need a physician the Law will always kill us.

But what the Law cannot do, Jesus has the power to lead us to a new life to finally bear fruit for God (**Rom. 7:4**). While the Old Covenant pointed forward to Jesus and there is continuity between the old and new, as promise is to fulfillment, there is also a marvelous newness to what Jesus has come to accomplish. Jesus must not be reduced to merely being a patching up

of the Old Covenant, as if Jesus simply shows us how we are to be better at keeping the Law. Neither can Jesus be simply contained within the confines of Moses as if He is merely continuing what Paul calls in **Romans 3** as a justification by the works of the Law (**Rom. 3:20**). But rather, what the Law and Prophets witnessed to has now been manifested – has now appeared - apart from the Law – the righteousness of God is now a free gift to all who through faith in Jesus Christ believe (**Rom. 3:22**). Paul sums up beautifully the newness of what Jesus has come to do for us in **Romans 8**:

Romans 8:2-4 ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

It is no wonder that Levi was so ready to throw a party when the Bridegroom suddenly appeared and called him to follow Jesus. He was released from the burden of always falling short of the glory of God to knowing that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (**Rom. 8:1**).

Amen!

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