

The Great Physician

Luke 5:27-32

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I've titled tonight's message, "The Great Physician," and you will see as we unfold this passage. This short passage that we are going to take a look at is Jesus calling a man to follow Him. This man we know by the name of Matthew. Matthew was a tax collector, and it appears that he was, probably of the twelve disciples that Jesus chose, the last of the twelve that was selected by Jesus. It's interesting that he was a tax collector because tax collectors were not well thought of. They're not well thought of today either, but back then it was far, far worse.

Let me tell you a little bit about the job of tax collecting. As many of you know, the Roman Empire ruled over not only Israel but much of that region, but Israel definitely included. Because they were an authority over Israel, they were exacting taxes from the people. They had a particular method of doing so that they called tax farming. The way that it worked is that they had in their minds the amount of money that they wanted to receive, collect, from every region, from every person. They divided their empire into these different territories or regions and then basically auctioned off an area to the highest bidder. Whoever the highest bidder was, they were the tax collector for that particular region.

These tax collectors were essentially trained extortionists. What that meant is that not only were they to collect the taxes that Rome required of them, but Rome told them that anything you collect above and beyond what you're going to give to us, you can keep for yourself. That became very desirable for these tax collectors, so they would take from the people more than they needed to in order to line their own pockets. Because of this, the social status of a tax collector was very, very low. In fact, you'll come across in the gospels a phrase, "tax collectors and sinners." Those two are linked together on many occasions.

Why was it that tax collectors were associated with sinners? Because in that culture essentially they were seen as the same thing. All tax collectors were sinners, but not all sinners were tax collectors. They were lumped together because of how vile these tax collectors happened to be. For example, they were considered to be just filthy liars. Because they were exacting more than they had to, they had to lie to do so, and so they were seen as liars to the point where no tax collector could serve as a witness in a court of law because they could not be trusted to tell the truth. In addition to that they were viewed as traitors. Why? Because most of these tax collectors were Jewish themselves, but they were betraying their own people by working for the Roman Empire to exact taxes from them to give to Rome, so they were seen as traitors to their own people, which made them despised by the Jews to the point where they were not welcome into the synagogue. They could not on the Sabbath day go into worship like the other Jews could. They were not welcome there.

With that background, I want you to follow along with me as I read Luke 5:27-32. It says, "After these things He"—that 'He' is Jesus—"went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' 28 So he left all, rose up, and followed Him. 29

Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them. 30 And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, 'Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' 31 Jesus answered and said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 52 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.'"

This calling of Matthew, who is identified as Levi here in this passage, and I'll explain that here in a few minutes, we find this in three out of the four gospels—Matthew tells the story; Mark tells the story; and as we just read here, Luke tells the story as well. It's a very brief story, only five verses in each of these gospels, only five verses attributed to this phenomenal story, but the fact that three out of the four gospel writers include this story means that they considered it important, and probably Matthew considering it more important than anybody did because it happened to be his story. Matthew is the center of this story. What's interesting about all three of the tellings of Jesus calling Matthew or calling Levi, is how immediately he left his job, left his former life, and began to follow after Jesus. There was no, "Hey, let me first go back and say 'goodbye' to my family." There was no, "I need to see if I can get out of my lease." There was no, "Hey, I need to tell my boss, give him a two-week notice," nothing like that. It was like Jesus called and he left his former life to follow after Jesus.

I'm going to get back to that subject a little bit later in our message, but I just want you to file that away of how quick he was to respond to what Jesus called him to do. What I want to look at first is the fact that Luke tells the story, and I chose Luke and his version of it because it is slightly different than the way Matthew himself tells the story. Most of the essential parts of their telling are the same, but there a few parts that they differ, and they differ in ways that we might in our initial reading not really pick up on, but what we find is that those differences maybe hold a little bit of weight that I'd like to talk about.

You see, when Luke tells the story he is not telling his own story, he is telling the story of somebody else. He is basically an outsider to this event. We know that Luke, in the writing of his gospel, actually did it as a historian would collect data and piece together the ministry, the life in the ministry of Jesus, and this was one of those stories that he chose to include. Not only was it not his story, he likely was not even there when it took place. He relied upon the eyewitnesses that were there.

Matthew, on the other hand, not only was an eyewitness of it, he actually was the subject of what was taking place here. Matthew was the insider to the story, Luke was just basically an outsider to this story. Now, we do know that both tellings of the story are in Scripture and all Scripture is breathed by God. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit, but when God inspires His Word, He does not eliminate the human element in the telling of the stories. Oftentimes the author's perspective is going to shine through the way that a story is told, and I think that is going to come out here. Did the Holy Spirit inspire Matthew's words? Absolutely. Did He inspire Luke's words? For sure, but there are some slight differences that I think are important.

Luke was writing basically biographical, which means that he was on the outside telling the story of others. Matthew, in this case, in this small segment of his gospel, which happens to be Matthew 9 if you wanted to take a look at that and it's also told in Mark 2. We're basically going to camp out here in Luke 5, but if you want to make reference to the other accounts, you can do so if I get boring and you decide you want to flip over pages and take a look there. My point being is that Luke was writing biography, Matthew was writing autobiography. Autobiography simply means you're sharing your own story. It is about you. It is what you saw, what you said, what you experienced, what you felt, so Matthew tells it in a little bit different way than Luke actually tells this same story.

I want to bring out a few of those differences. One of them is the way that he is identified. It's a different way to identify the individual that Jesus saw. I want you to notice here in Luke 5:27 that it says that Jesus " . . . saw a tax collector" Luke is basically identifying him by his occupation, his occupation of choice, which we have already elaborated on and have made the distinction that tax collectors were not highly esteemed in that particular culture. Nevertheless, Luke chose to identify him by his occupation, which immediately is going to taint the view of this man based upon what he did for a living, especially back in the time that Luke would've been writing and the Roman Empire was still ruling and tax collectors were still despised. Luke chose to identify him by what it was that he happened to do for a living. Oftentimes when we do so, we are already creating in our audience an opinion about that person, and it's not a very favorable opinion.

It's interesting the way that we will judge another person. We will judge them based upon our idea of who they are or our opinion of their views and so forth. So often we will slap a label on that person and use that label to identify that person. In fact, right now I think we're living in a time that that is pervasive in our culture where we are labeling everybody that is around us by their political views, by their ethnic group, by their gender identity, by their sexual orientation, by their economic class. We can go on and on and on. People are then labeled based upon what it is their views are or their preferences are and so forth and so on. Today people are called fascists, Marxists, extremists, illegal, and libtards, racists and so many other things. The list just goes on and on.

These labels essentially are a tool to form an opinion about someone that oftentimes is a very unfavorable opinion, and it's almost to give ourselves the permission to write them off, to dismiss any of their words, any of their opinions, any of their thoughts, that they have no validity whatsoever. Mankind has been very judgmental of others. We will be hypercritical. We will slap a label, and that label is meant to dismiss that person as a valid person.

Jesus does not see as people see. The way that He looks at others is not the way that most of humanity looks at others. You remember the passage in which Jesus was with a multitude of people. It was just before He was going to feed the five thousand, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. In that story, before the miracle actually takes place, it says, "But when He saw the multitudes,"—what did He see when He saw the multitude? When He saw just a sea of people around Him, all wanting to hear what He had to say, all wanting to get close to Jesus,

what was it that Jesus actually saw?—"He was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep having no shepherd." What did Jesus see? He saw lost sheep. He saw people that were hurting and people that were struggling, people that were defeated, people that were broken that needed a shepherd.

Do you remember when Jesus was near the temple with His disciples and there were people there at the temple going by the money box dropping in their offerings. An old lady was there to give her offering. Nobody was paying attention to her at all. Nobody actually saw her whatsoever because she was insignificant. She was just an old lady, and she wasn't really going to give much anyways. But you know, Jesus saw her. Jesus drew attention to her by turning to His disciples and saying, "Do you see that woman there? Everybody else gave out of their abundance, she gave everything that she had."

You see, Jesus sees differently than other people see, and it's going to be the case in this instance because Luke is seeing a tax collector, but Matthew doesn't record the story the exact same way. Matthew, in his telling, says when Jesus came by, "He saw a man" He saw a man. What does that mean, 'He saw a man'? Well, that's different than seeing a tax collector. This was a man that Jesus had created. This was a man who had been created in the image of God. This was a man who had made some bad choices in life. His life had been marred by his own sin nature and these sinful choices, but he was also a man for which Jesus had come to die, so Jesus looked at him differently.

It's interesting that Matthew was the only one that recorded it that way because when Mark recorded it he calls him a tax collector, when Luke recorded it, he calls him a tax collector, but when Matthew records the story, he said Jesus, " . . . saw a man" I think that's significant because it is Matthew's story, and what he experienced is that Jesus looked at him differently than everybody else looked at him. I would imagine in his life as a tax collector he, day in and day out, had to take the brunt of other people's slurs, of their looks, of their words that would tear him down, would show him that he was not welcome, that he was not accepted, that they did not approve of his choices. Then, Jesus comes along and doesn't treat him like that. Instead, He treats him with a sense of dignity. He treats him like a man.

About forty years ago I was sitting in a church service. At that time, I was a young believer. I had not been a Christian all that long, and my pastor was teaching on a subject I can't remember at all now, but I do remember one thing that he said because in that message he made reference to an event that had taken place in his life about a week prior. He was in some location I can't recall, but in that moment he saw a man who was doing something that only jerks do, so my pastor said, "In my head that's exactly what I thought to myself. I thought, What a jerk!" When the Lord immediately spoke to his heart and said, "You know, I gave My life for that man you just called a jerk."

There isn't a thing about that message that I remember except for that, and I've remembered it for forty years because it has impacted me. It's made me look at people differently, and I thank God for that because we will often think very critical, negative thoughts about people and their

choices, their lifestyles, and the things that they are doing with their lives, and we will have choice words about who they are and slap those types of labels on them. But I've tried to teach myself, every time I have one of those thoughts, that person is a soul for whom Christ has died. You see, that's how Jesus sees people. He doesn't see them based necessarily upon their bad choices, though they've made bad choices, the fact that they have sinned against Him, though they certainly have. When Jesus sees, He sees lost sheep. He sees broken people, and Matthew took note of that. He realized, "He didn't see me for what I did. He wasn't seeing me for the choices that I've made, a bad as those choices have been, He saw me in a different way."

Not only does Luke and Matthew tell the story as in a different identity, they also tell it in another different way, that is, the name by which Matthew was called because you've already seen here in Luke's telling of the story, he doesn't call him by the name Matthew, he calls him by the name Levi. Mark does the same thing, calls him by the name Levi. Matthew is the only gospel, actually, that calls him by the name Matthew.

Most scholars believe that Levi was probably his birth name, the name that he was given by his parents. You know, back in the Old Testament in particular and the New, names were given for a specific reason. Many of the names had a purpose behind it. They weren't just arbitrary. It wasn't just, "I think that name's cute." Oftentimes, even today, many of us as parents when we found out that we were pregnant, we began contemplating names. We think through those names, and oftentimes we have different reasons why we are going to name our child a particular name. Maybe it is a family name. It has deep meaning to you because others in the family have had that name. Other times a name is chosen because of the meaning behind the name—that name means something and that has some significance for the parent—so that is the name of choice when that child is born.

That might've been the case in this particular scenario, that he would've been named Levi. In fact, the original Levi was absolutely given his name because that name was significant to the mother. It's found in Genesis 29. Let's retell the story real quick, but Leah was the mother. She was married to a man who did not love her, and that was very painful for her as a wife to feel unloved by her husband. She had a son and named him Reuben—God has heard me. His name meant, "God hears," because she figured, "God has heard me, and now my husband is going to love me because I have had a son." Then, she conceived again and had another son and says, "God sees me now. Surely my husband is going to love me because I've now given him two sons." But still, her husband did not love her. She got pregnant a third time, and this time she named him Levi. What did Levi mean? It meant "join" or "attach." She surmised, "Now my husband has to be attached to me because I have given him three sons." He was named Levi because that had significance for his mom Leah. The name meant "joined;" the name meant "attach."

Fast forward into the New Testament at the time that this Levi was born. It may be for the very same reason or similar reason that he was named that because the parents saw it as significant. Maybe first of all because it would attach him to his culture. They were a Jewish family. They had a Jewish heritage. Levi was a Hebrew name, and it meant "joined," which

would join him to his culture, that he would grow up being a proud Jewish boy, grow up into a devoted Jewish man. Maybe that was their ambition.

Secondly, the Levites were the servants of God in the temple in the Old Testament. They assisted the priests in the worship of God. Maybe that was the reason that they chose the name Levi because they had ambitions for their son, that he would be a guy that was devoted to the God of the Jews, the God of Scripture. We don't know for sure, and of course I'm maybe taking some liberties here, but most surely Levi was given that name because of those types of things. It meant something to the family. Unfortunately, and as we see in the story, as he grew up, he did not so much become attached to his culture, he did not so much become attached to the worship of God because he decided to attach himself to the Roman Empire and he chose to attach himself to an occupation that wouldn't even allow him to enter into the synagogue, so it's very possible that his parents had certain ambitions for him and he turned his back totally on those ideas that his parents had for him and chose his own path—Levi.

Matthew doesn't call himself Levi, he calls himself Matthew. We have to ask ourselves, "Well, then, where did that name come from? Why is he called by two different names?" We don't know for sure. We're not told where he got the name Matthew other than the fact that from this point forward he is only referred to as Matthew, never again as Levi, even by Luke and Mark. When Jesus called Matthew to be a follower, never again is he ever called Levi in the Scriptures, he will only now be called Matthew, which may be an indication that it was actually Jesus that changed his name. You know, that's something that Jesus tended to do. Remember Simon, He changed his name to Peter, which meant "rock."

We find in the Old Testament that the Lord changed the names of many—Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah, Jacob became Israel. There were times that the Lord saw fit to change someone's name. He usually had a significant reason for doing so, and maybe this was one of those occasions where Jesus Himself decides to change his name. Why? Because his parents had ambitions that he would attach himself to all the right things but instead he attached himself to all the wrong things. Well, let's just get rid of that whole part of your life. Let's start anew. Let's call you Matthew.

Do you know what Matthew means? Gift of God. Do we have any Matthews in here? Are there any Matthews at all? If there is a Matthew in here, you might want to let people around you know, "Hey, I'm the gift of God." Matthew is the only one that refers to himself as Matthew at this point in his life, and I think it had meaning for him—Levi symbolized his old life, Matthew symbolized the new life.

I want to come back to the call that Jesus made upon his life, and again, we're still in verse 27, " . . . He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.'" As I said before, with no hesitation he followed.

We have to ask ourselves, how could he have responded so quickly? I mean, think about what he is leaving behind. He had a good gig, at least in respect to finances. The tax collectors made

a lot of money. They profited much, and it was partly why they were willing to turn their back on their own countrymen and be despised by so many because doing what they did actually made them very wealthy. But suddenly, he decides he's going to walk away from all that. He's going to walk completely away from that. What would cause him to do that? One of the reasons we might consider is the immediate impact that Jesus just had upon his life. Nobody had ever treated him like Jesus just treated him. Nobody saw him like Jesus saw him, and because of that he might've thought, You know, if this Guy could show me respect, can dignify me, He's worthy to be followed. That might've been it.

Or it could've been that what Jesus was actually doing was finally calling him to make a choice, make a decision. I say that because the words "follow me," in our English Bible come from a Greek phrase which was in the present imperative. Present meaning that it was to be a constant, permanent following. Imperative meaning that it intensified the statement into a command, that Jesus essentially was telling him, commanding him, "You know what? You need to make the choice to follow Me," which may indicate that this was not the first time that Matthew had encountered Jesus. Again, we don't know for sure because we don't find any part of the gospel that is telling us that Matthew and Jesus had a previous encounter.

We are in Luke 5, so there's four chapters previous. In Matthew's telling of it, he's in Matthew 9, which is already past the Sermon on the Mount, he might've even been there at the time the Sermon on the Mount was given, if that is actually what Jesus was meaning when He said the words, "Follow Me," meaning you need to do it permanently and stop being wishy-washy. It might've been a situation where he would show up when Jesus was around, he'd listen to Jesus talk. He'd be impressed with what he heard, but he wouldn't make any decision. He'd just go back to his tax collecting. He'd go back to his sinful life choices until Jesus came around again. When Jesus came around again, he'd go listen to Him speak, but again, he wouldn't make a decision and he'd go back to his old life. It is possible that what Jesus was actually doing was calling him right now to make a permanent decision.

There might even be some of us here tonight that are in that situation where we've decided we want to go back to church. So, "I want to get some things right in my life. I'm going to go back to church. I'm going to listen to some messages. It makes me feel good to go to some church services." But when the opportunity to give your life to Christ is presented, you don't really want to take that step yet. You're not really ready for that. I'll attend church, but then I want to go back and live my life my own way. At some point Jesus speaks to the heart and says, "It's time to make a decision." There might even be somebody here tonight that needs to make that decision and stop going back and forth between church attendance and worldly lifestyle and come to terms with the fact that Jesus loves you, died for you, and is calling you to Himself.

If that, in fact, is the case for Matthew, then he made that decision because right here, right now, he leaves behind his lifestyle, he leaves behind his occupation, and he chooses to become a follower of Christ from this moment going forward and never deviated from that. In fact, in this story he decides he's going to throw a party, verse 29, "Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with

them. 30 And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, 'Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'"

Matthew throws this party, and by the way, this party was really for Jesus. We know that because of the way that Matthew words it in the way that he explained what was taking place is that He was the guest of honor and all of his friends were invited to meet Jesus. The place was filled with other tax collectors and sinners because that's what tax collectors and sinners hang out with. They have no other friends other than people that are like themselves. So, he throws this big party, and Jesus is there in the midst of them. Why is he throwing this party? Because Jesus has now changed his life, and he wants to share that new life with the other people that are in his life.

So it is so often with a new believer, they are so excited about what God has just done in their life, they want everybody that they know to know about it, so he throws this big party. But there's a response to that party in verse 30, "And their scribes and the Pharisees complained . . . 'Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'" For those religious guys, they didn't see any reason to rub elbows with people who are not living their lives right, "They're dirty sinners. To hang out with them may contaminate me. I don't want to be around those types of people," so the religious people insulated themselves from those tax collectors and sinners, which actually drove those sinners away. There was a big wedge between the religious elite back in that time and those that were the down-and-outers of society because the religious looked down their noses at who they considered the lowlifes. The lowlifes felt so rejected by the religious people that they had no interest in becoming one of them, so they had their own group. Let the religious people do their thing, we're going to do our own thing.

Oftentimes there's a problem within the church in that we become Christianized. What I mean by that is that when we first get saved many of our closer friends are not believers. We might know a few believers, but most of our associations, the people that we have hung out with, don't know the Lord. Well, that begins to change over time. As you begin to go to church, you begin to make friends with the people that are at church. You hang out with those non-Christian friends less and less and less. In a matter of time you can find that almost all of your associations are just with other believers. The people at church have become your friendship core, and they're the ones that we have fellowship with. There's nothing wrong with that. We ought to enjoy that.

But what happens is we also begin to separate from everybody that we know that is not a believer, and now we get a haircut from a Christian, and we go to the stores that are owned by Christians, and we order online from Christian companies, and we only drink milk from a Christian cow. What happens is we lose contact with the world. You know, we're not to be of the world, but we are to be in the world because Jesus called us to be light and salt. The only way for us to do that is to have contact with the unbelieving world.

Here is Jesus, sitting in the midst of lost people, and the religious people have a problem with it. The very One that could change their lives, pull them out of the pit that they are in, and the religious people take issue with it.

Back in the 1700s the Church at England had become very elitist. What I mean by that is that the church was no longer for the common people. The common people really weren't welcome at church, and so they didn't go. John Wesley saw this happening. He saw the only people that were going to church were those that were wealthy, those that were in high society. The common people did not go, so he decided he would bring church to them. He began to preach outside the church walls. He would preach in a field. He would preach in a cemetery. Any place that a group of people would gather around to hear this preacher preach, he would preach the gospel to them. There are stories told about John Wesley preaching to thousands of coal miners, sharing the gospel with them. Many of them turning their lives over to Christ with tears, black tears streaming down their faces because of their coal-stained skin, giving their lives over to the Lord.

Here are all these new converts, people that have just turned their life over to Christ, but they weren't welcome into the Church of England, so John Wesley started a new church which became the Methodist Church, and all of these people that were getting saved were welcome in the Methodist Church. It was for the common people.

A hundred years later the Methodist Church became elitist. The only people that were truly welcome were those that were of high society. The poor they would allow to go, but they actually had to come in through a separate door than everybody else and had to sit in a pew that had no back and no cushion, and where their pews were was out of sight from the pulpit so the pastor did not have to see them while he preached. You can guess, they didn't come to church very often because they did not feel welcome.

A man by the name of William Booth saw that taking place. He didn't like it. On one particular Sunday he went throughout the town and rounded up all of the down-and-outers, all of the poor people that he could and said, "I want you to go to church with me." He went to the Methodist Church and brought them in and sat them in the front row. Because of that, he was kicked out of the church, so William Booth decided he would start a new movement and today it's called The Salvation Army.

What we see is a trend that has taken place within the church that the church could lose sight of what Jesus sees and we begin to see tax collectors and sinners. We don't see men and women created in the image of God, we see Levi, people attached to all the wrong things. We don't see Matthew, ones that can become the gift of God.

I love the fact that there is this contrast between the way Luke tells the story and the way Matthew tells the story because Matthew is sharing his experience. Luke is sharing it as an outsider looking in, and that is a different perspective. What we need to do is have the eyes of Jesus so that we see what Jesus sees and not necessarily what society sees. We need to look at people as Jesus would look at them rather than as others would look at them when we consider the way that Jesus ministered to people.

I want to mention another tax collector, actually, Zacchaeus. Do you remember Zacchaeus?

The guy that climbed the tree so he could see Jesus? Jesus came by and invited Himself over for dinner, “Zacchaeus, why don’t you come down from that tree. I’m going to have dinner with you tonight.” While that dinner was going on, you might recall what Zacchaeus responded to Jesus. He said, “Jesus, I want You to know right now, I’m going to give half of my wealth to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody of anything, I am going to pay it back fourfold.” It’s interesting the way that that played out because many of us would say what Zacchaeus did has to come before I’m going to have dinner with Him. As soon as he decides he’s going to give half of his stuff away, and as soon as he decides he’s going to pay back all of the wrong that he did, then I’ll have dinner with Him. But that wasn’t Jesus. Jesus chose to have dinner with him which resulted in Zacchaeus making that decision himself.

Remember when the woman was caught in adultery and there were a group of men there that wanted to kill her on the spot, or at least wanted Jesus to make the decision that she deserved to die because of her sin? Jesus, in that passage, says to her, “Neither do I condemn you”—and then He says—“go and sin no more.” It is not that Jesus does not care about sin, it’s not that He does not think sin is significant; in fact, in our passage here in verse 32 He says, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

Repentance was on His mind, but when we consider the woman caught in adultery, He begins with, “Neither do I condemn you”—and then He says—“go and sin no more.” We too often would flip those. We would say, “Go and sin no more, and then I won’t condemn you.” The gospel is God offering salvation, a free gift of forgiveness and eternal life based on what Jesus did, not how the sinner responds. The only thing that we could do is by faith receive it. It’s such a contrast between how Jesus so often deals with people and the way that we deal with people. Let us be more like Jesus.

Let me finish with one last thing, that is, getting back to Matthew’s name change. He did become the gift of God, you know. One of the interesting things about Scripture is that we never hear Matthew utter a word, not even in this story. There aren’t any words of Matthew here or anywhere else that he spoke. Maybe he wasn’t good with his words audibly, but the guy could sure write, and he penned the gospel of Matthew that we get to read. Maybe that’s what Jesus meant when He called him the “gift of God,” “Matthew, you’re going to be a gift to the entire human race because you’re going to have the opportunity to proclaim the gospel that saved you and can save others.” Lets pray.