

Luke 5:27–32

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[0 : 00] Again, that is Luke 5, verses 27 to 32. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

And Jesus answered them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning. So glad you're here.

Wonderful to see some folks that haven't been here in a while. That is years, having moved away and returned. The Lord is gracious and kind, and we're just glad that you're in the house.

And you might be glad that you didn't have a long and lengthy reading from the book of Leviticus. I thought your thanks be to God would have been swelling with vigor, joy, strength, and volume.

[1 : 34] If you haven't been here for the last 19 weeks, we were in the book of Leviticus with its lengthy readings and archaic structures that pleasantly surprised us.

But as we looked at the spring and anticipation of the summer, we thought we would just take a look straight at Jesus head on, not have to go anywhere and be reminded that Jesus changes lives.

And so, for the next consecutive Sundays, we'll look at six different people in the Gospel of Luke, men and women, lives whom Jesus changed.

And we'll wed that each week with someone in our own congregation who can testify, he changed my life too. Today, we meet an unlikely candidate whose life was changed by Jesus.

I think I would just call him a surprising follower of Christ. There he is. Take a look with your eyes. I've got him there in verse 27.

[2 : 54] After this, he, that is Jesus, went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the taxed booth.

Now, I just want to leave Levi there for a moment, if you will. Just sitting, as though we've come up behind him.

He doesn't know we're present looking at him. Though he's not yet aware that we see him or that Jesus is on his way past. No sense yet in our minds that he is anywhere near ready to have his life changed by Jesus.

He's simply there at work in the tax booth, in his cubicle, as it were, behind the desk. We see him just doing his job.

Can you envision him? He's got receipts for taxes that have been paid. He's got taxes in regard to bills that he needs to go out and collect.

[4 : 04] He's got loose coins. He's got money put aside. He's just at work. He's a member of Rome's Department of Revenue.

He probably drives a company car. The ones that frighten you as they roll through the streets of Chicago. Department of Revenue on their side with big, heavy, yellow disks to ensure that all of your taxes are paid.

There's Levi. Just a man among men. Ordinary day at work. As such, you and I would be helped to know that in Rome at this time, he probably reported directly to a provincial publican.

A publican would have just been a term of choice, a title, for those who purchased the rights to collect taxes for Rome who were living in distant places.

You just have to remember that here he's in the region of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem. And he's far off from Italy and Rome and the center of government.

[5 : 34] But Rome had its provinces. And the means by which they garnered funds was to auction them off to individual or conglomerates of sorts.

You might almost think of them as independent contractors, entrepreneurial capitalists who said, I will be willing to pay or collect the taxes for this region.

And they would barter on the price. And in Rome, the price would be fixed. And then the publican would, or as a group of buyers, take their funds and prepay everything to Rome.

Send word back to the field office. Hey, we've got the contract. We've been awarded the governmental deal. And this is what we need to collect from your region.

That individual then would find his way to Levi and others who were employees in the local office. And they then would go and collect monies.

[6 : 45] Those who have done some significant research just on that time period indicate that there were two primary taxes, but probably four or five as well.

There was the tributum and also a tax that actually dealt with your goods. Think of it as you're going to sell something here.

You're going to bring something into the city and sell it your wares. Well, you would have to pay almost, as it were, a tariff of sorts to be able to conduct business.

So there were taxes indirectly gathered for Rome, in which all the citizens who lived in Italy had to pay very little, if any, tax.

So on the backs of the provinces, Rome goes forward. Here's Levi. Levi. Interestingly, his name, Levi, indicates that he's Jewish by descent.

[7 : 53] He's a Jewish man living in a distant province of Rome near Jerusalem, employed by a regional office to collect taxes.

It actually was quite a lucrative job. It was lucrative because having prepaid everything to Rome, those who were running it never had to answer back on how much money they actually took in.

So if you could pay your due to Rome, say, in seven months, well, then everything else you collected for the year, well, that's yours.

And so here is Levi reporting to a publican. He's an entrepreneurial capitalist.

He's an independent contractor. He's Jewish. And he is now collecting taxes and finding himself at work.

[8 : 58] Now we're ready to return to verse 27. Now you're ready to see the man as he's sitting there. Levi, one of them, hired, probably in some respects because he was Jewish, to garner funds from the Jews who were living in the area.

But as such, he would have been disliked by all, but particularly by Jews who felt as though we're already under the heavy hand of Rome.

It's a country that serves, in a sense, as an occupier of our own world. And now I've got to support their world as well.

Levi. He's worldly. He's wealthy. He's irreligious.

For indeed, the Jewish community would have excommunicated him from the synagogue for having aligned himself with the world in such a way.

[10 : 16] Peter Marshall, who was one-time chaplain to the U.S. Senate, wrote this, We would boo or hiss Levi as the next candidate to follow Jesus.

He had sold out to the army of occupation. He's collecting taxes for the Roman government. This fellow is a racketeer. Money, wealth alone impress him.

Can you imagine him? A friend of Jesus? A man who had made a God of money? No. Levi, or Matthew, if you like, this one must be rejected.

And yet, read on. There he is at the table. And Jesus said to him, Follow me. And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

The kinds of lives Jesus changes. You know, many make much of Luke's gospel in regard to an emphasis on the poor.

[11 : 34] Rightly so, for he fills his gospel narrative with Jesus' compassion on those who don't have a thing. But here it is, right at the outset. Just to make clear to anyone who will read his gospel, Jesus has come to change the lives of all kinds of people.

Poor and rich alike. not only is he choosing Levi to follow him, he will actually ask him to lead for him.

He's one of the select few that end up going by the name of an apostle who bring this great news of the Christian gospel to the world.

19th century writer, Alfred Edersheim, in his sketches of Jewish social life, write this, of such men, excommunicated publicans did the Lord choose.

It was a wonder that the Holy One should speak to such a one as Levi. But it was not merely condescension, kindness, sympathy, even familiar intercourse with one usually regarded as a social pariah.

[12 : 53] It was the closest fellowship. It was reception into the innermost circle. It was a call to the highest and holiest work which the Lord offered to Levi.

And the busy road on which he sat to collect customs and dues would now no more know the familiar face of Levi.

He got up. Walked out. Looked at his supervisor and said, I don't think I'm coming back.

And took up with Jesus. But I've got a question and you probably do as well. I mean, it reads so strangely, so abruptly.

Just like that? Had they no interaction beforehand?

[14 : 02] Is this magic? And I think we've got to supply, in one sense, an understanding of some things Luke has said to this point.

I don't think this is some superstitious, almost sounding encounter that Levi had never had any awareness that Jesus was turning his countryside upside down.

In fact, if you just glance back at chapter 5, verse 15, which is just on the front side of our story, Luke wants you to know that by now, even more the report about Jesus was going abroad.

And great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. Or, when you look down even a little further in verse 17, on one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem because he had this power to heal.

We don't know the headlines of the local newspapers, but we do know that in that region, at that time, Jesus was large on the landscape of public discourse.

[15 : 32] And so Levi, we can surmise, had heard of him, more likely than not, had encountered him as just someone coming to listen along the way.

This isn't some just abrupt, magical, follow me, get up, and go. With a bit of imagination, we can envision Levi then hearing of Jesus, perhaps having seen Jesus, certainly been in conversations from others about the things happening through Jesus.

And in doing so, he begins to question his own choices in life. I can envision him considering the possibility of a better life.

One in which forgiveness was possible. I mean, that's the healing of the paralytic on the front side. Forgiveness of sins?

Not only that, but he had, in common with Jesus, a common enemy. Namely, all the religious teachers who had shunned him, he knew that Jesus wasn't happy with them either.

[17 : 06] So in Jesus, there's one that he can identify with. Here's another man living among men who's indicating that he can help people, give hope to people, come alongside people, that actually there might be a higher purpose available to people.

Maybe some of you even wondering the same thing today. Levi, at night, in bed, questioning now whether his money, with all the power and pleasure that came from it, is this really life's final baseline of fulfillment?

He had chased it, he was socially ostracized for it, but he had made it. Enough, perhaps Levi's wondering, of having it all.

but hoping that that can't be all there is. I think Levi begins to think, perhaps I will be the kind of person of whom it will one day be said, Jesus changes lives.

And at that moment, Jesus comes, he sees him, he says, follow me. And he says, I'm done with this. I'm hoping, I'm looking, I'm seeking, I'm desiring something more of life.

[18 : 46] And so the unlikely candidate to become a Christian gets up, leaves it all behind, and follows Jesus. Let me get it as clear as I can.

The gospel is for opportunistic entrepreneurial capitalists, as well as those who don't have a thing. The gospel is for those without any money, and it is for a man with money.

And this man, Levi, is not alone. Let me tell you a little story about a young man that grew up in Chicago, quite wealthy, early 1900s, by the name of William Borden.

He came from a family that had immense wealth through silver mining in Colorado. His mother, upon his high school graduation in 1904, ends up taking him down to the church where your friend met you, the Moody Church, and he hears the pastor, R.A. Torrey, speaking. Now here's a man who's an heir. by the age of 16 to millions and millions. Borden decides to become a follower of Christ.

[20 : 09] He goes on to study, do his undergrad work at Yale. It's during his undergraduate years at Yale that he begins to talk to other students about the need to present this Jesus whom he has found to their friends.

And over his four years at Yale as an undergrad, the whole school is swept up in conversations on Jesus. He then decides to go to Princeton and studies there and then he says, I'm going to think I'm going to become a missionary.

The man with millions at that time period gets on a boat heading off to India, eventually arrives, not even having yet arrived in the field, lands in Cairo, Egypt, contracts meningitis of a sort that kills him within two weeks.

Young William Borden pushed back from his familial fortune, followed Jesus and was gone from the world by age 25.

Yet, his biographer summarizes his most unusual life with these lines. When thinking about Borden, the biographer writes, no retreat, no reserves, no regrets.

[21 : 46] I guess I want to say that Jesus comes to change the lives of people who will take great comfort that a fresh start on life can come.

Men and women who take great comfort in realizing no, this world is not all there is. it can't be. So depressing it would be.

Even with all his wealth and all his power and all his pleasure, Levi had come to a point where he said, every morning when I wake up, there has got to be more than this.

I think he kind of reminds me of, or resonates with, a previous writer who put to pen and paper these words, books.

I made great works. I built houses, planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.

[23 : 12] I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. trees. I gathered from myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.

I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines in the delight of the son of men. I became great. I surpassed all who were before me.

My wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep them from. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward from my toil.

Then I considered all that my hands had done, and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

At some point, that reality fell upon Levi, and he'd had enough. what a wonderful thing it would be today if we saw men and women here who said, I've been there, partied up, got on a plane, resided in incredible destinations, but there's got to be more than this.

[24 : 47] Men and women who, like William Borden, pushed back from the table of our plenty, and said, give me Jesus.

Just give me Jesus. as you watch his first steps as a follower of Jesus, I'm fascinated by what he does.

Did you see it? Take a look at verse 29. 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.

First thing he does, he's to have a chance to meet Jesus.

And so they came. Can you imagine the scene? I'm guessing the place is buzzing, music is blaring, wine is flowing, food is both coming and going.

[26 : 18] Hopefully the smoke rings are rising. Jesus is among the guests reclining. And he says, this is Jesus.

just give him a couple of minutes. And hope begins to rise amidst the most unusual crowd.

But, and here the turn takes place in the text, doesn't it? I mean, I know verse 30 says, and the Pharisees, but it certainly reads like, but, however, the surprising follower who throws the party, but the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled at his disciples saying, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

sinner? Now they go to Jesus' other followers. What are you doing with these people? Seems to me that the house party became a problem.

The comfort to Levi had become a challenge to the Levitical priesthood and the teachers of their day. There was a visceral reaction among the Pharisees.

[27 : 45] I think the Pharisees are much like the morality police of our day. They're totally convinced on what's right and wrong behavior. They were the religious practitioners of the day.

They were the purists. They were the ones who knew what you were to do and not do, who you were to talk to and not talk to. And for them, this is a problem.

They didn't like the company that Jesus kept because he kept company with the spiritually sick, the sinners in need of the Savior.

And Luke has already been showing this contrast throughout. While we're not going through the book of Luke, just six vignettes, you should know that he opens very clearly with showing the detractors on a number of fronts.

Here, the detractors are because they don't like who he's with. but earlier, they didn't like his mission either.

[28 : 47] Verse 12 of chapter 5. Who are you to be on mission to think that forgiveness of sins is available to others? Only God does that.

Or even following this unit, the disciples of John will come to him and they won't like his values. I don't like your mission. Trying to build up followers of Christ where forgiveness of sins can be offered to anyone.

And I don't like your values that you do away with common conventions that we all ought to be holding. And not only that, I don't like your people like Levi and others.

Yet, for Jesus, these were the people, let me get it to you as I could. These were the people whose cell phone numbers were on his phone.

Let me put it even better. His number was on the phone of these kinds of people. Hey, Jesus, we're throwing the big thank you party, five o'clock Friday, well, I don't know, maybe nine o'clock Friday, I don't know, and Jesus gets it and goes, I'm going.

[30 : 12] I'm going. So, Jesus moves, right? We've seen this surprising follower followed by the house party that became a problem.

We've seen comfort to someone who's looking for more in life than what money can afford, and now we're seeing challenge to those who actually think they got hold of their religious piety.

And so, Jesus takes a minute, and I'm going to take a minute, to challenge those kinds of people. You can see it there. We begin to close. There he is, verse 31.

He answered for his disciples, hey guys, I got this. I know they're on you, which really means they're on me, so let me give the response. Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Jesus says, I'm about relationship, not religion.

[31 : 22] I'm about people, all kinds of people. I don't have much stomach for religious piety. charity. There's the irony.

Later, these Pharisees will be called out for being willing to tithe their mint or from their proceeds. In other words, they're giving of their proceeds needs to all of it. Jesus elsewhere implies very directly to this situation and says, isn't that ironic?

You take care of the little things which don't actually impact your life, but you have no concern for the big things. You'll give me a little mint for my tea, but you won't allow me to have mercy upon the many.

And that's the reorientation of our Lord. He has a disdain for those whose lives are slowed down by the spiritual barnacles of pride.

[32 : 39] Just ride the underside of your vessel. Pride. Jesus is like, I want to go. We got people to reach. change. C.S. Lewis in his book, Mere Christianity writes this, in God, you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself.

Unless you know God as that, and you know yourself as nothing in comparison, you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God.

A proud person is always looking down on things and people. And of course, as long as you're looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

End quote. And so today, we see the first of six, the kind of people whose lives are changed by an encounter with our Lord.

And I pray that this little vignette will be a comfort to many. I pray that there are men and women here who know what it's like to go to bed at night thinking, is this really it?

[34 : 10] Is this really it? God help me. There's got to be more than this. And if that's where your mind is and your heart is and your experiences, I can just envision Jesus this morning and the strength of his word under the weakness of preaching, passing your chair and saying, follow me.

And you're like, I'm going to give that a run. I remember well the testimony of one of our elders' wives who came to Christ, young in life, who came forward at a meeting.

No, don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to do it today. And as she walked forward to give her life to Jesus, she said with each step, I pray that this is not a fad.

I pray that this is not a fad. May this not be a fad. May Jesus actually be what I need in all the world. And now, decades and decades and decades and decades later, that person is still throwing Jesus, thank you parties.

and may this be a challenge as well as a comfort to any among us who look down on any rich or poor.

[35 : 47] For Jesus has come to change lives, yours included. So follow him.

our heavenly father, we give ourselves to you today, and we look forward with great anticipation the coming weeks where we linger, we linger over the mercy of our Lord that many, many would take up with you.

We pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen.