

Lesson 15 - Luke 5:27-39
“*Confronting Conventional Thinking re:
Sinners and Fasting*”
March 8, 2009

Introduction

[draw attention to day of prayer March 14th; and also week of prayer coming up]

Our journey through this amazing narrative written by Luke is all about sharpening our senses and looking once more at Jesus. Why are we doing this?? Because we believe that He is absolutely unique in the history of the world; we believe that He is the only One through Whom we can receive grace, forgiveness, acceptance, strength, hope, cleansing, and new and eternal life! If what we claim to believe is even partially true, then there is no better way for us to spend our time together than by focusing our thoughts, sharpening our senses in order to pay attention to the reality of who Jesus really is!

We have entitled our overall series, “Discovering the Central Character of Salvation History: Walking beside Jesus for a while...” Of all the books in the Bible, Luke is one of the best places we can turn for this. As we noted at the beginning of our series back in December, Luke is a masterful story teller. From beginning to end of his 24 chapter narrative, he is stitching together pieces of the story that include events, teachings, conflict, background material in order to leave us with a finished product that will absolutely convince us that Jesus is who He claimed to be.

As we continue looking at Luke’s account, I want to remind us that there are only a few ways that we can take this person Jesus as Luke presents Him to us. CS Lewis, in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, helpfully points out that although many people would like to receive Jesus as simply a good moral teacher without divine authority – writers like Luke do not leave us that possibility.

As we look closely at the way Luke presents Jesus to us there are only three things that we might say about him: Either Jesus’ claims were false and he knew it, in which case He must be called a liar, or his claims were false and he didn’t know it, in which case we would call him a lunatic or a delusional egomaniac, or his claims were true, in which case we must accept Him as the Lord of all, the Creator of the Universe, the One who came from God. It is not reasonably possible to suggest that Jesus was a great, but merely human, teacher. Anyone who has that view needs to think again.

Our text today is still early on in the story (the end of chapter 5) and yet over and over again Luke has already been stressing just how unique Jesus is. And so today my desire is that each one of us in this room would have a sense of walking beside Jesus as we observe His life, His teachings, His miracles. We all come from different places in our lives.

- Maybe you are in a place of being unsure about Who He is. As we look at this text that includes a meal at Levi's house, I hope you will find a place at the table and that you will hear the compelling words of Jesus for your uncertainties today.
- Maybe you're coming from a place of brokenness. Whether it be through circumstances out of your control or simply bad choices you have made, you have been confronted this week by your own sinfulness and your powerlessness to overcome whatever it is that is overwhelming you. I trust that you too will find a place at Levi's table today and hear again just how much Jesus wants to be with you!
- Maybe you are in a good and healthy place physically and spiritually. Praise God for that. I pray that you too, by grace, will sit at Levi's table and hear the voice of Jesus and respond with even greater praise and joy and that you will be preserved from the trap of the Pharisees who thought they could achieve spiritual success through human effort.

Background and Reading

Very briefly, let us pay attention to what Luke is doing in the immediate context before we read the text. In the previous chapter (4:14) Luke begins to record the public ministry of Jesus, beginning with His amazing inauguration speech,

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

And so Jesus has begun to do exactly that – reach out to the outsiders and oppressed. So far we've seen Him show special grace to a demonized man, a leper, a paralytic and now, in our story today He will show grace to a tax collector!

Luke has told us so far that Jesus teaching had authority which commanded the attention of the people. Up to this point, we haven't heard much of His teaching – only his interaction with both disciples and skeptics.

The Pharisees are introduced into the picture in 5:17. This is important for us to notice because the right from 5:17 to 6:11, the major theme of the events relates to Jesus making Himself known to these religious leaders. Last week Alan suggested we should look at them as 'evangelicals'. I. Howard Marshall helps to clarify: "The Pharisees appear in the Gospels as defenders of the traditions of the elders, in which the law of Moses received many petty refinements, and hence as defenders of strict Jewish orthodoxy..."¹

The phrase which I find helpful is to consider them as 'guardians of the institution of the faith'. It's easy for us to distance ourselves from the Pharisees, in part because of the way Jesus speaks to them and calls them hypocrites etc. But we need to be careful not to fall into their trap by distancing ourselves from them! We too can easily become guardians of the institutions and traditions of faith if we are not careful. This passage and the whole story of Luke is about Jesus coming to bring new life; not reformed institutions of faith...

Let's read the passage:

Luke 5:27-39

27After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

29Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30But 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'?"

31Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 32I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

33They 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."

34Jesus answered, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? 35But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 212.

36He told them this parable: "No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. 37And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. 38No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. 39And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'

In our effort to sharpen our senses in order to observe Jesus, I want to suggest 3 phrases to form a framework for our thoughts.

- **Jesus looks for ‘whole life’ followers**
- **Jesus comes to be ‘with’ sinners**
- **Jesus declares Himself to be the giver of new life**

Jesus looks for ‘whole life’ followers

From the beginning to the end of his story, Luke wants us to know for sure that what Jesus came to bring to men and women was not a revised religious system, but rather a new and transformed life. This is most clearly seen in the calling of the disciples. A couple of weeks ago Clint helped us to observe the calling of Peter, James & John. Verse 11 of chapter 5 tells us what happened: “So they pulled up their boats on shore, left everything, and followed Him”.

Here we find the calling of Matthew, who is also known as Levi. Notice the similarity of language: “and Levi got up, left everything, and followed Him.” The Greek language emphasizes this statement in that ‘left everything’ is in what they call the aorist tense which indicates a single action in the past; where ‘followed Him’ is in the imperfect tense which indicates an ongoing action in the future. This is exactly a picture of what it means to become a follower of Jesus. Someone has noted that while the 12 disciples did this in a very literal sense of giving up their careers to spend full time with Jesus, other disciples kept their careers but were, as we will see in Jesus’ later teaching called to an equal kind of sacrifice in giving up their whole lives in order to follow Jesus.

As we continue through Luke we will come across passages that will challenge us deeply about what it means to follow Jesus completely, but for now, I want to make 2 observations about this incident where Jesus calls Levi (Matthew) to follow Him completely...

1. **Following involves a calling to repentance.**
 - a. Verses 31-32 contain an incredibly important self-revealing statement by Jesus which aligns exactly with His inaugural speech back in chapter 4. This is Jesus confirming to the Pharisees His primary mission on earth: *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 32I have not come to call the righteous[those who think they are righteous], but sinners to repentance”*
 - b. Repentance is pictured exactly in what Levi did here – he left everything about his old life behind in order to follow Jesus.
 - c. As we work through Luke we will discover that repentance is often associated with joy. True repentance is that point in our lives where we realize that we can no longer do this on our own strength and so we lay our lives down totally into the hands of Jesus and find the His strength gives us more than we need to live day by day.
2. **Repentance is not something we do by our own strength; it actually comes to us as a gift from God**
 - a. Let’s pay attention to what happens to Levi here.
 - b. We don’t have time to go into the whole scenario of the taxation system in the Roman Empire, but we do need to pay attention to the fact that Levi was a hated man by most of his fellow-countrymen. The kind of tax collectors who sat at their roadside booths were apparently among the worst of the generally corrupt tax collectors. They were hated because they had sold their souls to the ruling Roman Empire and were getting rich off the backs of their fellow Jewish citizens. They had no morals, no scruples, no conscience. Someone has suggested that Levi may have been the most hated man in all of Capernaum.
 - c. And so we imagine the scene. Jesus steps out of the house where he has just forgiven and then healed a young paralyzed man. Everyone is still reeling and trying to take in exactly what Jesus is claiming. Then Jesus approaches Levi! You can imagine the communal gasp that goes up – not him Jesus!
 - d. Let’s pay attention to what Jesus does NOT say: ‘I see a lot of natural leadership gifts in you, Levi; if you’ll just clean up your act and sort out your values, I could really use you in My Kingdom’. NO! His invitation to Levi is bald and beautiful! *Follow me!*
 - e. The text is very sparse here, but we know from his response that Levi realized that this was an invitation to lay down his old life and start a brand new one with Jesus.

Jesus is still issuing the invitation for whole life followers. He's still saying to you & I – 'follow Me'. It is not an invitation to pick up some religious practices like going to church and volunteering your time in some ministry. He's asking us to lay down our self-directed lives and put our lives into His hands. If you feel like you're doing OK with your own life; that you have everything you need to look after yourself emotionally, physically, spiritually, financially and in every other way, then this message is not for you, Jesus says. However, if you have come to the end of your rope and you realize that you are sinful, broken and unable to break the destructive patterns that are ruling your life, then I have very good news for you! Jesus says, *follow Me!*

I am very concerned that especially in our affluent, western, cultures that have been based upon Judeo-Christian foundations, we run the risk of embracing institutional Christianity without the whole life commitment!

I want to give you an assignment: on the back of the Day of Prayer insert you will see list of questions that has been proposed by Gordon MacDonald in his book, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*. These questions probe into many areas of life and ask questions about how you are doing in relation to God in those areas. At minimum, I would ask as you set yourself to pray next Saturday, that you put these questions before the Lord and have a serious discussion with Him about them. If possible, I would ask that you do as is suggested at the top of the page and go through these questions with a close, trusted Christian friend. Jesus is calling us to whole life discipleship – we will only be able to help each other to embrace this life of Jesus as we open our lives and become vulnerable to each other. As we do, He will infuse us with the abundant life He came to bring.

Jesus comes to be 'with' sinners

In this second major observation, I simply want to observe Jesus' eating habits as they are shown here and in many other places in Luke.

The story takes a marvelous turn here. Levi, having given his whole life over to Jesus is not moping about what he has lost, but rather turns immediately to celebrate with his friends. Who are his friends?? – they are nobody but the rest of those who are considered to be the scum of society by any self-respecting Jew! And so we imagine the scene – a rag tag bunch of rich crooks and criminals busily comparing stories about how much money they've made lately and who they've swindled.

And in the middle of this motley crew, are Jesus and His disciples, Peter, James & John, if we take the story to happen chronologically in our chapter.

Outside are the self-respecting, law-abiding Pharisees – the guardians of the institutions of faith. Their question is simply this, ‘why do you eat and drink with such rabble?’

This is only the beginning of the reputation that Jesus and His followers will get as they continue to eat, drink and socialize with undesirables. You see, for the Pharisees who place so much emphasis on ritual purity, they could not bring themselves to see how this One who claimed to be from God; who claimed He could forgive sin; could actually associate with such obvious sinners.

And yet, that is exactly what Jesus came to do and I believe we need to receive a challenge today by observing His methodology.

One writer has suggested that Luke presents to us a theology of salvation that may be characterized as a theology of ‘with-ness’. Jesus comes close and hangs out with those whom He describes as the sick who need a doctor.

Several years ago, I was at a church planting seminar in Vancouver and I remember one panel member saying upon being asked what churches need to do in order to be more effective, he simply replied – we need more food.

Barb & I have had some discussion about the relationship between food and social relationships in various cultures. Certainly our experience in Uzbek culture was the food and hospitality played a huge role in family dynamics and friendships. In our fast food culture the values are somewhat different, and yet, I contend that even here we need to pay attention to our eating habits! I’m glad this message comes on a day when we will eat together downstairs. I want to encourage us to use these meals to really learn how to be ‘with’ each other in meaningful ways, to get to know new people, to strengthen and deepen the relationships that we already have. I also think of events that we have done like the Cridge dinners at Christmas time. I would like to suggest that perhaps more meals where we invite neighbourhood families to join us might be a way to break down barriers and open conversations for the Kingdom of God.

We'll come back to this thought in a moment as we approach the Table of Communion.

Jesus declares Himself to be the giver of new life

We must notice first however, what is going on in this final section of the chapter. The Pharisees and teachers of the law have another question as they observe the habits and practices of Jesus and His followers. *“John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”*

Jesus response to them is startling and in their minds blasphemous. Remember, these are the guardians of the institution of faith and here is One who is making claims which actually question the validity of the institution itself!

Let us consider the concept of fasting. The Law of Moses included a fast that was called for one time per year. By this time, the Pharisees had modified the expectations to the point where those who considered themselves to be especially holy fasted twice per week, on Mondays and Thursdays. You see, that was part of their problem, they thought that by multiplying the physical signs of piety that they could earn favour with God. How mistaken they were.

In response to their query, Jesus uses the imagery of the bridegroom being with His guests. This in itself would raise the hackles of the OT savvy Pharisees. The prophets like Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah used the imagery of the bridegroom to refer to Yahweh Himself! And here is Jesus offering a picture that suggests in their minds that God has come to be with them – and therefore it is time to party and celebrate, not to fast!

Then He goes on to tell 2 short stories. If you take a piece of new cloth and try to patch an old garment – it will not work. If you take new wine and pour it into old wineskins, both the new wine and the old wineskins will be destroyed – therefore you must use new wineskins. How would they understand this?? They would have had some level of understanding of what we can see more fully in retrospect, namely, that to attempt to contain the Gospel within the bounds of Judaism will only destroy both. Further, the gospel is radically new and must be allowed to express itself in its own way.

This is what we can see from our perspective. As we look back, I believe we must have some sympathy for the Pharisees as for them it meant that everything they had devoted their life to was being called into question by this new character on the block! Jesus was making a claim that aligned him with Yahweh Himself; He claimed He could forgive sin; He obviously was able to heal physical sicknesses; and now He is claiming to be the giver of new life in a way that was not within the bounds of the institution.

No wonder we see by the time we get down to 6:11 that these Pharisees are ‘furious and begin to discuss ways to get rid of this fellow’.

By painting the picture in this way, Luke wants you and I to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is making claims that no other person could ever make. He is claiming to be the giver of new life!

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Conclusion

Well, Luke’s painting of Jesus is full of bright colours. The plot is thickening as the conflict develops between Jesus and the guardians of the institution. There is no way that any of us can sit here this morning and say that Jesus was just a good moral teacher. Either He was a liar and He knew that He was deceiving people; He was delusional and wasn’t criminally responsible for his words; or He is the Lord of heaven who came to call sinful and broken people into a wonderful relationship with the Living God. This same Jesus is calling to you and me today. Do you hear Him calling your name?? What is your response? Are you ready to give Him your whole life??

As we approach the Table of Communion, let us read about yet another meal...

Luke 22:

“14When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. 15And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. 16For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

17After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. 18For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

19And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

20In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."