

A Supper with Sinners

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[0 : 00] Well, a couple weeks ago now we heard about how Jesus began to call men to follow him, to be his disciples. We heard about Peter and the miraculous catch of fish.

And today as we continue the story of Jesus, we're going to hear about someone that we might have thought unlikely to become a follower of Jesus. We're in Luke chapter 5, and we're picking up the story in Luke chapter 5 verse 27.

After 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. So Jesus is out and about, and he sees a tax collector. And Luke tells us the name of this tax collector is Levi.

And Levi is there sitting at his tax booth. We might wonder where all this took place. Mark tells us in his gospel that the location of this encounter was near the lake, the Sea of Galilee.

[1 : 14] It's possible that there was a tax booth right out at the lake, set up there in order to monitor the catches of the fishermen, and to ensure that the taxes were paid on the fish.

Another possibility is that Jesus was at the lake, and he walked along until he entered one of the lakeside fishing villages, perhaps Capernaum, and that Levi had his tax booth set up there in the little fishing village.

Another important question here is, who was Levi? The Gospel of Mark says he was the son of Alphaeus. We don't really know who Alphaeus was, so that doesn't really help us a whole lot. But the Gospel of Matthew records the same account with the name Matthew used instead of Levi. And so the traditional view held by Christians for centuries is that Levi, the son of Alphaeus, was Matthew.

This same tax collector became an apostle and later wrote the Gospel of Matthew. Either he had two names, or perhaps Jesus gave him a name, Matthew, similar to how he gave the name Peter to Simon.

[2 : 24] I'm just going to call him Levi this morning, since that's what Luke calls him here. And finally, what was Levi doing?

Luke says Levi was a tax collector, sitting at his tax booth. To fully appreciate what's about to happen next, it helps to understand a little about tax collectors back then in their culture.

Let's remember that Israel is under the control of the Roman Empire at this time. And so with that comes a very different feeling when the tax bill comes due.

These taxes are not going towards your local schools or hospitals or community projects. They're going to Rome to be used however the emperor decides.

They're going to Herod so that he can use them for his purposes, projects, whatever he wants to do with them.

[3 : 27] Actually, it was a very complicated system. In the northern part of Israel, Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee. And he functioned as a sort of client ruler, such that there was no Roman governor in the region.

And Herod was obligated to pay taxes to Caesar, whatever the Romans asked for. And Rome had set amounts on things. There was the poll tax, which was collected annually on every adult male. There was a land tax of 10% on grain harvests. And 20% on wine, fruit, and olive oil. There were customs and transportation taxes on all the goods and merchants and travelers of about 2% to 5%. There was an inheritance tax of about 5%. There was a sales tax on everything of 1%. And those numbers might not sound too bad if you're thinking about our sales tax or some of the numbers we have in Canada today.

But here's where it gets really ugly. These were the amounts that Rome demanded from Herod. And then what Herod and other Roman governors did was to add their own taxes on top of those.

[4 : 41] And then they would go a step further and auction off the rights to collect taxes to the highest bidders. So let's say that Herod was obligated to pay a million denarii, a million days' wages to Rome for his region.

He would look at that. He would figure out how much he wanted for himself. In addition to having to collect that amount, to add to his wealth, to build whatever projects or buildings or monuments he wanted to.

Of course, Herod's greed factored into this. And so he might say, well, I'm going to aim to collect one and a half million denarii. And so Herod would add his own taxes on top.

In Galilee, he put a 25% tax on all fishing since it was a big business in his region. So you can imagine this. Basically, one out of every four fish that you catch goes to the tax man.

And then this tax farming system worked like this. Herod would essentially auction off the job of tax collector to the highest bidders. Let's say that in a local district, the sort of minimum required by Herod to meet his goal was 200,000 denarii.

[5 : 58] A guy might bid and say, well, I'll pay you 250,000 denarii to have the rights to collect in that district. Then another guy might say, well, I think I can do better than that. I'll bid 300,000.

And up and up it would go. And the highest bidder would pay his bid in advance to Herod. So Herod was guaranteed to get the money.

But then this tax collector was now let loose in that area and was able to collect as much as he could to cover his bid and make his own profits.

They could add on their own rates. They could add on their own fees and surcharges and interest for late payments and penalties. And they were backed by local authorities to do the collecting.

So if someone refused to pay, tax collectors could report them to Herod's officials. And the officials had the power to seize property, to enforce fines, and even to imprison people.

[7 : 00] So with this sort of a system, tax collection became a lucrative business for the wealthy few. And the people ended up paying much more than the minimum percentages required by Rome and Herod.

Basically, these tax collectors, they would try to get as much as they could without causing backlash, without causing a revolt. And as a result of this, tax collectors were utterly despised people.

They were thought of as robbers, bullies, swindlers, immoral scum. Now with that context in mind, we can imagine the surprise that many would have had when Jesus saw this tax collector named Levi sitting in his booth and walks over to him.

Follow me, Jesus said to him. And Levi got up, left everything, and followed Jesus.

Now a couple things about this exchange. First of all, we need to understand what Jesus meant when he said, follow me. This wasn't just a temporary, for the moment, invitation to come along.

[8 : 22] That's often the way we use it when we use these words today. Follow me, I'll take you there. Or follow me, I'll show you. But here, this imperative comes in the context of Jesus deliberately selecting men to be his followers, to travel around with him, to work with him.

This invitation is often spoken about by commentators in terms of a rabbi or teacher calling someone to be a full-time apprentice or pupil.

So that's what we should hear in Jesus' words. When Jesus says, follow me, both Jesus and Levi know that this is an invitation not just to come with Jesus for the day, but to go with Jesus from now on.

And we can think over what Jesus has been doing. He's been traveling all over the place. He's been going town to town. He's been going through the countryside.

He's making annual trips down to Jerusalem for the festivals. We heard about how he gave the same call to Peter just before this, not too long before this.

[9 : 31] And Peter and his brother Andrew and James and John, the fishermen. For them, to follow Jesus meant leaving behind their daily, usual work. Same here for Levi.

When it says that Levi got up, left everything and followed Jesus, it basically means that he's walking away from his job to follow Jesus. You might be thinking, well, who's going to be sitting in the tax booth tomorrow?

Not Levi. And notice the word everything. He left everything and followed him. The sense this gives us is that Levi was all in.

He wasn't planning to follow Jesus, you know, three days a week and then spend the other three at the tax booth, continuing to collect. Another thought that I had about this exchange.

You know, it might seem strange to us to hear of Jesus just sort of walking up to Levi and saying, follow me. And then Levi just leaving everything and following him. Like, what's going on here? Why did he do that?

[10:38] Is this the first time they've met? Now, I've never heard anyone say or suggest what I'm about to suggest, so take it with a grain of salt.

But it would seem to me that Levi, at the least, already knows who Jesus is. It would seem that he understands what Jesus means when he says, follow me.

Remember that Jesus has been teaching in this region, all over the place. News of Jesus has been spreading all over, even down as far as Jerusalem. And if Levi is here by the lake, and Jesus has spent a fair bit of time out at the lake, perhaps Levi knows a fair bit of what Jesus has been teaching.

He's been listening to it. This is where the miracle catch happened recently with Peter. Who knows? Maybe Levi even had a professional interest in that haul of fish.

Maybe he was in charge of keeping tabs on the revenues of fishing in the area. At the least, I think we can kind of see between the lines that Jesus is not a complete stranger to Levi in this moment.

[11:51] Levi's been hearing things. He's been seeing things. He's probably heard a fair bit of Jesus' teaching. And I would suggest that maybe, there's no way to know this for sure, but just maybe, Levi was one of the tax collectors who responded to John the baptizer's preaching before Jesus began his public ministry.

If you recall back in Luke chapter 3, John was preaching a message of repentance, and that God's judgment is coming for the wicked and disobedient. And some tax collectors were there, and they asked, well, what should we do?

If we're going to turn from our wicked ways, what should we do? How does it apply to our profession? And John told them not to collect any more than they were required to. Could Levi have been one of those tax collectors?

Again, it doesn't say here, but it makes sense that something was going on in Levi's heart leading up to this moment of decision, such that now he's just ready to leave everything behind and follow Jesus.

Imagine, if you can, what it might have been like to be Levi. Levi, a hated individual, despised by most people.

[13:10] You have the memories of all the ways that you've taken advantage of people through your career. You maybe never allowed yourself to feel the full weight of the shame and guilt you should have felt as you took advantage of people, as you watched them suffer at your very hands, as you pressed them again and again and again for more and more money, even threatening.

But then all of a sudden, God begins to work in your heart. Perhaps, as I said, through the preaching of John the Baptizer, and your attitude is beginning to change.

Your heart's beginning to wake up to all the ways that you've hurt people. You're beginning to see why they despise you. And you don't blame them.

And then suddenly this man, Jesus, comes to your town. Everybody goes to the synagogue to hear him. You don't even dare to try and go see him at the synagogue because the people don't even let you come in the door there.

But out at the docks where the fishermen are working, you see him. There on the shore of the lake, you hear him preaching.

[14:29] And the words that he speaks are beginning to soften your heart. You hear him speaking about righteousness and about love and about the heart that we should have towards God and the heart that he has towards us.

And Jesus is not like the Pharisees and the teachers of the law with their hypocrisy and pride. And you hear of Jesus calling people to follow him.

And many are going around with him everywhere that he goes. And most of them are the very people who hate you. And maybe you wonder, could I ever be a follower of Jesus?

Would he even accept me with who I am? A tax collector. And with the things that I've done to people.

Can you imagine what this moment must have been like when Jesus locked eyes with Levi sitting in the tax booth. And instead of doing in that moment what everybody else did and quickly looking away, he begins to walk right toward you.

[15 : 39] He sees you like nobody else has ever seen you while you're in that booth as a human being.

He's actually coming to you to initiate with you. And maybe you wonder, what's he going to say? Is he going to rebuke me for how I've wronged so many people?

And it's none of that. He simply says, follow me. And you can hardly believe your ears.

Like, me? You're calling me? It doesn't say what Levi was thinking or feeling, but I imagine two things.

First, a sense of deep unworthiness. And second, a realization that this is the most amazing and gracious opportunity ever.

[16 : 37] And I don't want to miss out on this for anything. Levi gets up, leaves it all behind, and follows Jesus.

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

You get the sense that Levi was happy. So happy to have been called by Jesus. Like, we've got to celebrate. Let's have a feast.

Let's throw a big banquet. Let's do it at my house. Jesus, you'll be the guest of honor. I'm going to invite all my friends.

Who are the friends of the tax collector? Other tax collectors and other scoundrels and sinners.

Luke says, a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.

[17 : 48] Matthew and Mark both say that it was many tax collectors and sinners. And we'll see why they use that term in a moment. So the moral people, the religious people, they aren't even friends with tax collectors like Levi.

But we also remember that Levi was probably very wealthy. and wealth attracts all sorts of people. Sinners was kind of a label given to Levi and his buddies by the self-righteous Pharisees.

But there was also probably some truth to that as well. The kind of people that would be friends with a guy like Levi were probably other greedy men of means. Swindlers.

Men and women who were obviously immoral, corrupt, maybe collaborators, traitors, self-indulgent people, given to drunkenness.

I mean, the list could go on. We notice the adjectives. Levi held a great banquet and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.

[19 : 01] So Levi doesn't just kill the fattened calf, he slaughters half the herd. He pulls out all the stops, a massive banquet, massive feast.

And notice who the banquet is for. For Jesus. To honor and celebrate Jesus.

And as you can imagine, this kind of banquet or party is the last place that some would expect Jesus to be. Held by a tax collector in his own mansion with a large crowd of other wealthy tax collectors and sinners, would a holy man like Jesus even darken the door of such a gathering?

Well, he did. And it was met with criticism from the Pharisees and the teachers and the teachers of the law. Verse 30. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belong to their sect complained to his disciples, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

In other words, if you're a righteous and holy, devout man, Jesus, you would not keep company with immoral and greedy men like them. But unbeknownst to the Pharisees, Levi's purpose in this great feast was noble.

[20 : 32] It was a banquet given for Jesus to honor and celebrate Jesus who had just called him whom he has now become a follower of.

The purpose of this banquet is not to engage in gluttony and drunkenness nor is it to impress all his wealthy friends. It would seem that Levi is attempting to bring his colleagues and friends together so that they can meet Jesus personally.

To introduce them to Jesus. And there are the Pharisees and the teachers of the law sitting on the sidelines judging Jesus and his disciples for even attending.

Because of who's at the party. Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus answered them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.

What an answer. These words of Jesus are loaded. we notice Jesus likens himself to a doctor. This is an amazing analogy.

[21 : 53] I was thinking about this a lot this week. Have you ever been to a walk-in clinic in the city? Sometimes if it's busy you're waiting in the waiting area with all kinds of people and you see and you hear them coughing all around you and sniffing and you know you're starting to worry am I going to catch something from them?

And you're trying to keep your distance and maybe you know are these arms on my chair? Who was sitting here last? Did they wipe their snot all over this? And you start to kind of you know curl up in a ball.

But then you get in to see the doctor and if you've ever seen a good doctor he cares about you. He listens to you. He examines you carefully. He tries to figure out what's the matter?

What are your symptoms? What's the solution? And he offers his best advice and solutions. And you feel better and then you walk out and you see all the people still waiting in the waiting area coughing and sniffing.

Have you ever wondered in those moments just how the doctor how often the doctor gets sick just from meeting face to face with sick people all day long? Have you ever felt admiration for the doctor whose job it is to get close to every other person in that waiting room?

[23 : 21] The same people that you were moving away from curling up shielding yourself from. Isn't the doctor worried about getting sick too? What about his health?

What about his well-being? It's an amazing analogy. It highlights how Jesus is not concerned so much about himself like the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

His focus is on others and how he can help them to get well. He has compassion on Levi's friends. He cares about each one of them just like he cared about Levi the tax collector.

Like a doctor Jesus moves towards these people who are spiritually sick in an effort to see them restored. He wants to see them made well again with God.

That's why he goes to the banquet because he loves them because he has compassion on them. He sees their need. In fact Jesus goes even further in the next statement he says this is his very purpose and mission to call sinners to repentance.

[24 : 41] How can you do that if you avoid all contact with them and never associate with them? How can you do that if you're always trying to keep your distance from them?

And notice what Jesus the doctor does. He says I've come to call the sick the sinners to repentance. To repent means to acknowledge and confess your sins to God and to turn away from those sinful attitudes and behaviors and to turn to God to seek to be restored in your relationship with him.

So Jesus doesn't condone any of the sinful attitudes or behaviors of the people that he's eating and drinking with at the table.

He's there to call them to repent. He's there to call their evil deeds and attitudes what they are and turn from those.

Turn back to God. Jesus preached repentance just like John the Baptist, John the Baptizer did. This last statement of Jesus may have had some nuance to it and sometimes it might be difficult to unpack it a little bit.

[26 : 00] I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. What does Jesus mean by this?

Is he agreeing with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law that yeah they're righteous and they really don't need Jesus but these sinners well they really need me.

They're sick. You guys are well. Well the Pharisees they certainly thought of themselves as being righteous. We follow the law right down to the letter.

We're experts in the law. We take it seriously. We take it literally. Not like the Sadducees and others. And so these words are really striking aren't they?

I have not come to call the righteous to repentance. Why not? Is it because they don't need to?

[27 : 04] Or is Jesus saying something else here? I think what Jesus means to say is not that they're actually righteous and don't need to repent. We'll see later on in the gospel Jesus has a lot more to say about these people and what they've been up to that's not righteous.

I think what he's saying is that they are self righteous because of their self righteousness they are deaf to his call.

They are blind to their need for Jesus. They won't ever come to see Jesus the doctor because they don't see themselves as being sick with sin. They see themselves as being well, as being healthy, being right with God by their own good works, by their careful keeping of the law, by their own avoiding contact with sinners like Levi and his buddies.

This should make us think and ask the question, what about me? How do you see yourself in relationship to Jesus? Do you see yourself as healthy or as one who is sick?

Jesus has come as a doctor. Do you need his care? Do you need his help?

[28 : 44] Or are you good to go without him? Been doing pretty good on your own. Do you see yourself as a sinner? Or do you see yourself as being righteous?

A pretty good person. Do you hear Jesus calling to you to repent? Have you done that?

God makes it very clear in other places in his word. Romans chapter 3. There is no one righteous, not even one.

There is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one.

sin. That's our condition. He goes on to say a little more. Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law.

[29 : 52] Rather, through the law, we become conscious of our sin. sin. And just down the page a little in Romans 3.

There's no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So we've all blown it. Every one of us is a sinner.

And no amount of good works on our part can make up the difference. Our guiltiness cannot just be undone. It can't be wiped away by simply doing more good things than the bad things that we've done.

We've still done those bad things. We've still sinned in countless ways. All of us have. None of us are righteous. We are all sinners.

But here's the good news. Hear these words of Jesus again. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Jesus has come to call us back into a restored relationship with God.

[31 : 05] Do you hear that call to repent? He's like the doctor that we all need to save us from sin's deadly effects in us.

Let me read the rest of this verse. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

I love these words. We can all be justified made right with God by his grace.

his gift. His gift. It's a gift that comes by Christ Jesus. It's a redemption that comes through Christ Jesus.

How does it work we might wonder. How can sinners be justified? How can we be made to have this right standing with God? Paul just goes on and tells us God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith.

[32 : 28] The Apostle Paul is talking about Jesus' death on the cross. As we'll hear later in Luke, Jesus will go on to offer himself as a sacrifice to God to atone for our sins.

What that means is that Jesus freely, as a gift of grace, will put himself forward on our behalf and willingly take upon himself the punishment that we deserve for our sins.

And God will accept this as payment in full such that justice is done for the wrongs we've committed and we can be let off the hook completely, forgiven, spared what we deserve.

This is what happened when Jesus died on the cross. We're getting close to that time of the year when we turn our hearts towards that with Easter coming or Resurrection Sunday, I should say.

But each month also we take time to remember this amazing gift of God's love and grace. His body, which is what the loaf of bread represents, was broken.

[33 : 57] His blood, which is what the cup represents, ran out of his body as he hung there and died on the cross. We eat the bread and we drink from the cup to remember his sacrifice of atonement for us.

The thing that he did to make us sinners well. And so if you have repented, if you have believed in Jesus, then I want to invite you to partake with us this morning.

And if not, please just let the elements pass you by. We'll take some time now to quietly reflect and pray. And then we'll have Charles and Dave come and pass out the elements.

Once you've received them, I encourage you just to hold on to them until everybody's been served. And then we'll give thanks and we'll eat and drink together.