

Sunday, March 5, 2023 | Onward

Week 8 | Luke 5:27-32 | "The First Social Outcast of Jesus"

On January 1, Pastor Bob kicked off the first sermon series of 2023 entitled "Onward." This series will explore the so-called "firsts" of Jesus' life and how he pressed *onward* into new and unexplored territories. And Jesus' first words tell us that wherever we are and whatever we're doing, we ought to "be about [our] Father's business."

In the second week, we moved from Jesus' *first words* to the *first steps* of his earthly ministry. As we read, God even showed up to mark that magnanimous moment by declaring to all that Jesus was his actual "Son." And just so that Luke's readers do not miss the importance of that declaration, he immediately provides a lineage that proves that Jesus was, in fact, directly descended from God and not only Adam. Through his *mother's* side, Jesus identifies with the *human* race. But through his *Father's* side, Jesus identifies with the *divine* race. And by being the true heir of God, Jesus can transform sons and daughters of Adam into sons and daughters of God.

We discussed Jesus' first recorded run-in with temptation in the third week. And this temptation is a result of Jesus being declared God's Son. A claim of that magnitude had to be real-world tested. And, as we saw, Satan didn't pull any punches. He tempted the Lord to turn stone into bread, to worship him, and to cast himself down from a lofty height. Ultimately, Jesus did not succumb to the Devil. And so, when the Son of God overcame temptation, he made temptation something to be overcome. What does that mean for us? Through the Messiah's victory, we can be victorious over temptation.

In the fourth week, we unpacked Jesus' first sermon. In that message, the Lord laid out his life's purpose: *he is the bringer of "good news."* He came to fulfill God's promises and liberate God's people. And while his words were initially met with overwhelming enthusiasm, the Lord was driven from his hometown and nearly thrown off a cliff. Why? Jesus revealed that the "good news" wasn't only for his friends but also for their enemies, which proved too much for them to swallow. And so, a congregation that had just applauded Jesus nearly killed him. Ultimately, Jesus never did do a great work in his own hometown. And though that is sad, their failings taught us a valuable lesson: **prejudice keeps us from experiencing the wonders of God.** If we think God has only come for "our camp," we can rest assured he will leave us behind and find those who love the stranger as much as the friend.

In the fifth week, we studied Jesus' first few miracles. We saw him not only cast out demons but heal the diseased. And those demonstrations of power further legitimized Jesus' claims and

began establishing his authority in the people's consciousness. But, as Jesus pointed out, he did not come merely to do good works; he was a preacher of the good news. Thus, the Lord's miracles were always subordinate to his message.

Two weeks ago, we were introduced to the first disciples of Jesus. Peter, Andrews, James, and John had an interaction with the Lord on the shores of Galilee that forever changed the trajectory of their life. Peter, particularly, was so moved that he ended up leaving the biggest catch of our life behind to follow Jesus. Why? Because he got a glimpse of who the Lord was. And **the greater our knowledge of Jesus, the greater our devotion to Jesus will be.**

Last week, we explored the first theological *controversy* of Jesus. And this controversy arose because Jesus told a paralytic man that his sins were forgiven. This upsets the religious leaders. They rightly countered that only God can forgive sins. Jesus then proves he had the authority to forgive by healing the man of his paralysis. That miracle became an outward demonstration of an inward transformation. And that illustrates a vital characteristic of the Lord's ministry: **Social and spiritual relationships are repaired through Jesus Christ.**

Today, we'll be exploring the first *social* outcast of Jesus. And while it is true that Jesus had interactions with several outsiders already (i.e., possessed, leprous, paralyzed, etc.), Levi will be the first to follow the Lord who was, from a societal standpoint, considered to be a sinner, bar none. This wasn't because he had some debilitating disease that rendered him ceremonially unclean, like the leper, but because of Levi's profession; he was a *tax collector*. Just like today, the tax man was hated in the first century. And though there are various reasons why they were so disliked (some valid, some not), the primary reason was that they were regarded as *traitors*. Yet, despite Levi's reputation, we'll see Jesus *intentionally* seeking him out and even calling him, of all people, to be one of his disciples.

Jesus, as usual, is the centerpiece of today's scene. Thus, I want you to notice three actions that illustrate the Lord's desire to intentionally engage with outcasts:

i. Jesus looks for the outsider (5:12-16).

READ: Luke 5:27-28 (ESV)

²⁷ After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." ²⁸ And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

The word translated as "saw" is the Greek word **θεάομαι** (*thay-ah-o-mai*), and it refers to more than just observing or seeing. It indicates a looking that is intentional, careful, and thoughtful.¹ Jesus didn't chance upon Levi this day; he went *searching* for him. It was no coincidence that the Lord passed by the tax booth.² This meeting was the most important appointment on Jesus' agenda.

This sounds awesome, but Jesus' actions are even more remarkable when we realize he came looking for a "tax collector." Those who collected taxes in the first century were considered collaborators, extortioners, and traitors.³ Jewish texts from this time lump tax collectors with "thieves and murders."⁴ It is tough to overemphasize how hated these people were in the first century.

"Levi" only shows up here and in Mark's retelling of this event (cf. Mar. 2:14). Later, Luke will give us an official list of the twelve disciples in which "Levi" does not appear (cf. Lu. 6:12-16). This has led some to believe this man isn't among the twelve. However, in Matthew, he says one of the twelve was called "Matthew the tax collector" (cf. Matt. 10:3). This means that Levi=Matthew. It was common for people to have multiple names at this time (Simon=Peter, Thomas=Dydimus, etc.; cf. Ac. 1:23; 4:36; 12:25; 13:9).

So, here we have Jesus coming for Levi, who was a tax collector. He would've been hated by everyone and likely avoided by all. Yet, the Lord specifically seeks him out and says to him: "Follow me." We're not told that Jesus had any other encounters with Levi before this moment. Though we can safely assume, given Jesus' travels, he had passed by this customs checkpoint many times. But whether they were familiar with one another or not, Jesus called Levi to follow, and Levi obeyed. Luke tells us he left "everything...and followed him." At this moment, a social pariah becomes a devoted follower of Jesus. And it could be argued that Levi's "leaving everything" cost him more than Peter, Andrew, James, and John's "leaving everything" (cf. Lu. 5:11). Fishermen could fish again should this whole disciple thing not work out. But Levi, a tax collector, could not get his job back. This man put his entire future in Jesus' hands.

Jesus does not call the qualified; he qualifies the called. You may not feel worthy. You may have even been told by someone that you aren't worthy. And, as I'll explain more in a moment,

¹ Garland, David E., *Luke*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan 2011), p. 238.

² Bock, Darrell L., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 1994), p. 492.

³ Morris, Leon, *Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 139.

⁴ Edwards, James R., *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), p. 112.

this is likely true as no one is truly worthy. Yet, despite our unworthiness, Jesus calls us to follow him. His calling is more important than our reputation.

ii. Jesus dines with the outsider (5:17-26).

READ: Luke 5:29 (ESV)

²⁹ And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

After becoming a disciple of Jesus, what is Levi's first act? He throws a party. Feasts were massive undertakings that would've cost a great deal. That Levi was able to do this implies he was wealthy. When he "left everything," he renounced his former life but kept the stuff he had already accumulated. We see this throughout the Gospels, where people who encounter Jesus repurpose their resources to serve God. It also illustrates that discipleship leads to feasting and joy. The disciples may have given up their lives to follow Jesus, but in doing so, they discovered what it means to truly live.

Levi likely didn't have friends of the "reputable" sort. Being a tax collector, the respectable crowd would've kept their distance. As such, Levi's friends would've been people he associated with the most: other tax collectors. And so, who do we find that Levi invited to this party? Pharisees will call them "tax collectors and sinners." Levi wanted his friends (people who would've been hated as much as him) to meet Jesus. As J. C. Ryle put it, "A converted man will not wish to go to heaven alone."

Luke tells us that Jesus accepted this offer and was found "reclining at the table with them." The Lord took this opportunity to connect with a segment of society that had been ostracized by the religious elites. We'll see why that is in the moment, but I want you to notice that the Lord was not afraid to associate with the "wrong crowd." In fact, to Jesus, the "wrong crowd" was precisely the "right crowd" he wanted to associate with. For it was to those whose needs were great that the Messiah came.

iii. Jesus confronts the "insiders" (5:17-26).

READ: Luke 5:30-32 (ESV)

³⁰ And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" ³¹ And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

The Pharisees and their scribes have already been introduced in Luke's account. They were upset by Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness for the paralytic man (cf. Lu. 5:20-26). Now they're not upset about what Jesus said; they are upset about something Jesus ***did***.

But, instead of going straight to Jesus, the religious leaders go to his disciples. When you're too intimidated by a leader, the cowardly attack a leader's followers. So, they asked the disciples why they were eating and drinking "with tax collectors and sinners?" It wasn't the act of feasting they were attacking, though they will take issue with that too (cf. Lu. 5:33-39). Instead, they were attacking Jesus' company. The Lord dining with "tax collectors and sinners" rendered him unclean as the company he kept was not devout followers of the law. They did not abide by the O.T. commandments. And, here's the thing, they were likely ***correct***. While it is hard to precisely identify who the "sinners" were, we know from history that tax collectors were indeed some of the most despicable human beings on the planet. One commentator said the best modern-day comparison would be that they were "pimps and informants."⁵ And here was Jesus, eating with them?!

How could he do this? Because he did not only come to eat and fellowship with sinners but to call them to ***repentance***. Jesus explains, "“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***.” Jesus eats with sinners to turn them into saints. He affirms their existence without affirming their lifestyle. We sometimes get that backward. But Jesus always loved the sinner and hated the sin.

So, what's the takeaway?

It takes an ***open door*** to create ***open hearts***.⁶

The Book of Acts is about this very thing.

READ: Acts 11:1-18 (ESV)

¹ Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁵ Green, Joel B., *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), p. 246.

⁶ Bock (1994), p. 500.

⁴ But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.'

¹⁰ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹ And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'

¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" ¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

So, what's the takeaway?

It takes an **open door** to create **open hearts**.⁷

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Bock (1994), p. 500.

Video Description

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: