

A meal for the hungry

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[0 : 0 0] Right, you have your Bibles open again at Luke chapter 5 and verse 27, and we'll ask for God's help! as we look at this passage from Scripture. Let's pray. Father, we do so thank you for these accounts! from the life of the Lord Jesus, these quite remarkable accounts, these quite dramatic accounts, and we know, Father, they are full of teaching to help us, Father, to know how to be true followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we pray this morning that you would help us to learn those lessons and help us to be changed by those lessons, and this may be to your glory and for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now, many organizations, probably perhaps ones you may work for indeed, have mission statements, now then. This is one, our mission is to be the consumer's first choice for food, delivering products of outstanding quality and great service at a competitive cost through working faster, simpler, and together. Whose mission statement is that? Test goes close. If you, Sainsbury's, well done, brilliant, brilliant. That is very close to us in Hayworth's Heath because Sainsbury's dominate. Now, here's another one. We are a global family with a proud heritage, passionately committed to providing personal mobility for people around the world. Any thoughts? Close, close. It's Ford, so I don't know how you feel about that, but that is Ford. Actually, when I check these, actually, I rechecked them. I found these last year. Some of these are changing, so you've just got to show all these companies are constantly moving, so they're slightly different.

If you're a real Savannah Rack and you want to check these out, you might find the wording is slightly different. What is interesting, some of the mission statements are a little bit sort of vague, and you don't quite know what they really do. So here's a brilliant one, and this affects probably half of us in this room all the time. We work to help people and businesses throughout the world realise their full potential. This is our mission. Everything we do reflects this mission and the values that make it possible. Any idea? Most of us moan about this company a lot of the time. Brilliant, brilliant. There you go. So mission statements are good. I suppose the purpose of them, they help the organisations to focus, and it helps us as customers to have some expectations. So they have their place, but there's nothing new. Whose mission statement is this? I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. That's Jesus' mission statement. So there's nothing new. He had a mission statement, and he set that mission statement into a bit of context, which is this, that it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. And so what Jesus is doing in his mission statement, he's saying effectively he's likening himself to a doctor, and he's likening sinners to sick people that are in need of healing. So that's the setting of his mission statement, and that puts us, as it were, into some sort of position with Jesus. And really this begs three questions that we want to unpack this morning. First of all, well, who are these sinners that Jesus has come to heal? Secondly, what does repentance and Jesus' healing look like? And thirdly, well, who are the righteous, and what does Jesus do with them? And this passage from Luke that we've been looking at helps us to answer these questions. But before we look at these particular points, it's quite useful to do a bit of background. So this is a little bit, it's more a bit of history and a bit of, I don't know, culture of the times. But I think that hopefully this helps to set the scene for the particular passage. So first of all, the calling of Levi is actually found both in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, as well as Luke. And it's a very key passage in all the Gospels, because it sets out what is Jesus' main purpose for coming. And it was not to bring physical healing, it was not to be a teacher, although these things are important, but it's to heal people of their sins. That was his primary reason for coming. And all three of these Gospel writers include the calling of Levi immediately after the healing of the paralyzed man. And what they're doing in the Gospel writers, they're drawing a parallel between the physical healing that we've just read about of the paralytic

and the spiritual healing. And what we see in those two accounts, in both cases, Jesus issues a command. In verse 24, we see that, to get up. And in verse 27, follow me, there is a command. And in both cases, they get up, and in fact, begin a new life. They start a whole new life. And what is quite interesting, for those who like getting into the word details, the word used for where it says in verse 25, immediately the paralytic stood up. And then in verse 28, we hear that Levi got up.

[5 : 28] Actually, in the original, that is the same word. So the writers want us to see these two accounts, the physical healing and the spiritual healing sit alongside each other. They are parallel accounts.

So Levi. Levi was a tax collector. We have a tax collector in our church, so I had to be very careful what I said at this point, so I'll remain neutral. What the Romans did, they were very clever. They employed the locals to collect the tax. So they didn't collect themselves, they employed the locals. And the tax collectors of that time were organized into areas under a chief tax collector. And you remember Zacchaeus, who comes up in Luke chapter 19, he was one of those chief tax collectors. And the way it worked was that the Romans required a set amount of tax from each area. So they had a quota of tax they had to collect. But it was up to the tax collectors to collect that amount, but then they could collect on top of that their salaries and their expenses. Okay. And of course, we can see that this system was open to abuse. And most tax collectors probably did overcharge and became very wealthy. And this was certainly true of Zacchaeus. And it was probably true of Levi.

Because as we look into our passage in verse 29, we could see that he could afford a great banquet. And he had a house big enough to accommodate a crowd. So probably Levi was quite wealthy.

[7 : 02] Now, not surprisingly, nothing new here, tax collectors were not well loved by their fellow countrymen. In fact, they were hated in this situation. Partly because most of them were dishonest. And partly because they served the occupying Roman force. And therefore, were seen as traitors. And therefore, they were treated as outcasts.

Now, the tax collectors, they generally operated from custom stations or toll booths. And usually at key locations. So they were set up these toll booths, let's say at markets or at bridges or at key main roads. And there would have been a lot of them. And again, we see this in verse 29. Because there was this large crowd of tax collectors that gathered. So there was a lot of them.

Now, Levi himself, he probably operated in Capernaum. And probably on the main road that went from Damascus down to the Mediterranean Sea. Now, we know a bit more about Levi, not just about being a tax collector. It is generally accepted that he is actually the apostle Matthew. So Levi was his given name, but Matthew was his apostolic. Oh, dear my brain. Thank you. Whatever. Therefore, he was not only appointed as an apostle, but he was also the writer of Matthew's gospel. And it's important to remember that. Now, one of the questions that people often ask when you read this passage was, was this Levi's first awareness of Jesus? And I think the answer is probably not. It's reckoned that Levi's call probably came about a year into Jesus' public ministry. And also, we need to remember that Capernaum was Jesus' headquarters after he had to leave his hometown of Nazareth. So given Levi's workplace, he probably heard quite a lot about Jesus.

[8 : 58] I mean, by this time, Jesus was well known, and he had a massive following. Back in Matthew 4.25, we're told this, that large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region across the Jordan followed him. But that is most of Palestine in New Testament times. So there was a massive following of Jesus. People just interested in hearing what you said.

And Capernaum was actually in the area of Galilee, just to give you your geography. So I think Levi probably had a good idea who Jesus was. And he may have even heard Jesus teaching at some point. So that's Levi. Now, besides Levi, and besides Jesus and Levi, we have two other main players in this account, which is our friends, the Pharisees, and the sinners. So dealing with the Pharisees first, we know that their opposition to Jesus is well known. What is probably less well known is they were intently following Jesus the whole time. At this healing that we've just read about, we are told in verse 17 that the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village in Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. They were just following Jesus, watching him, looking to trip him up. So it's no coincidence that when Levi held this banquet, that the Jews, the Pharisees were there again. And then lastly, we have the sinners themselves. And who were these sinners? Well, they were the local criminals and the immoral. They were the unsavory society. And again, these were seen as outcasts. Hence, at least in the mind of the

Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners were all grouped together. They were all outcasts. So that's a bit of the background. I hope that's been useful to look at our three points. So the first point we're looking at, well, who are these sinners that Jesus has come to heal? Well, firstly, they are those people who have broken God's law. They are the criminals and the immoral and the unsavory of society.

That's who they were. And I guess most people would agree with that definition of who are the sinners. The Pharisees certainly did. And society generally did. And I think even our modern society would generally say, yeah, they're the sinners. We can be happy with that. They're the criminals. They're the ones who make life difficult for others. They cause suffering. They disrupt the smooth running society.

They cause the break-ins. They're the ones who make a lot of noise. All those issues. So I think everybody would agree with that. And of course, if Jesus stopped there in defining what a sinner was, then everybody would be happy and we'd all feel good about ourselves when we go home. But of course, he doesn't stop there. It's very interesting. He doesn't stop there because what Jesus then goes on to say in verse 31, that he describes sinners as being sick. And this, of course, runs much deeper.

[11:57] This is more than what a person does. This is a condition of the heart. It's not just an outward thing, but it's also an inward thing. And that is because we sin because we are sinners. We are not sinners because we sin. And that's a key thought. I'm sure it's familiar to many of you, that we sin because we are sinners at heart. We're not sinners because we sin. And this, of course, is much harder for people to accept because it strikes at what a person is. It strikes at me. It strikes at you.

So it's not just what we do. It strikes at our pride. It strikes at our sense of self-worth. You know, I'm not a sinner. Yes, you are. I am a sinner. And Jesus begins, of course, to expose this same sickness in the Pharisees. Outwardly, they are not like the sinners. That's true. They keep the law to the letter. But inwardly, the Pharisees fail to love God and others. They despise these other people. They can hardly be described as being healthy. And sadly, of course, the Pharisees can't see it. But Luke clearly points to this conclusion. But again, if Jesus were to stop there, at least some would agree with this definition of sinners. So some would agree, yeah, sinners are bad people.

And there is basically like a sickness. You know, we're sinners because of that state of our heart, our condition of our heart. But Jesus actually goes even further. He says that actually, ultimately, being a sinner is defined by our relationship with Jesus. Okay? So being a sinner is defined by our relationship with Jesus. Now, how do we come to this conclusion? Well, it's like this.

We see that the way that the Pharisees are rejecting Jesus confirms their sickness. Okay? We see in this passage that Levi accepts Jesus and that confirms his healing. It's his acceptance of Jesus that brings the healing to Levi. So let me use an illustration. I'm not medical whatsoever, but this is best I could come up with. Imagine that somebody is really lethargic. Okay?

[13:57] So you just can't get out of bed every day and, you know, life is just a grind and you've just got no energy left. And somebody says to you, what you need, my friend, is an iron supplement. So you dutifully do what you're told. You take this iron supplement and within days you bounce back to full health and full strength.

And that, therefore, confirms the diagnosis that you had an iron deficiency. So what we're seeing in this passage is that if Jesus is the right medicine for this person who is sick, then that is the right deficiency.

So this person had a Jesus deficiency. That is the root problem. Now, of course, this is a really shocking truth. You know, this is what we would call the offense of the gospel.

But this is clearly what Luke wants us to see. So being a sinner is about doing wrong, but more critically, it's a condition of the heart. But ultimately, it's about whether or not we follow the Lord Jesus.

That's an amazing truth. And that's what Luke is trying to show us in this way. And to say, this is a very unpalatable truth. But this is why three of the gospel writers include the call of Levi.

[15:05] It establishes the basis for the good news. And that's that way that we can, all of us here, can repent and be healed. It's an amazing truth, but it's a hard pill to swallow, as it were, at the beginning.

Okay, so that's who sinners are. Let's think now about what does repentance and Jesus' healing look like? So starting with repentance.

Well, put simply, repentance is a change of heart. It is from a heart that is self-centered to a heart that is Jesus-centered. So let's think about Levi.

See, one minute, Levi's heart is setting on making money. The next, we read, he's giving his money away to throw this big banquet for Jesus.

And that's close to my heart because I'm organizing my daughter's wedding. And I now know how much banquets cost. So trust me, I say this is a real feeling.

[16:03] There was a complete change of heart. New priorities, new values, a new way of living. Now, how do we know he was set on making money? Because he was prepared to be an outcast.

He was just hated by everybody. Nobody was his friend, apart from other tax collectors. But he was prepared to suffer that in order to pursue his ambitions of earning lots of money.

So his heart is now changed and is set on pleasing and serving Jesus. And to emphasize this big change, we see this in verse 28, that Luke tells us that he was prepared to leave everything.

It says he left everything. And that's to capture that idea of this massive change from setting his heart on making himself and pursuing his own wealth to pursuing Jesus.

And the way Luke tells the story hints at two things that's going on in Levi's life before this. First of all, he almost certainly had a sense of his own sinfulness.

[17:09] He was not self-righteous. Although this is not explicit in the passage, he certainly knew he had a label of being a sinner. And probably deep down he knew it.

Also, we're seeing Luke is constantly contrasting the Levi with the Pharisees. They were like opposites. And of course, we can see how the Pharisees were really self-righteous.

And if you fast forward to Luke chapter 18, there's the parable with the Pharisee and the tax collector both praying. And the Pharisee is full of his own self-righteousness.

The tax collector confesses his sinfulness. And Jesus says it's the tax collector, not the Pharisee that goes away justified. So this teaches us that before repentance, there does need to be an acknowledgement of our own sinfulness to some extent.

And secondly, what we see going on in Levi's life, that he was hungry for something better in life. Although he had quite a good life in terms of the money, the conditions were poor.

[18:19] And he was hated by his fellow countrymen. And we must try and pick up some of the symbolism that goes on in this story. See, he spent his days. Now try and picture this. Take yourself into a dusty, hot Palestine scene.

He spent his days in a toll booth on a hot, dusty road with everybody hating him. So you now bring that to our situation. Imagine now your job for the rest of your life was to sit in the...

Sorry about this to anybody who does. In the toll booth at Darfur Crossing. Okay, would you like that? Every time I go through the Darfur Crossing, I say, I'm so grateful. I'm so grateful that I don't have to sit there all day.

Imagine that's bad enough. And then imagine that all the drivers hate you at the same time. And that's your life. So it's pretty miserable, sort of life that he had. Although he's making lots of money. So from his toll booth, Levi was probably picking up stories about Jesus.

And he was attracted to what he heard. Jesus was offering something far better. And he may well have gone home at night thinking, yeah, I want something of this. So gradually he'd come to hunger for something better.

[19:26] Hunger for something that Jesus was offering. So when Jesus came to Levi and said, follow me, for him, it was a no-brainer. It was a no decision.

Easy. So it took him milliseconds to say, yep, I'm with you. Because he'd already thought about it. And of course, the idea of that hunger and being fed, of course, is picked up in the banquet.

So it is with Jesus that he's being fed. It's with Jesus that's satisfying his hunger. So we do need a sense of our sinfulness to come to repentance. We need that hunger for something better, something of God's righteousness.

And then we come to looking at Jesus' healing. So what does this look like? And again, this is where the paralyzed man helps us to understand what's going on.

So we go to the paralyzed man. We can see that. So the paralyzed man was given the ability to walk and run. So again, put yourself in that scene. Here's a guy, been paralyzed probably all his days.

[20:28] Through this miracle, through Jesus' forgiveness, through this healing, he then has that ability to walk and run, to explore new places, to meet new people, to do new things.

This was a total transformation. It was an amazing thing. And all that new life that was there for him to take. And of course, this is what's going on with Levi.

But in a spiritual sense, you see, he was given that ability to walk with God, to learn new things, to meet new people, to do new things. There was a total transformation going on in Levi's life, as there was in the life of the paralytic.

And that's what we're meant to see. And of course, as we know from the other gospel accounts, and as we thought about earlier on, he was appointed as an apostle. He was then with Jesus through many amazing experiences.

He was one of the founders of the church. He was commissioned to write one of the gospels. And he continued that mission to reach out. And that had to be better than sitting in a hot, dusty tall booth, being hated by him all.

[21 : 34] So his life was completely changed. And of course, that liberation, that change, didn't just benefit Levi. It benefited others. We see that in the large crowd of tax collectors that gathered at the banquet.

Ultimately, of course, we see that benefit through the writing of Matthew's gospel. And that same benefit comes right down to us today, out of that transformation.

Quite amazing. And as there was that certainty, certainly that hunger amongst his fellow tax collectors and sinners, they didn't just come for the food for Jesus, but they said many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him.

And this is in Mark 2, verse 15. And his disciples, there were many who followed him. You see, the whole thing was being quite effective and contagious almost.

So there were many from that group of society who were following Jesus. And Levi was showing something of the change that can take place. Now then, we thought that Jesus' definition of a sinner was quite shocking.

[22 : 45] So it's quite shocking to be told that actually you're a sinner because you don't follow Jesus. But actually, there's something quite shocking about what we're reading here, about this whole part of repentance.

Because this is how it works. This is what we're reading. That Jesus says to Levi, follow me. Levi says, yes.

And that's it. That's it. There was no ceremony. There was no test. There was no references. There was no probation period.

The guy didn't even have to supply a CV. That was it. That's how repentance works. And that's quite offensive to many. Very offensive. Jesus says, follow me. I say yes.

And I'm there. I mean, that's quite amazing. And because it's no wonder the Pharisees hated Jesus. And yet the tax collectors and sinners flocked to him. So that leaves us then with the whole matter of righteousness.

[23 : 45] So who are the righteous? And what does Jesus do with them? Well, there's two answers to this question. There's the answer according to Jesus. And there's the answer according to the Pharisees.

According to Jesus, no one is righteous. And we see how this works out again in this passage. See, if we were reading on, if we knew nothing else, and perhaps you just arrived from the moon or Mars or somewhere, and you just picked this up, the people you expected to be righteous would have been the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, the priests, the spiritual leaders.

You expect these people to have been the righteous. But clearly they were not. And we see in verse 21, for instance, that they were actually complaining about Jesus.

They were complaining about when he forgave the person of his sins. These people, far from rejoicing in what Jesus was doing and embracing him, they were complaining about Jesus. They had no concern for the tax collectors and the sinners.

They had written them off. They were hardly loving God or loving their neighbor. They were hardly acting as righteous people. So the conclusion must be, from that natural point of view, if the spiritual leaders were lacking in righteousness, then all must be unrighteous.

[25 : 06] And this becomes clearer and clearer as Jesus' ministry develops. So all of us are in need of healing. All of us need a doctor. And Jesus calls all of us to repent.

And that was true then. And it's true still today. So that is how Jesus sees us. That we're all sinners. We all are in need of repentance.

Now the Pharisees, they take a different view. See, the Pharisees' view of the righteous are those who are law-abiding. If you're a law-abiding person, that according to the Pharisees, you are a righteous person.

And that view is still widely held today. So those who are not criminals, not immoral, not unsavory, they are the righteous ones. They don't need a doctor.

They don't need to repent. That's the Pharisees' view. Now although in this passage, Jesus doesn't actually challenge the Pharisees at this point, we are given an early indication of where this is all going.

[26 : 11] Back to verse 21. There we see the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, who is this fellow that speaks blasphemy? They were inwardly criticizing Jesus.

That's what's happening now at this point as the Gospels develop. When you get down to verse 30, they are beginning, in the banquet, they are beginning to outwardly be critical of Jesus.

They were complaining outwardly about Jesus, about what he was doing. Fast forward to chapter 6 and verse 7 of Luke. They were then looking for a reason to accuse Jesus.

Go further forward to chapter 7 and verse 30 of Luke, and they were in effect rejecting Jesus. Go right forward to the end of the Gospels, and at Jesus' trial, what were they crying?

Crucify him. See, the self-righteous, their rejection of Jesus' call to repentance leads to a hardening of their hearts.

[27 : 15] So in other words, the more we say no, the more we're inclined to say no. That's the path that they were on. And this contrasts so strongly with Levi. This is the big difference.

The more Levi said yes to Jesus, the more he was inclined to say yes. So he was appointed an apostle. He took on that commission to write Gospels account.

He grew in obedience. But with the hardening of hearts, it's the other way. The more we harden our hearts, the more we say no, the more we're inclined to say no. But it gets worse than this, because we read that Jesus is not passive about people who reject his call.

It's not without consequences. He starts with people giving over to their wishes. They do not want healing. So he begins to give them over to their sinfulness.

And this is captured in Romans 1.28. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done.

[28 : 19] So Romans teaches us that as we say no, as we reject Jesus, so we're given over to that. And one of the things that will not be done is to say no to Jesus' call.

Okay? So the right response to Jesus' call is to say yes, not to say no. So the more we say no, the more we're inclined to say no. And sadly, this is why often older people find it harder to repent.

They've probably said no many times. Saying no to Jesus is not a neutral act. It is a dangerous path. So let's come finally to our conclusion.

Well, firstly, Jesus is still on mission. We looked at his mission statement at the beginning. He's still on mission. He is still calling sinners to repentance. His healing work is still available.

So even in this meeting, Jesus has been on mission. His words have been read. They've been explained. He promises to be with his people where they gather in his name. And he still longs for people to turn to him and to find healing.

[29 : 27] And secondly, there are still sinners in this world. There are still the self-righteous. So nothing has really changed. So what Luke is doing in this passage for us is giving us a choice.

This is the choice that faces all of us at some point. And in a sense, we have to then retake that choice almost on a daily basis. Do we go the way of Levi?

Or do we go the way of the Pharisees? That's what's presented to us in this passage. So the way of Levi is to actually recognize that we are a sinner, to repent, and to go on to enjoy and serve Jesus, and to go on and join him in his great mission to make known that gospel.

That's the way of Levi. The way of the Pharisees is to hold on to our self-righteousness and say, no, I don't need repentance. But in doing so, we will become more and more hardened to Jesus, and ultimately, we will be those who will also cry, crucify him.

Right back at the beginning of the gospel, Luke sets out his purpose for writing, which is to write an orderly count of Jesus so that we may know the certainty of these things. And that is our prayer today, that we may know the certainty of these things, and that we may, each one of us, respond in the right way.

[30 : 43] So let's turn to our last song. It's on the overhead. This is a, I think those of you of a certain age will know this song.

This one is a, got a slightly upbeat, which hopefully we all will achieve. It's slightly, sort of slightly more, yeah, not jazzy, but slightly upbeat from the usual pace. This, I think, is a helpful one because this, the chorus on this is, Saviour, Saviour, hear my humble cry, while on others you are calling, do not pass me by.

And if there was one song that was possibly being sung by Levi's friends when they saw the change in Levi, then this would be it. This would be the song that shows a hunger for something better.

So let's sing together, pass me not, O gentle Saviour, hear my humble cry, while on others thou art calling, do not pass me by. Thank you.