

Encountering Jesus

Luke 5.27-32

The 5th Encounter: Jesus: “friend of sinners”

Luke 5.27-32

Matthew 9.9-13

Mark 2.13-17

“Follow me.”

Later, as Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth. “Follow me and be my disciple,” Jesus said to him. So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him. (Luke 5:27-28)

- ▶ This is the second time in Luke's account that Jesus calls someone to follow him; in the first, it was Simon and his brother who were career fishermen. In both accounts, the response to Jesus' invitation is the same: immediately they left everything to follow Jesus!

- ▶ Levi son of Alphaeus: only Mark and Luke use the name “Levi.” Many Jewish people were known by more than one name (e.g. Simon Peter). In Matthew’s account, he refers to himself as he is known (“Matthew”) in the various lists of the twelve disciples (Matthew 10.3; Mark 3.18; Luke 6.14; Acts 1.13).
- ▶ Given the greater detail and emphasis that Mark and Luke give to these accounts, they no doubt want their readers to recognize the extraordinary work of grace that is transpiring here.

- ▶ Levi Matthew, son of Alphaeus, was a tax collector—
 - ▶ Tax collectors working in the service of the Roman Empire would have been as loathed as were collaborators in Nazi-occupied territories during World War II or present-day Palestinian informants working for Israel.
 - ▶ A Jew who collected taxes was disqualified as a judge or witness, expelled from the synagogue, and a source of unending shame to his family.

- ▶ Because their work required interaction with Gentiles, tax collectors were considered unclean—just like the leper who approached Jesus.
- ▶ Religious teachers decreed that Jews could lie with impunity when dealing with tax collectors.
- ▶ Many considered tax collecting for the Romans an act of treason to God. This would have been the view of one of Jesus' disciples, Simon the Zealot.

This was the man Jesus approached and invited, “Follow me.”

▶ This is an encounter that deeply resonates the words of the Apostle Paul who himself was a blasphemer and a violent man, “the worst of sinners” (1 Timothy 1.13-16)—

... but where sin increased, grace was present in greater abundance, so that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5.20-21)

▶ Levi, an exceptionally wealthy man, instantly recognized that the grace and call of Jesus was worth more than everything he possessed—

So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.

What is Jesus worth to you?

“Simply put, if you’re not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can’t be my disciple.” (Luke 14.33 MSG)

- ▶ Following Jesus doesn’t always mean the loss of everything—although it might, and for some it will. But it does always require the giving up of whatever is the driving ambition of our lives. For Levi, it was his career with its future of financial success and sufficiency. And yet for Matthew, it was a no-brainer: he instinctively and immediately understood the surpassing worth of leaving everything else to follow Jesus.

▶ The Apostle Paul, arguably one of the most highly educated and influential men of his era, when he encountered Jesus, immediately responded as Levi and Simon. Years later, he wrote this autobiographical testimony:

I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. (Philippians 3.7-9 NLT)

- ▶ We erroneously believe that God is “added value” to our lives: we add him to everything else that is important to us and he brings blessing, or added value — affirmation, success, a better life. But the reality is that when that is what we believe, we are not following Jesus; we are not his disciple and he is not our Lord.

▶ In Luke 14, Jesus is speaking to a large crowd about what it really means to follow him. He summarizes all that he has said with this statement:

“So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.” (Luke 14.33)

The Greek word “apotasso” comes from two words: *apo*, from; *tasso*, to place in order. It literally means “goodbye”—to take leave of, dismiss, renounce. It conveys the principle of setting something aside to prevent it from becoming a hinderance or gaining excessive control.

- ▶ Repeatedly throughout the New Testament we see these truths about following Jesus:
 - (1) An encounter with Jesus always confronts us with what is really most important to us.
 - (2) A true follower of Jesus will be *willing* to give up anything and everything to follow Jesus.
 - (3) A true follower of Jesus embeds this principle in his life as a matter of practice, daily orienting his life around Jesus and setting aside anything that might become a hinderance or gain excessive control of time, focus, and ambition.

- ▶ The truth is that until I give up, dispose of and disassociate myself from what matters most to me, something else matters more to me than Jesus — and that is what I am following.

“This is my story . . .”

Later, Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. (There were many people of this kind among Jesus' followers.) But when the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him eating with tax collectors and other sinners, they asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with such scum?” (Mark 2.15-16)

- ▶ For Levi, encountering Jesus and leaving his career to following Jesus was so significant that he hosted a big celebration and invited “many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners” to hear his testimony and meet Jesus for themselves.

▶ Levi's story, and the ultimate purpose for which Jesus calls us to follow him and become his disciples—

“Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!”

means that we need to ask ourselves some basic questions:

- (1) What do I talk about? How much do I talk about Jesus?
- (2) Do I look for opportunities, in the daily context of my life (school, work, shopping) to “fish” for people?
- (3) How often do I invite someone to a place where they can encounter Jesus and his grace?

In the U.S., most followers of Jesus rarely talk about God, faith, religion, or spirituality. A recent study by Barna Group, a church research firm, shows that a good three-quarters of Christians in the U.S. have fewer than 10 spiritual conversations a year. That means most of us talk about topics of faith less than once a month.

—*Engaging in Spiritual Conversations*, THRED

Who is at your table?

[Jesus] turned to his host. “When you put on a luncheon or a banquet,” he said, “don’t invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you.” (Luke 14.12-14)

- ▶ Jesus was a man of hospitality; the Gospels are prolific with stories of Jesus creating opportunities for people to encounter him at the dinner table. Regardless of whose table it was, there were always people there who were outsiders (cf. Luke 7.36-50).

▶ Luke tells us that many disreputable sinners could be found following Jesus and Jesus himself acknowledged his reputation as a “friend of sinners”—

“The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, ‘He’s a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!’ But wisdom is shown to be right by the lives of those who follow it.” (Luke 7:34-35)

▶ Jesus understood the attraction of a party and the significance of hospitality to influence relationships and create opportunities for witness—and he made prolific use of these platforms.

▶ When we look at Jesus' "table theology" and see his practice of hospitality, we need to consider:

If Jesus were at our table or made use of our house, who would be there? Only those who look like us? same race and ethnicity? same background and values?

▶ The reality is that Jesus would populate our gatherings and events with outsiders—the poor, naked, blind, crippled, hungry, homeless. He might even show up with them at our door just to see whether they would be welcome at our table.

- ▶ If we seriously and honestly consider the words of Jesus, then the reality is that—
 - (1) If we are comfortable that everyone at our table is just like us, Jesus probably would not stay. He came to seek and to save the outsiders.
 - (2) If everyone in our church is just like us, we can be sure of this: Jesus won't make it his home church. He wants his house to be a place for all nations (Isaiah 56.7).
 - (3) Jesus wants to find at our tables —and in our churches— more than those who are “like” us. “Where are the sinners?”

Ultimate purpose—

When Jesus heard this, he said, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do.” Then he added, “Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.’ For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.” (Matthew 9:12-13)

- ▶ Church people can be some of the most exclusive, judgmental people. When the Pharisees, the “churchiest” people in Jesus’ era, saw him at Levi’s celebration, their reaction was utterly devoid of grace: “Why does he eat with such scum?”

▶ Jesus did not attend any occasion just to enjoy himself; it was always with his ultimate purpose in mind. In his response to the Pharisees, Matthew in his account tells us that Jesus quoted the prophet Hosea and told the Pharisees to go and learn this truth:

God is not interested in how “churchy” we look; He wants to see us bringing His mercy to sinners.

- ▶ The attitude of the Pharisees left these tax collectors and sinners far from God; they made no effort to go to them and in fact, would distinguish themselves from such people as did the Pharisee praying in the Temple. “I thank you, O God, that I am not like this tax collector” (Luke 18.10-11).

- ▶ Jesus came to bring those who were far away near while the Pharisees were content to let them die in their sins; their attitude showed that they lacked the heart of God: compassion that seeks out those who are lost so that they can be reconciled to God. “Go and learn this” is a scaring rebuke of Jesus to the most religious people of that era. Jesus is saying to them, “You don’t know or understand the heart of God.”

- ▶ Jesus came as the Physician of souls; would he then surround himself with the healthy? He came to seek and save those who are lost; would he content himself with only the “found”?
- ▶ The bottom line for us is this:
If our way of doing God’s work isn’t reaching out to sinners, if it isn’t bringing healing to sin-sick souls, it isn’t the way of Jesus.

- ▶ In claiming to follow Jesus, is he really the ambition of our lives?
- ▶ Do we really follow his pattern of life and align the purpose of our lives with his?
- ▶ Are we in training to become physicians of the soul?
- ▶ Do we seek opportunities and create events to give people the opportunity to encounter Jesus?
- ▶ Who is at our table? Who is in our church?