

September 2, 2018
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
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HANGING OUT WITH SINNERS Luke 5:27-32

I love to figure out how to solve problems, accomplish tasks, and especially how to build things. That spirit easily flows over into my relationship with God in which I love to help God out by recommending the best way for Him to accomplish His will. Oh, I'm all in favor of doing God's will. It's just that I naturally think I know the best way for God to bring it about. That is not good. But it is a natural part of human wisdom. Because God creates us in His image, we are creative ourselves. We are doers, problem solvers, fixers.

That is part of the reason why God's work is so amazing. He seems to delight in doing His work in ways that we never thought of or, even more often, in ways that we are quite sure are destined to fail. For example, Jesus promised the apostles that **He** would build His Church. I suppose that included the reality that He will build His Church His way. The initial building blocks of this marvelous, eternal Church was Jesus's choosing of twelve men, eleven of whom He gave the task of continuing the Church building process.

A quick assessment of the men Jesus chose lends credence to the idea that He accomplishes His work contrary to human wisdom or even common sense sometimes. Why did He choose fishermen to buttress the most important spiritual work in eternity? Or why did He choose a tax collector who had the reputation for being a notorious cheat? And why did Jesus pick a zealot named Simon who was associated with a group of rebels who wanted to overthrow the government? And Jesus chose a doubter, and even a liar and thief named Judas. Jesus chose such a motley crew not just to be His followers but to be His closest followers—the ones He depended on to keep the work going after He returned to heaven.

In light of choices like that we are not surprised also to see that Jesus called the outcasts. The weak, the sick, the liars, the cheaters, the prostitutes across the spectrum of life to come to Him and find healing for their spiritual sickness.

Lurking in the shadows of reasoning through Jesus's choices is an important question. What would ever cause people like that to be attracted to Jesus in the first place? Why did three fishermen abandon the biggest haul of their career to follow Jesus? Why did the tax collector leave a most lucrative career to follow Jesus? Why did you and I leave "normal" life to pursue life that is always looking at future eternity?

God orchestrates the circumstances that draw us into fellowship with our Savior. We know that the Lord arranged for Peter, James, and John to be astonished when they finally committed to following Jesus after knowing Him for several weeks. Who knows what circumstances were boiling in Levi's life when he got up from the tax booth and followed Jesus?

Thank God for His grace that causes a nice tranquil life to be turned upside down. Rather than grow distraught when your sense of direction becomes skewed, turn to Christ and rest in Him. When the light at the end of the tunnel appears to be getting dimmer not brighter, hold tighter to the Lord's hand. When the sure foundation feels more like sand washing out from under your feet as you stand on the edge of a vast ocean looking for some kind of life and security, Jesus is calling you to follow.

Those are often symptoms of spiritual need. The gracious God allows circumstances into the sinners' lives that progressively cause them to look for hope. The same gracious God allows similar circumstances into the lives of His own special people to draw us to Himself where we find help in the time of need. We will be encouraged to read again how Jesus called Matthew to follow Him, which Matthew did quickly. We will be encouraged to hear Jesus point out to deceived teachers who thought they were righteous, that He came to call unrighteous people like Matthew, and you, and me to follow Him.

A Sinner Enlisted (vv.27-29).

Jesus invited the sinner to follow. This was a particular sinner Jesus saw when He went out, possibly after healing the paralyzed man in the house (v.26). *After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth (v.27a)*. In the same story in Matthew's account (Matthew 9:9), the tax collector is called Matthew. It was possible for a man to have two names (i.e. Simon and Peter). Also, in all the lists of apostles, you never find Levi, but always find Matthew listed.

Jesus went out into the public place and saw this particular tax collector. The verb translated *saw* means more than to casually observe or even to see without focusing on the object. This word means to look at intently, to gaze on with purpose. When the divine Son of God gazes on a person, He is looking into the man's soul. Jesus studied this tax collector, gazed into his soul because He was about to call him to follow. That should strike us as odd. Surely there were better people than tax collectors who could take up Jesus's ministry of proclaiming the good news of God's grace in salvation!

Tax collectors were among the lowest of the low, the most outcast of the outcasts in Jewish society. They worked for the hated Roman government who Jews considered to be their slave masters. Herod Antipas was the Roman appointed ruler over that region of the empire. Because he was ultimately responsible to collect all the taxes and send them on to Rome, he sold tax collecting positions to the highest bidder. The collectors gathered taxes on almost everything. The people were taxed for the privilege to be alive (poll tax), on their income, on their land, and everything produced on the land. They were taxed on everything transported across the roads and through the ports (like Capernaum).

The tax collector was required to collect a specific amount on all the taxes. Beyond that, he was free to collect as much as he could with all excess being his profit. Typically, there was a middle man who purchased the right to collect taxes, who would then hire people like Matthew to man the booths throughout the region. The middle man made a cut on what the collector was required to collect. Everything else was fair game for the collector.

Capernaum was a logical place for such a tax booth. It was the largest port on the Sea of Galilee. It was situated at the intersection of the major east west road and north south road in the region. Most goods transported through Israel went through Capernaum. That is where Jesus zeroed in on the exceedingly sinful tax collector. He was "filthy rich" in every sense of the word. Surely every time the average citizen of Capernaum, and especially the religious leaders, saw Matthew sitting in his booth, they hated him and despised him. He was a liar, a cheat, a traitor to Israel and God, and not a friend to the community.

What did Jesus see as He gazed on this man? He saw a liar, cheat, traitor, law-breaking sinner who in his heart despised God and justly deserved the most horrible wrath God could invent. He saw a man just like me. He saw a needy sinner like you.

When Jesus looked at Matthew, He saw people like I see going in and out of Lady Godivas, the strip joint at the corner of Wade Hampton and St. Mark's Road. I literally hate that place which I must see every time I go through that intersection. I have no good thoughts about the people who own the place, work at the place, and frequent the place. In my mind, they are fools at best and wicked God-haters at worst. I am very convinced that they deserve God's wrath and just as convinced that one day they will receive it if they are not changed. How will they be changed? They must learn about Jesus. Sadly, far too many sinners in our city already know much about Jesus.

Why was Jesus looking at the tax collector? Jesus gave the sinner a command. *And he said to him, "Follow me" (v.27b)*. Jesus walked up to the tax collector and spoke two words: "Follow Me." This was not an invitation to be considered or contemplated by Matthew. It was not even a recommendation. In the Greek text, the verb *follow* is a present tense, active voice, imperative. That means it is a command that requires, "Start following me right now and keep on following me."

The two words were the expression of the Savior's choice. It really was not a matter of Matthew conceding to the call. Jesus explained that this was the case for all of the apostles He chose. *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you" (John 15:16)*.

This is the same calling that all of us born again people experienced at a point. Paul described this miraculous call by writing, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:3-6).*

Because Matthew was Jesus's choice, Jesus initiated the contact. The story does not reveal that Matthew saw Jesus and ran up to Him and said, "Hey, I've been looking for you." There were thousands of people who took the initiative to jump on the "Jesus bandwagon" looking for benefits. But when Jesus explained the cost of discipleship, they all faded away like the morning dew.

Matthew responded the way he did because Jesus did not just invite him, but called with an effectual calling. The effectual call is a spiritual miracle whereby we become convinced of our sin and misery. Through the effectual call, the Holy Spirit enlightens us to the truth about us, and Jesus persuades us to trust Christ, enables us to embrace Christ by faith, and thereby we experience the miracle of regeneration.

It might be ironic that Matthew's name means 'gift of God.' At the moment Jesus called him, Matthew received the gift of God's grace unto salvation. He was the fourth disciple called, Peter, James, John were first.

How did the sinner respond to Jesus's command? He followed intensely. Matthew left it all. *And leaving everything, he rose and followed him (v.28).* This statement brings up a question when we compare it with Matthew's account of the same story. Why didn't Matthew mention in his account of the story that he left everything to follow? Matthew's account reads: *As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him (Matthew 9:9).* No mention of how much he left. That is because Matthew the greedy, rapacious tax collector had a new heart, a new personality. A humble man does not gloat about the amazing sacrifices he has made.

The tax collector responded instantly and made a choice that required a new lifestyle. We all respond like that when Jesus calls us with the effectual call. If it really is the effectual call, we sinners acknowledge our sins, repent, change, follow. Jesus called Matthew with a present tense command which could be interpreted, "Start following and keep following." Matthew's response viewed historically is described with an imperfect tense verb which would be interpreted, "He started following and kept on following." That is the character of the new creation. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).*

And what does that new life, that new character look like? One obvious thing is that Matthew invited others to get to know Jesus. *And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them (v.29).* The new follower of Jesus desired for others to know Jesus, so he spent a lot of money on a big banquet and invited sinners to attend.

In the ancient Middle East (and still) sitting down to share a meal was more than just fellowship. It was a sign of spiritual fellowship. Was it right for a new believer in Christ to have fellowship with sinners? Here in Luke's story he revealed that there was a large company of tax collectors. He also mentioned very kindly and tactfully that there were *others*. Matthew, in telling his own story, was not quite so tactful. *And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples (Matthew 9:10).*

Oh! The "others" were outright sinners. Sinners are presented in the Psalms as being outside the law and covenants. Therefore, according to the religious leaders, they were hopelessly unclean and unredeemable. To eat with such sinners would render one's self ceremonially unclean according to the Rabbis' laws. In the self-righteous Pharisees' eyes, this act was as wrong-headed as Jesus reaching out to touch a leper. Both rendered Jesus ceremonially unclean. Those religious authorities would have been horrified to see Jesus show up at the temple to worship after this dinner.

The hypocrisy of religious leaders notwithstanding, Matthew threw his own going-away party. He was leaving his old job and beginning a new life. Obviously, his intent was to introduce Jesus His

Savior to his friends. But we are left to wonder whatever happened to his friends? There is no more indication anywhere in Scripture that they continued to hang out with Matthew. Things changed for Matthew which required things to change for his friends. He followed Jesus but they did not. Again, Matthew gave up everything to follow Christ. Tradition holds that Matthew preached the gospel in Persia and Ethiopia where he was martyred with a halberd (spear/battle axe combination).

It is just a known reality that unrepentant sinners generally avoid much association with people who are so intent on following Jesus that they sacrifice literal life itself. The world assesses people like that as fanatics, religious nuts, extremists. It seems that is what Jesus called Matthew to be. Is that what Jesus intends for us? Has He called you? Are you following with all your mind, will, and strength?

Responses (vv.30-32).

The religious authorities responded negatively to Matthew's kindness and Jesus's attendance at the party. The self-appointed authorities grumbled. *And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples (v.30a)*. This is the same kind, if not the very same group, of religious leaders who accused Jesus of blaspheming when He healed the paralyzed man (5:21).

They were Pharisees. That is the name of one of five sects in the Israelite culture. The other four included Sadducees who were more politically minded, desiring to stay in Rome's good favor. There were Zealots who, as a group, were bound and determined to overthrow Roman authority. Often these people got caught up in rebellions and attempted coups. There were the Herodians, a nationalistic party that favored embracing Greek influence. And there were Essenes who were quite conservative religiously. They were like separatists who are connected with the Dead Sea Scrolls and Qumran community. It is possible that John the Baptist was part of this group.

The Pharisees generally came from Israel's middle class. Probably there were about 6,000 Pharisees in 1st century Israel. They began sometime in the 2nd century B.C. in connection with the Maccabean revolts. Their name speaks of being separate and probably indicates their desire to resist the influence of the Greek culture and

less devout Jews. They specialized on the Torah, creating hundreds of laws intended to help Jews keep the law of Moses. In many ways, they held to accurate Scripture interpretations especially in matters of the resurrection and eternity.

But the Pharisees were the proud teachers of their version of Bible truth which led them to be leaders in Christ's crucifixion. The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 spelled the end of the Sadducees. The Bar Kochba rebellion in A.D. 132-135 resulted in the annihilation of the Zealots. That left the Pharisees as the dominant religious sect in Judaism. They wrote down the oral laws that had been their guide for centuries (Mishnah) in A.D. 200. They compiled the Gemara (300 years of Rabbinic commentary). They combined the Mishnah and Gemara in the Talmud in A.D. 500. And so the conservative or Hasidic Jewish sect today is essentially the Pharisees of Jesus's day.

Luke mentioned another group of grumblers who saw Jesus enjoying a meal with sinners. There were the Pharisees' scribes. These were the lawyers who interpreted the law. We often find this coalition resisting Jesus all the way to the crucifixion.

Well, these authorities observed Jesus's actions and drew an authoritative conclusion. They were saying, *"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (v.30b)*. In their thinking, certain classes of people did not qualify for fellowship. According to their laws and interpretations, sinners, especially exemplified by tax collectors, were not worthy of association. They should be cut off. No good Jew should have any association with such people. If Jesus was really a rabbi, He should have lived like one. Their argument was, "If you are really a rabbi (teacher), why don't you live like us?" They simply assumed that they were the true authority on religion in Israel.

Jesus explained the great truth by giving the hypocrites a pertinent illustration. *And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (v.31)*. It is as though Jesus agreed with them. "Yes, there are *sinners* who are spiritually sick." The tax collectors and sinners are spiritually sick because they are separated from God, the giver of eternal life. They are experiencing an eternally deathly sickness called the penalty for their sins. They need spiritual healing.

There are also those sinners who are deceived into thinking they are spiritually well. They too are suffering from the fatal disease of sin. But they errantly believe they are just fine. Their church has convinced them they are fine. Their friends or family have convinced them that they are as good as anyone else. They have become convinced in their minds that God is good and will let them into heaven, thus avoiding the eternal death of their spiritual sickness.

Spiritually sick people need the Lord's mercy. Therefore, according to Matthew's account of the story, Jesus told them, "*Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice'*" (Matthew 9:13a). According to Matthew's account, Jesus quoted part of Hosea 6:6 to the Pharisees and their scribes. God said through the prophet Hosea, "*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*" (Hosea 6:6). Part of the problem was that the scribes and Pharisees were experts on the Law (Torah) but not interested in history or the Prophets.

The lesson Jesus taught was that such proud religious folks like them are real good about doing sacrifice. In terminology that applies to us, we would say that religious folks are satisfied with going to church, singing songs, giving offerings, even flipping a little money to the beggar. God is not impressed with such religious activity. God desires for us to have heartfelt compassion on the truly needy. That requires discernment to understand who truly are the repentant, needy, and sincere. That requires sincere response.

There have been times when Pat and I have visited churches on vacation where we are greeted by the "official" greeters at the door. I will sometimes say, "Well, they did their duty." At other times we will be greeted by people in the church who sincerely make us feel welcome, like they really are glad we chose to worship with them that day. Pharisees do duty. Followers of Christ have a heart of mercy.

Jesus calls the needy to repentance. He said, "*I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance*" (v.32). The necessary first step in healing is to admit your need, agree with God. God does not redeem, regenerate, forgive sin, save those who refuse to say the same thing about themselves that He says. But, coming face to face with the Law and admitting that we are rightly condemned because we break it all the time is the first step to salvation. Remember, *The*

law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Romans 5:20).

This same process is obvious regarding Christians who need maturing. If we assume we are okay, we will never take the Lord's medicine. It is easy for us to conclude that there are two classes of people: Me (and my kind who are righteous) and those sinners who need Christ's medicine. Actually, even after becoming a Christian, we are still in need of Christ's medicine. I am a redeemed child of God. My spirit is renewed and recreated. But I live in a body owned by the traits of the flesh. My spirit fights with my flesh all the time. I am in constant need of taking my spiritual vitamins from Jesus. He has healed me from the penalty of sin, and continues to cleanse me by His mercy.

Thank God and rejoice if you have experienced Jesus's effectual call to follow Him. Now, following Him, be quick to share the good news like Matthew did. Hold regular times when you can tell sinners the good news of salvation. Don't be surprised if they fail to respond like you did. Maybe Jesus isn't calling them yet. Never forget that we who make up the Church Christ is building were once separated from Him by our sins. All sinners are in need of Jesus's medicine. At least offer it to them.