

## **Jesus, Friend of Sinners**

### **Luke 5:27-32**

We are still in what I would call the introduction phase of our extended study in the Gospel of Luke, and the story that is the foundation for our time this morning is typical of many that we will see as we work our way through this Gospel over the next few months. We will find this story to be typical in that in what seems to be a pretty ordinary event, at least as we look at it, Jesus finds multiple levels in which to challenge and teach us. Typical in that we are invited, really more compelled than invited, to find a place for ourselves in the story. And typical in that the lessons to be learned from the story include things that are as obvious as the noses on our faces, but we may overlook them just as easily as we overlook our own noses.

Let's see if we can lose ourselves in this story and find truth for ourselves in here.

### **READ Luke 5:27-32**

We find this event in the chronology of the ministry of Jesus near the beginning. As Luke puts the narrative together, we see that Jesus had already generated some substantial notoriety, at least in the region around Nazareth and Capernaum, on the northwestern corner of the Sea of Galilee. He had claimed the fulfillment of an important prophesy about the Messiah for Himself in what Luke records as His first sermon, had cast out demons, healed crowds of sick people, and started gathering His core group of disciples. In what seems like a sequence of very positive events for the people, Jesus got the attention of the keepers of the status quo – the Pharisees – who were suddenly everywhere Jesus was. Now I don't mean any offense to owners of Chihuahuas, but the Pharisees and teachers of the law seem like a whole pack of the little things, circling and yapping and nipping at His heels. Jesus threw the pack a juicy piece of meat when He sat down to eat with Levi and his friends.

In our modern terminology, we would describe the Roman tax collection system as having been out-sourced. The tax collectors were local entrepreneurs, who paid the taxes assigned for their particular district in advance, and then set about collecting from the population. The chief tax collectors, like Zaccheaus who we will meet in chapter 19,

would have had some number of employees or subcontractors like Levi working for them. The position held by Levi would have been something like a toll booth worker, sitting at a place where goods or services were being transported or sold and collecting whatever tax was due on the transaction. Levi was not likely one of the wealthy of the tax collectors – not a chief. Nevertheless, tax collectors were outside of the mainstream of Jewish society and religious life, because they were serving the ambitions of the Roman empire and because of their association with Roman money, which bore the likeness of the Emperor, who had deemed himself worthy of worship. In the structure of Jewish society, tax collectors were in the same class as robbers and murderers. Jesus looked this one in the eye, said “Follow me”, and Levi, who we know as Matthew, got up, left everything and followed Him.

“Left everything” is important here. “Left everything” meant that Matthew abandoned his post, and there was no turning back. “Left everything” for Matthew included using whatever resources he had to invite his old friends to experience Jesus. This is the transformation that Paul would talk about in his letter to the Romans – transformation from slaves to sin into slaves to God.

The banquet that Matthew organized for his old friends, the tax collectors and sinners, and his new friends, Jesus and the disciples, was scandalous. The Chihuahua pack was in a frenzy. How could this man Jesus, who was claiming to be something really special in the Jewish religious system, sit at the table with all those unclean people? He sure was not going to curry favor with the Pharisees and teachers of the law doing stuff like that. We don’t know who was on Matthew’s invitation list, but we can imagine that it would have included a laundry list of categories of people who had been excluded from the mainstream of society like the tax collectors.

The Pharisees don’t challenge Jesus directly here – they complain to the disciples. That would have been an interesting scene in itself. The Pharisees would not have dared to enter Matthew’s house themselves, so they must have waited outside, maybe getting one of the disciples’ attention like a guy selling stolen watches from under his overcoat: “Pssst. Pssst. Hey, buddy! What do you people think you are doing in there?” Jesus

responds for them, but the disciples must have realized that they were accomplices to the scandal. They were all Jews, too, and knew the rules about association with unclean people. Yet they were so drawn to Jesus, so bound to Him in ways that they had not yet begun to understand, that they crossed the line with Jesus and took their place at Matthew's table. Jesus responds directly to the Pharisees with a description of His ministry that should be our description of ministry – calling people to right relationship with God.

Nearly 1600 years later, the Italian painter Paulo Veronese was commissioned to paint a depiction of the Last Supper to replace a work by Titian that had been destroyed in a fire. Veronese's vision of the event was as scandalous as Matthew's feast. The Inquisition was in full flower, as the official church struggled to regain control 50 or so years after Martin Luther sparked the Reformation with the publication of his "95 Theses". The transcript of Veronese's trial by the Inquisition is almost comical, as the artist and the interrogators danced. The inquisitors could not allow the artist to show people that the Pharisees would have tagged as "unclean" in the same space as Jesus at the Last Supper. Never mind that Scripture does not include the guest list for the Last Supper; why wouldn't other followers of Jesus who were in Jerusalem for the Passover have been there? After all, Jesus had well established by then that He would eat with anybody. But to avoid punishment, maybe execution, Veronese pled guilty and agreed to alter the painting to take out the offensive elements. He never actually did any such thing. Instead, Veronese simply changed the name of the painting to "Feast in the House of Levi", an event in which it was safe to leave in the tax collectors, sinners, and dogs – presumably even Germans. We are still free to see it as the Last Supper.

Are we challenged here? Are we bound tightly enough to the example of Jesus that we actively, personally seek out people to call to Him? Are we bound tightly enough to the example of Jesus to go to the feast in the house of Levi with all those sinners? Where are we in this story?

We would like to say that it is easy for us to distance ourselves from the Pharisees, but have we ever acted – or spoke or thought – in a way that excluded anyone from the

good news of the Gospel? Not just someone we know personally, but whole categories of people that do not think or talk or dress or worship like us. Have we ever sought justification for an exclusion like that in a Scripturally-based position on some issue? That's Pharisaic legalism, not grace. We would like to say that we would be in the place of one of the disciples, but have we "left everything" to follow Jesus? That does not just mean leaving our job or family or social position – it means leaving behind the life and the priorities that we cling to, that feel so comfortable, that we think of as a good life but that keeps us from realizing the excellent life that God has made for us and calls us to claim. Where we should find ourselves is among Matthew's friends at the table – new friends of Jesus.

Jesus said that He did not come to call the righteous. Great for us, because righteous means perfect in relationship with God, and there is no one righteous or good in that definition but Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus identifies me and you here as people that He calls to repentance and right relationship with Him. Is that not the greatest thing? The voice of Almighty God, Incarnate in Jesus Christ, manifest in the Holy Spirit, calls me, calls you, calls all of us, collectively and personally to His table – to the feast of love and mercy and forgiveness and grace that only God can prepare. Hear your invitation to the feast, and pull up a chair.

Amen and amen.