

Calling Sinners
Luke 5:27-39
Pastor John Miller

One of the great dangers of the Christian life and in the church today is that of legalism. Legalism is a very dangerous trap Christians can fall into. It is defined as “a fleshly attitude which conforms to a man-made code for the purpose of exalting self.” So legalism is relating to God by law, rules or regulations. Then you have your own standards by which you determine who is spiritual and who is not. It usually leads to self-righteousness and to a censorious, critical, fault-finding, judgmental attitude toward others where you look down on them, because they don’t pray as much as you, they’re not as spiritual as you, they don’t read the Bible as much or go to church as much, or they’re not doing what you think a Christian should do. Therefore you feel superior to them, and you want them to keep your rules and regulations, which aren’t Biblical; they’re just self-established to feed your own flesh.

So we become self-righteous, we look down on others, they don’t meet our standards and we lose our sympathy for sinners. We actually start to despise those who God loves, for whom Christ died. It’s easy, after being a Christian for some time, to become isolated and insulated from the world and to begin to have a critical, judgmental attitude toward those who don’t meet our standards or follow the Lord the way we do.

In our text today, we find Jesus calling sinners. He is eating with them and reaching out to them. The book of Luke is the book where Jesus said, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). We certainly see that today. Because of this, He is brought to conflict with and criticized by the legalistic, self-righteous scribes and Pharisees. They didn’t understand Christ’s ministry, His methods or His motives.

Today we are to learn in this passage, through Christ’s ministry, His methods and motives and why He came. When we examine this passage, we learn the important distinction between Jesus and religion, and we come to understand why Christ came.

The key text in not only Luke’s Gospel but in this passage is verse 32. Jesus speaking said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” Jesus Himself is telling us why he came.

Now don’t misinterpret what Jesus is saying here. He’s not saying that there are righteous people who don’t need Him; He’s saying the “righteous” are those self-righteous who don’t think they need Him. They don’t see their need for Jesus. Rather He has come to those “sinners” who know they are sinners and need a doctor. He is like a physician, and He knows those who are sick need a doctor. So He came to call the sinners and not the self-righteous, who think they don’t need Him.

There are only two, main divisions in our text. The first division is in verses 27-30. It is the setting for the conflict. Jesus is now going to come into conflict with the scribes and the

Pharisees. It is just starting to brew in the Gospel of Luke. The stage is set for this criticism. Luke says in verse 27, "After these things He went out and saw a tax collector..." or "publican" "...named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.'" So Jesus sees Levi at his tax booth and said to him, "Follow Me."

Verse 28, "So he left all, rose up, and followed Him. Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others..." also considered sinners "...who sat down with them. And their scribes and the Pharisees complained..." or "murmured" "...against His disciples, saying, 'Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'"

So we see that Jesus has a clash with the legalists. "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" They probably thought Jesus would get cooties if He did that.

Sadly, we as Christians can get the same kind of attitude. "I don't talk to the heathen. I don't talk to sinners. I don't go there. I don't do this. I don't smoke. I don't chew. I don't hang out with those who do. I don't go to picture shows. I don't drink." That's their philosophy. They have their little standards. They can be fine, but they need to be careful not to become self-righteous and legalistic about it.

Back in verse 27, we have the setting. This account took place "after these things." What things? This was after Jesus had cleansed the leper and healed the paralytic. It is believed He had been in Peter's house in Capernaum, where the four friends tore the roof off and lowered their friend down into the presence of Jesus. Jesus had healed him by saying, "Your sins are forgiven you." Then He said, "Rise up and walk."

In the cleansing of the leper and the healing of the paralytic, we see through these miracles pictures of how God saves sinners. He heals us and He cleanses us from our sins. So this is still the context of bringing Jesus into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees, as the tension builds in this Gospel.

Notice that it says that Jesus "saw." The Greek word for "saw" is very interesting. It refers to "a contemplative look." So Jesus looked observantly and contemplatively. He didn't just see; He saw intentionally with purpose and observation.

So what did Jesus see? He saw a man named Levi, who needed salvation. What did Jesus see? He saw a man who was "a tax collector." He was "sitting at the tax table." But Jesus sees what we don't see. You should pray, "God, give me Your eyes; let me see what You see. Give me Your heart; let me feel what You feel. Give me Your compassion; let me feel Your compassion." I like the song that says, "Let me weep with Your tears. Oh, God, soften my heart." It's so easy to become callous toward the sinful world and angry at them. So Jesus saw with purpose and design and intention. And he saw a man who was a tax collector or publican.

What is a publican? It was a tax collector who was a Jew collecting taxes for Rome. They were turncoats. They had forsaken their own nation. They were Jews working for Gentiles. They

were money-hungry and money-grubbing. They would bid for an area in which to collect taxes. They would have a customs booth or toll booth, and as people passed by with their wares, fish and lumber, cloth and goods, they would be taxed. Rome had set an amount for the publicans to gather for Rome, but anything over that amount the publicans could pocket. So they were taxing the people exorbitantly, they were greedy and getting very rich. A publican was synonymous with wealth, decadence, evil and licentious living.

It was said that at this time, tax collectors were the most hated members of society. When they walked down the street people would spit at them, throw rocks at them and curse them, because they were hated and despised by their fellow Jews.

Yet Jesus called Levi to be His disciple. I can imagine the disciples thinking, Oh, we need to help Jesus here! He's pickin' the wrong guy! He needs to stick to fishermen. Not tax collectors! So they were probably blown away by Jesus' choice. But we need to see what God sees. We need to feel as God feels. We need to move as God moves; toward those who are in need. Who the world had rejected, Jesus is now accepting.

It's interesting that in Luke's Gospel, we have Levi, a publican, called to follow Christ. And we have Zacchaeus, in chapter 19, who was the wee, little man of Jericho and a tax collector. He too was forgiven by Jesus and became one of His followers.

Levi was also known as Matthew. He was the writer of the first book of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew. So this despised, hated, rejected tax collector becomes Matthew the Apostle, the writer of the Gospel bearing his name. How marvelous that is. And the name "Matthew" means "gift of God." So he became a gift to us in writing his Gospel.

So Levi was sitting at a tax booth, probably on a main road. There was a main road that went from Damascus in the east by the lake Galilee then west to Rome. So all the goods that passed by Galilee would be taxed by Levi at his receipt of customs.

Now Jesus said to Levi, "Follow Me." My heart leaps for joy when I hear the words, "Follow Me." What a blessed day it was when Jesus said to you, "Follow Me." You turned from your sinful life to follow Him. Nothing was ever the same. And verse 28 says, "So he left all, rose up, and followed Him." What a marvelous thing that is. It's a call for Levi to attach himself permanently to Jesus as His disciple.

I wondered if Levi knew anything about Jesus. I believe he must have. He must have seen some of Jesus' miracles. He must have heard Him preach. He must have seen the Lord in the area of Galilee. Maybe he knew about Him through James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who he taxed quite often for their fishing business. So Levi probably had some familiarity with who Jesus was.

What a lesson this is for us. We see God's grace to those the world writes off. When you get to heaven, you're going to be blown away by who you see there. And even more so, people are going to be blown away to see you there! "What are you doing here?! You were messed up,

man!" And you're just going to say, "The grace of God, man! I'm saved by God's grace." People are going to be shocked to see you in heaven. Me too. Amazing. So we see that God accepts, forgives, helps and heals those who the world rejects.

Perhaps the other disciples were upset with the Lord's choice of Levi. Remember that John and James were brothers. Their dad, Zebedee, had a fishing business that was taxed by Levi. Now they're in the same group; they're disciples! "I don't know about this Lord. You sure You know what You're doing?!" The group has a tax collector, a zealot and a bunch of smelly fishermen. Amazing! So it is God's grace that He accepts who the world writes off. When others saw a despised tax collector, Jesus saw a gift of God.

Also there was a cost to Levi leaving, verse 28. It says, "He left all." I thought that was interesting. Many commentators said that the fishermen could go back to their fishing, but a tax collector could not go back to his job, because it was so competitive and it would be bid out. The highest bidder would get his former job. So when Levi left, he left all his money and possessions behind. But there was one thing he didn't leave behind: his pen. He closed the books, left his tax booth and took his pen with him. Praise God! He started writing down what Jesus said and what He did. And we have it today, the Gospel According to Matthew.

So my question is, "What's in your hand?" Moses had a rod and God used that. David had a sling shot and God used that. David had a harp and God used that. What gift, what ability, what talent has God entrusted to you to use for His glory when He calls you to follow Him? What a cost it is to forsake all and follow Him.

Now Levi throws a party, verse 29. I like this. And if anyone could throw a party it was a tax collector. He had a big house, a big crowd, all these tax-collector friends. In fact, the only friends a tax collector had were other tax collectors; no one else would go to his house. Except Jesus.

So Jesus takes His disciples, where all these publicans are hangin' out. Verse 29, "Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house." That means this was a huge bash, a big party. Levi had a big house. "And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them." So Jesus went to the party.

Another observation I had was that Jesus never turned down an invitation to dinner. Neither do I. So Jesus goes to Matthew's house and there is a big party there. But the scribes and the Pharisees are not happy that Jesus and His disciples were there.

Why did Levi throw this party? To celebrate his new life. Salvation is something worth celebrating. It's more important than your wedding, than graduation from college. It's celebrating the new life you have in Jesus. And it is to honor Christ out of a heart of appreciation. And it's also so Levi could introduce his friends to Jesus. This is number one on his list. "I want my publican friends to meet Jesus, who has changed my life!"

I've discovered that many times new Christians are the ones who bring the unsaved. It's

because after you've walked with the Lord for many years, you lose contact with sinners. Maybe you have them on the job and in your neighborhood, but you lose contact with them, because you just hang out with other Christians.

So my encouragement is if you are a new believer, "strike while the iron's hot." Before your unsaved friends abandon you, forsake you or won't talk to you, reach out to them. When I got saved my friends would still come around. But when they realized I was a Christian, or "Jesus Freak" back then, they didn't want to come around me anymore. So we need to reach out to the people around us while we can do that. Reach out and share the love of Christ.

Now notice the criticism and conflict, verse 30. "And the scribes and the Pharisees complained..." or "murmured" "...against His disciples..." not going directly to Jesus "...saying, 'Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'"

I want you to notice the questions marks. There will be two of them. The first is, "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" In the Jewish mind, eating with a Gentile meant you become one with them, so they wouldn't eat with Gentiles. So for the religious establishment, eating and drinking with sinners was dangerous, because you became one with them, even though that's not what the Bible teaches. So Jesus ate and drank with these publicans, who were classified as sinners because they were worldly and ungodly. Jesus gladly went to the party, where He is brought into conflict with the religious establishment.

What were the scribes and Pharisees doing here at the party? We used to say, "They were sin-sniffin' and flesh-findin'." Later on when Jesus was walking through the wheat fields, they were hiding in the wheat spying on Him! So everywhere He went they were looking for Jesus to do something they could criticize.

This is what a legalist does. They come to Christians gatherings, to Christian fellowships, and they say, "Look what she's wearing! Look at that! Look at this!" They get critical, fault-finding and judgmental toward us.

The scribes and Pharisees said, "Why do You eat and drink with these sinners?" In their view, Jesus and His disciples had defiled themselves by consorting with sinners. They were sadly unaware of the fact that they were sinners themselves and in need of God's grace and forgiveness. Someone said, "Religious observance of rites and rituals without love and mercy for needy sinners is a false religion."

And we as a church, Revival Christian Fellowship, can get so comfortable with our Christian friends that we can get the mentality, "Us four, no more, shut the door." We can freak out and say, "Oh, did you see what that person was wearing to church?!" God looks at the heart and not at their clothes.

When I first got saved, I worked for a few months for Campus Crusade for Christ. They kept thinking, When's he going to get saved?! They were praying for my salvation, and I was already saved. They thought I wasn't, because I had long hair and a beard. I said, "I look more like

Jesus than you do! What are you talking about?!" So we judge people by their clothes or the length of their hair back in the '70s rather than looking at their heart.

So the scribes and Pharisees became critical of Jesus. They were out of accord or harmony with the very heart of God. May that never be said of us!

The 18th century church in England became very selective on who could attend the church. Only the high society, the "upper crust," was allowed to come to church. The families of wealth and nobility would buy their own pew, and only that family could sit there. The people of lower class had to enter the church through a separate door and sit at the back of the church on wooden benches with no backs or padding.

So God raised up John Wesley, who went to the streets and the fields to preach to those who needed Christ. He started the Methodist Church this way. But then 100 years later, when the Methodists became very legalistic and ritualistic, God raised up William Booth, who then started The Salvation Army. Booth went out into the streets and kind of blew the doors off the church by bringing "street people" into the church and putting them in the owned pews. Booth was getting "new wineskins" for the "new wine" of the work God was doing at that time.

The second division of our text is in verses 31-39. This is the sermon from the conflict or Jesus' message that came out of the conflict. So Jesus heals or does some miracle, then comes a conflict and from that conflict comes the sermon.

Jesus used the questions from His critics to explain His mission, His methods and His motives. He does that by giving two pictures and a parable. The two pictures show why He came and who He is. And He gave a parable that has two parts.

The first picture is that of a physician; He came for those who are sick, verses 31-32. Jesus answers the question in verse 30 in verse 31. "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.'" This is an answer from logic. It's those who are sick who need the doctor. He is saying, "I'm the physician, they are sick and it only makes sense that sick people need the doctor." Then He says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Jesus saw Levi and his friends as spiritually "sick." They were patients who needed the help of a physician. The scribes and Pharisees were quick to diagnose others but were blind to their own sinful condition.

The prodigal son, in Luke 15, "wasted his possessions with prodigal living" (Luke 15:13). It was reckless, wasteful, sinful behavior. But he repented, saw his need and came back to his father. The elder brother is also in the story. This parable is really about the elder brother. He's a prodigal too.

The parable of the prodigal son was given because Jesus ate and drank and hung out with sinners. Jesus told them, "When you lose a coin and then find it, you rejoice" (Luke 15:9).

When you lose a sheep and find it, you rejoice (Luke 15:6). So when you lose a son and find him, you rejoice (Luke 15:32).

So when the older brother came home, a party was going on for his younger brother. People were dancing, eating and having fun. The sinful brother had a new ring on, a beautiful coat and new sandals on. The older brother had been working hard in the field and had never forsaken the father. So he stayed outside, refusing to go in to the party for his younger brother. He was angry. The father then came outside to the older brother to plead with him to come in, when the older brother unloaded on his father. "I have been serving you...and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends" (Luke 15:29). All the poison in his heart came pouring out. The father said, "All that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found" (Luke 15:31-32). The father told him not to have this attitude.

There are sins of the flesh, which we see in the younger brother. And there are sins of the spirit, which we see in the older brother. You can go to church, you can be religious, you can observe rites and rituals but have a heart that is far from God. "The Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). "The proud He knows from afar" (Psalm 138:6). So there are sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit. The Pharisees and scribes in our text were guilty of sins of the spirit. Their hearts were not right with God.

So Jesus' answer, in verse 31, was logical; doctors are for sick people. And the Lord's answer was also from Scripture. In Matthew 9:13, Jesus quoted this passage and said, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." That's from Hosea 6:6. Luke does not record that Jesus said this, but Matthew does. Then Jesus said, "For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Jesus is the great physician. He comes to us in our need, He makes a perfect diagnosis and He provides the complete cure, which is the Cross. Wouldn't it be great if a doctor came to you? Remember when doctors used to come to your house? That was awesome! Now you have to go to their office, wait six hours to be called in, wait another hour before they spend five minutes with you, then charge you and even misdiagnose you.

Wouldn't it be great for a doctor to come to you, properly diagnose you, give you the cure and doesn't even charge you?! That's awesome! That's my kind of doctor. So Jesus died on the Cross, paid the penalty for our sin knowing we are sin-sick souls and He saves us by His grace. How marvelous that is! He is the great physician.

Someone said, "The first link between my soul and Christ is not my goodness but my badness, not my merit but my misery, not my standing but my falling, not my riches but my poverty." I like that. So you come "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3); they need the physician.

The second picture is Jesus as the bridegroom, verses 33-35. It's a wedding where we

celebrate. "Then they said to Him, 'Why do the disciples of John...' John the Baptist "...fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?'" They're having too much fun! You're not supposed to have fun. You're not supposed to eat and drink. "And He said to them, 'Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?'" No! This is the image of a wedding feast. "But the days will come when the bridegroom..." referring to Christ "...will be taken away from them..." at His death and burial "... then they will fast in those days."

So Jesus is the physician, we're sick and He comes to heal us. Jesus is the bridegroom, we're at a wedding and we eat and celebrate. I can't tell you over the years how many times I've been criticized for using humor in sermons. A woman came up to me one time very angry. "You give jokes while you preach!"

I said, "If you knew what I held back, you'd give me credit. You think that's bad; I'm holdin' back, lady."

"Well, Christians aren't supposed to have fun!" She thought we were to be baptized in lemon juice. "Wipe the smile off your face! You're in church right now! Don't laugh; God frowns on that." That was her attitude.

No. That's insane. The Christian life is not a funeral fast; it's a wedding feast. Now fasting is fine; if you want to fast, then fast. But nowhere in the New Testament are we commanded to fast. Fasting is mentioned. It is assumed we will. But it isn't commanded; there are no imperatives about fasting.

In the Old Testament in Leviticus 16, there is only one day a year that the Jews were commanded to fast, and that's the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. But the Pharisees fasted twice a week and gave tithes of all they possess. They thought they were so spiritual. "Look at how spiritual I am! How often do you fast?" They thought they were better than others.

So don't take what is a required law in the Bible and put it on someone else, because they don't keep your standards. You think you'd be more spiritual if you fast? Not necessarily so. Jesus said, "When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance...Wash your face" (Matthew 6:16-17). And I would add, don't go to a Christian potluck. You walk around and smell the food. You are asked, "Aren't you going to eat?"

"No; I'm fasting."

"Well, I'm not. Get out of the way. I want the mashed potatoes." That's the way I'd feel at a potluck.

Fasting is a legitimate discipline, but it has to be led by the Spirit. It has to be because you're earnestly for God. It doesn't win you "brownie points" with God. And it doesn't obligate God to do what you want Him to do. That can never happen. Fasting is a denial of the flesh to strengthen your spiritual life. It has benefit and value.

I've never been able to fast. When I fast, I get visions but they're not from God. Flying hamburgers. French fries in the sky.

But the scribes and Pharisees got upset that Jesus and the disciples were having fun. They thought you shouldn't do that. The problem in the church is that those with less liberty become critical of those with greater liberty.

I heard a true story of a pastor back East, who had a very legalistic church. They viewed Sunday as the Sabbath, so they couldn't have fun. It was a cold, winter day, there was a snow storm and all the streets iced up. So the pastor had to put on ice skates and skate to church in order to get there. When the elders found out, they were upset and said to the pastor, "You can't skate on the Sabbath!"

He said to them, "That's the only way I could get to the church service."

So they said, "Well, I guess that's okay, as long as you didn't enjoy it."

He said, "No; I was miserable the whole way." That's the way some people are today: no joy in the Christian life.

The third thing Jesus did was give the scribes and Pharisees a parable, verses 36-39. There were two pictures in this parable. One was about a new patch on an old garment. The other was about new wine in an old wineskin. "Then He spoke a parable to them: 'No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old.'"

"And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine..." which is what Jesus was bringing "...must be put into new wineskins..." not the old wineskins of Jewish legalism "...and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine..." Jesus indicting the scribes and Pharisees "...immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better.'"" So the scribes and Pharisees cater to their religious rites and rituals; they don't want the "new wine" of God's grace.

What is this "new patch on an old garment"? Jesus is saying that if you have an old piece of clothing with a tear in it and you take a patch from a new piece of cloth and sew it to the old garment, when you wash the garment, the new patch will shrink (the old has already shrunk) and the new patch will tear away from the old garment and ruin it.

Jesus did not come to patch up the old; He came to give us the new. He didn't come to reform Judaism and make us legalistic; He came to bring in the New Covenant of grace.

What about the "new wine" and the "old wineskins"? They didn't have bottles and glass at that time and Thermoses like we have today. The skin of a goat would become the leather of a wineskin. The wine in the wineskin would ferment, and the wineskin would stretch and expand, because it was elastic. But once the wineskin was old, it became ridged and brittle. And if you

poured new wine into this old wineskin, the fermentation would create expansion and the wineskin would burst because it was brittle. So new wine must be put in new wineskins.

Jesus didn't come to patch up Judaism, and He didn't come to pour new wine into old wineskins. We must have new wineskins. So Judaism was going away, and Christianity was coming in.

When Jesus died on the Cross and the veil in the Temple was ripped from top to bottom, God was saying that the way was now made by grace. The entire book of Hebrews is about this. Jesus is a better priest, He has a better covenant, He has a better temple, He is better than angels, He is better than the old.

If anyone "drank" the old rites and rituals, they say they don't really want the new, because they're self-righteous and don't see their need for God. Someone said it like this: "Men are often more impressed with the antiquity of a religious practice than with its validity."

So Jesus came, verse 32, "to call...sinners to repentance." He came to heal our sin-sick souls. He came to bring us joy and liberty when He sets us free. And He came to bring us new life.

Nicodemus, who was a religious Jew, came to Jesus in John 3. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be "born again" (John 3:3). It's not that they didn't need a physician; it's that they didn't realize they were sick.

So what a blessing that God allows you to see your sin-sick soul! Then you cry out to Him for forgiveness, and you experience the joy of sins forgiven.

And we also learned from the story that we shouldn't be afraid to have contact with sinners. Don't be afraid to go to your heathen neighbor's house and have dinner with them. Or have them in your home. Share the love of Christ.