JESUS CALLS LEVI

Luke 5:27–39

Key Verses: 5:31–32

“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.’”

Who are you close to? It can be a sobering thought. Sadly, some people are close to no one. Even married couples can grow distant. Some try to keep close to family, or to old friends, or maybe those at church. Some want to be seen as close to certain individuals for the sake of their own prestige. In today’s passage Jesus gets close to certain people, yet avoids others. And who does he get close to? Surprisingly, it’s people with a bad reputation! Of course Jesus and his disciples quickly get criticized. But he doesn’t back down. He uses this opportunity to make a mission statement. Jesus gets close to certain people as his mission from God. What are we to make of it? How should this passage impact our lives? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

Today’s passage is the climax of a theme in chapter 5. In his ministry Jesus is going “outside the box.” He touches a leper. He forgives a paralytic. He heals people who can’t be healed. Now he brings his healing to somebody’s soul. Look at verse 27. Jesus sees a tax collector named Levi. Physically there’s nothing wrong with him. But inwardly, in the words of Isaiah, “The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil” (Isa1:5b–6). In verse 27 Luke is using a particular Greek word for “saw,” and it means to see with depth of insight, and with the purpose of visiting, as we would a friend. Most busy people would see Levi sitting at the tax booth and barely notice. If he’d taken their money, they might see him with revulsion or hatred. Tax collectors were squeezing money out of people for their own dishonest gain, working for their oppressors. Among both Jews and Romans tax collectors were seen as the lowest kind of people, along with robbers and pimps. Levi was living on the edge of society. But when Jesus encountered him, he saw him differently. He saw him with great interest and deep compassion. He wanted to be his friend. He didn’t see just what he was at present, but what he could become in the future. Jesus says to him, “Follow me.” It means more than just going around together. It means, “Come be with me,” “get close to me,” “learn from me,” “imitate me.” By his grace, anybody can be called into such close fellowship with Jesus.

How does Levi respond? Look at verse 28. It seems so random. How can he just up and leave everything and follow a guy he barely knows? The location seems to be the village of Capernaum, and Levi is the tax collector there. His job requires him to be observant of everybody and everything going on. Jesus has been ministering to people there for a while, and evidently Levi in his tax booth has noticed. Maybe he’s overheard some of what Jesus has taught. Maybe he’s seen how Jesus called Simon Peter and the others. Jesus healing all kinds of sick people and his gracious words must have moved Levi’s heart. But due to his occupation, he never dreamt Jesus would call him. But he did! Levi’s leaving everything shows how sick and tired he is of that meaningless life of chasing money, and how trapped he feels in that tax booth. He’s so ready to get out of there, to make a new start. He’s also so intrigued that Jesus is actually interested in him. He knows he needs help. Despite the outer trappings, he’s somebody who’s inwardly humble, seen in his eager response. Levi shows us something about being Jesus’ disciple. To follow him, we need to “leave everything” (5:11, 28; 14:33). It means making a full commitment to him, giving him our first priority. It means learning to put him ahead of everything and everyone else—all our potential idols. Leaving everything for Jesus is related to repentance (5:32b).

Read verse 29. In this Gospel the author Luke often mentions events at meals (7:36–50; 10:38–42; 11:37–54; 14:1–24; 22:7–38; 24:29–32,41–43). Levi is so happy Jesus has chosen him that he opens his home to honor him with a “great feast.” He invites all those he knows to come and meet Jesus, too. Tax collectors were notorious for being penny pinchers, and stingy. But Levi spares no expense on the food and drink and doesn’t calculate how many people to bring. It’s one of the most memorable events in Jesus’ ministry. The guest list is basically a “who’s who” of notorious people—outcasts all. What’s going on? It’s a celebration of the amazing grace of Jesus toward the worst of sinners. It’s a glimpse of heaven, where sinners who turn to Jesus are welcomed, celebrated and treated like royalty (15:7,10,22–24). Verse 29 says Levi “makes” this great feast “for Jesus.” To do this Levi may’ve cleaned out his bank account.

And there’s something even more stunning. It’s not stated explicitly, but Jesus brings his disciples there. He knows what kind of people are present. They’re shunned by society because they’ve all lived as flagrant rule-breakers. To put it mildly, they’d done many bad things, hurt others and ruined themselves. We’re not sure what their motives are: No doubt many have showed up just for the free food and drink. Still, Jesus comes and reclines at their table. In their society such meal fellowship was reserved only for the closest friends. But Jesus’ presence at this meal communicates louder than any words that he accepts them all. Levi brings these people there because he wants them to get to know this Jesus who is so full of grace. We can only imagine what the meal was like: So much delicious food and drink, so much laughter like these people had never had before, and it’s all bathed in an aura of wonder and amazement. Though they’ve been living in such darkness and sin, now Jesus is with them and accepts them, and this makes them feel like they have some hope. They’re experiencing none other than the tender mercy of God (1:78).

But some people are not happy. Look at verse 30. The Pharisees and their scribes are grumbling. What’s the problem? Partly, they’re mad because they were not invited. But also, they have a totally different approach to spiritual life. They think they’re supposed separate from sinful people, so as to be holy. They think hanging out with such wayward people will make them corrupt. Earlier they accused Jesus of blasphemy for telling somebody his sins were forgiven (5:21). Now they’re insinuating Jesus is also immoral. Luke repeatedly tells us how people “grumble” against Jesus for receiving “sinners,” being their friend, eating and drinking with them (5:30; 7:34,39; 15:1–2; 19:7). This time the Pharisees try to poison Jesus’ own disciples against him.

How does Jesus answer? Read verse 31. He’s explaining why he’s there—not to selfishly enjoy food and drink, but to bring healing to sick people. His words reveal his compassion. They also reveal his wisdom. Jesus is going to invest himself in those who know how much they need his help. It’s still true. People who don’t think they’re very sick aren’t going to seek out a doctor’s help. Likewise, people too proud to look at their own problems aren’t going to open up to Jesus. This is why people at that time needed the ministry of John the Baptist, to help them see how sinful they were before God (cf. 3:3–14; 7:29–30). We all still need to realize how spiritually sick we are, and how desperately we need Jesus. What’s more, like Jesus, we need to be looking out for such people who know they’re sick with sin, and invest our time and energy in ministering to them.

Jesus adds his conclusion. Read verse 32. It’s one version of his mission statement. Earlier Jesus said he came for the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed (4:18). Later he’s going to say that he came to seek and to save the lost (19:10). Here he’s making it simple, plain and clear. He’s come not to get involved with self-righteous people, but to call sinners to repentance. To do that, he’s making friends with them first. By being with sinners, he’s giving them a taste of God’s love. It’s to help them find their way back to God.

Generally, human life has been called “the school of hard knocks”—the painful education we get from life’s many negative experiences. Sometimes tragic life events can seem so cruel. Sometimes the people closest to us can be cruel, too. Even when we’re hurting so badly, we may encounter only selfishness and coldness. Some people or places offer healing, but what they’re really after is money and their own gain. As spiritually sick people we try so many things to find relief and restoration, and all too often we only end up disappointed. But real spiritual healing happens as we spend time with Jesus and experience his grace. We do this mostly through prayer and meditating on his word. We also do it by spending time with those in whom Christ is dwelling. When we realize we’re totally helpless—so sick, so unworthy—we come to him, not to prove anything, but only for his mercy and grace. Then a miracle happens: he begins to heal our sick, wounded, weary souls. He does it free of charge! So it’s called “free grace.”

As we experience his healing, we become “wounded healers.” In the context of healing others Jesus said, “You received without paying; give without pay” (Mt10:8b). We spend time with others in need of God’s grace, just like us, and we offer our genuine friendship to lead them to our best friend, our great Physician, the “balm in Gilead” (Jer8:22), Jesus, the only one who can truly heal us. To do this, first we ourselves open up to Jesus, let him show us how we need his grace. Then we put ourselves out there, take risks and get close to people, even to seemingly unsavory ones. Are we really doing this? Have we totally opened ourselves up to Jesus? Have we accepted his mission as our own? Are we trying, in his name, only for his sake, to get close to even one sinner?

In the last part people ask why his disciples are not fasting and praying but only eating and drinking (33). How does Jesus respond? Read verse 34. Here, Jesus is the bridegroom; his ministry is like a joyful wedding; and “guests” are literally “sons.” They are those closest to the groom, who really want to share his joy. It would be weird to ask them to start fasting at the bridegroom’s wedding. In the same way, as we get close to Jesus, our lives become characterized by joy. It’s only natural. It’s not just personal; we also taste the joy of seeing sinners come back to God through him. The place for fasting is when our bridegroom is taken from us (35), which may refer to the time when he’s crucified.

Jesus goes on to give two short parables, one about new and old cloth, the other, about new and old wineskins and new and old wine (36–39). The point is, we can’t mix them. Old cloth and old wineskins need to be thrown away, and we need to make a new start with new cloth and new wineskins. Especially we need to be like new wineskins for the gospel: open, receptive, eager to learn, ready to let it stretch us, work powerfully within us and totally change us. There are always people who prefer the old wine of legalism to the new wine of God’s grace, and we’re not going to change their taste. We just need to move on.

Read verses 31,32 again. Praise God for Jesus our Physician who can really heal us! Thank God for Jesus who chose to be with sinners, not the self-righteous. May God forgive us for isolating ourselves and ignoring such people today. May he help us experience Jesus’ healing through repentance, and use us to bring his healing grace to those in desperate need.