Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Jesus Came to Call and to Save Sinners
Scripture: Luke 5:27-32
Code: 42-67

I know that you're enjoying our study of the gospel of Luke. I invite you to turn, this morning, to chapter 5 in Luke's wonderful gospel, the account of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. I hear such wonderful response, feedback from our congregation with regard to our study of Luke and I know it's profoundly impacting all of our lives. If you think it's a blessing to you, and you only hear an hour a week, think of what a blessing it is to me, takes me about 15 hours of preparation. I am profoundly, profoundly grateful for the study of this gospel because it is an unceasing encounter with the living Christ and that is a purifying and exhilarating and encouraging communion.

We see Him again in our text, chapter 5 verses 27 to 32. "And after that, He went out and noticed a tax gatherer named Levi sitting in the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' And he left everything behind and rose and began to follow Him. And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house and there was a great crowd of tax gatherers and other people who were reclining at the table with them, and the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples saying, 'Why do You eat and drink with the tax gatherers and sinners?' And Jesus answered and said to them, 'It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'"

I could pronounce the benediction on that passage. You don't need me. That's clear, isn't it? What a simple, straightforward account. But I have figured out a way to keep you here. Sometimes we find texts that are almost inscrutable, complicated, profound, and sometimes we find texts that are so simple a child can understand. That is one of the joys of exposition. We are where we are because that is the way God has laid it out and He knows and has known that we would be here in this text on this day.

This passage contains one of the most clarifying and defining statements Jesus ever made. In fact, to understand the statement is to grasp the essential uniqueness of Christianity. The statement is in verse 32, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." In that sentence Jesus tells us why there was an incarnation, why He was virgin born, why He lived, why He died, why He rose, why He ascended, why He intercedes. The whole glorious scheme of salvation is summed up really in that statement. He came to call sinners to repentance. The Lord Jesus Christ came to save

the sinners who would repent.

As we go through the life of our Lord Jesus in the gospel of Luke, we are going to come across this matter again and again and again and again because it is at the heart of all gospel ministry to call sinners to repentance. That includes defining men as they must be defined as sinners, measuring them against the law of God by which the Spirit of God can then produce repentance, pointing out the glories of Christ which can elicit by the Spirit faith. And on the basis of that faith and repentance salvation comes. This has always been the theme of true preaching. It is repentance and it is a message directed at sinners.

Jesus was saying what we know, that the Christian faith is not for good people. It's for sinners. The church is not for people who think they're righteous. It's for people who know they're not. You hear that criticism a lot, "Well the church certainly isn't filled with perfect people." True, but at least we know we're not perfect, that's why we're here. This is not a club for the righteous. This is a hospital for the sin sick. We understand that. And have you noticed that the more you grow in Christ, the more you love Him, the more you mature, the more you grasp the great truths of Scripture the more you understand how wretched you are? It is a sign of maturity to be unsettled and distressed about your sinfulness. So we could say that the more mature a congregation is, the more they recognize their sinfulness.

One can't even enter into the kingdom of God without a recognition of sinfulness. This was absolutely foreign to the Jewish establishment at the time of Jesus. Luke makes that very clear at the very beginning of his discussion of the ministry of Jesus back at chapter 4. Look back at verse 17 for a moment. You will remember this dramatic day in the synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus had come to His own synagogue where He grew up with the people that He knew when He was a boy and a young man, probably His extended family was still attending the synagogue, very familiar, very familiar people, familiar place. He went into the synagogue to announce essentially that He was the messianic fulfillment of Isaiah 61. He was the long-awaited Messiah. He was the Savior. And He got up and He picked up the scroll of Isaiah, according to verse 17, and He read from Isaiah that great passage, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden." This was shocking stuff. He went on to give an exposition of that. He began the exposition in verse 21 by starting with these words, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," and then no doubt went on from there to explain that the Messiah had come to bring salvation to people who would be classified as the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed.

And the people sitting in that synagogue that day were offended. They were not the spiritually poor, they were the spiritually elite. They were not prisoners to their sin, they were the righteous. They were not blind to spiritual truth; they were the ones who could see. Nor were they oppressed by guilt. They imagined themselves to have established by their own efforts righteousness with God. They were not the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed and they were so offended at what He said and the way He illustrated it that by the time the service was over, they tried to throw Him off a cliff, kill Him, the offense was so great. They were a congregation of people like the rich young ruler who when told by Jesus that he needed to be honest about his own sin and be willing to sacrifice everything he had, turned his back and walked away. They would not accept the assessment of their condition by the Lord Jesus Christ. They would not acknowledge that they were the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed, spiritually bankrupt with nothing to commend themselves. They were not the poor in spirit. They were not prisoners of sin. They were not blind to spiritual reality. They were not oppressed, downtrodden. They loved to think they were free before men and God. And to say otherwise was dangerous enough that it could cost you your life.

But Jesus says in that verse we read, verse 32, that He can't do anything for people like that. He didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. There never will be salvation, there never will be the forgiveness of sin; there never will be eternal life for anybody who thinks he's righteous. Jesus centered His ministry then on the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed. He centered His ministry on people who understood their true condition, social outcasts, people who didn't live with any illusions, people for whom a deformity or a paralysis or a disease, even leprosy, or a social stigma that put them in the category of outcasts, were much quicker to examine their own hearts honestly than those moving among the religious elite, buying the lie that they were right with God. And so we will see as we go through Luke, Jesus spends His time with the outcasts. He even gained the moniker "the friend of tax gatherers and sinners."

But it was because those people came to grips with their true condition that Jesus could minister to them. They were the sick, who knew they were sick, not only physically but spiritually, and desperately needed the physician. Jesus came then to the repenters. He came to seek and save the lost. And here in another dramatic incident, Luke points up this great theme of saving sinners. In the previous account, verses 17 to 26, you remember, we had the healing of the paralytic. But much more important than the healing was verse 20 where Jesus when He first confronted the paralytic who had been let down through the ceiling, said to him, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." He didn't say, "God will forgive your sins," He said, "I forgive your sins." And in that moment, in that split second that man's sins were erased forever. Jesus knew his heart. He was a paralytic, he, therefore, to one degree or another, a social outcast. He had come to grips not only with the problems of his illness, but he had come to grips with the sins of his life and his heart and in his silence Jesus read

his heart and gave him what he desperately wanted and needed and that was forgiveness. And then to prove that He could forgive his sins, which isn't visible, He healed his body which is, and only God can do both of those things.

And so we have then a very specific illustration in verses 17 to 26 of Jesus forgiving sins, which then poses the question, a question which Matthew, Mark and Luke all understand will be raised and the question is, "Whose sins does Jesus forgive?" He forgives that paralytic. Is he in the category of people that Jesus will forgive? Because all three of those gospel writers follow that incident up immediately up with this one. And this one answers the question, "Just whose sins will He forgive? How far will He go? He will forgive and restore the paralyzed man but how deep does Jesus go? How far down does He go to rescue sinners?"

And the answer is, so far down that He even saved a tax gatherer. Now, that may not strike you as particularly significant since you may have a certain attitude toward contemporary IRS agents and people who collect your taxes. But they don't have anywhere near the stigma that they did in the time of Jesus and until you understand that, you don't understand what He was doing here and why the Pharisees were so shocked and startled at His action.

The account before us opens up in verse 27, "After that He went out." Out of what? Out of the house in Capernaum where the incident with the paralytic had happened. He had been there teaching. He had been there with the Holy Spirit upon Him, as verse 17 says, to perform healing. He had been healing. He had been teaching, and then the incredible healing of the paralytic and his sins being forgiven. The paralytic, according to verse 25, did exactly what Jesus told him to do, verse 24, "Jesus said, 'Rise, take up your stretcher and go home.'" In verse 25 he rose, took up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. A creative miracle which gave him back not only the movement of his limbs, but all the musculature that had atrophied so that he could get up and go home. His brain instantly knew perfectly well how to walk, something that people in that condition have to be retrained to do but not if Jesus heals you. He does it completely. The man is walking home then with his four friends, glorifying God. And Jesus leaves and walks along a road beside the Sea of Galilee, if we compare the Matthew, Mark accounts. He's walking along that road and we come to the first part of our text, receiving the sinner, receiving the sinner.

"Along the way," verse 27 says, "He noticed a tax gatherer named Levi, sitting in the tax office." He was a *telns*. He was a publican, who were known as crooks of the rankest kind. You remember when some of those tax gatherers back in chapter 3 verses 12 and 13 came to John the Baptist the question was posed to him about what should be the evidence of their true repentance? And he said,

"Just collect what you're supposed to collect and no more." Be honest. They were known as dishonest. And here is one of those dishonest tax gatherers by the name of Levi. This is Matthew, and Matthew in his gospel calls himself Matthew. Matthew means "gift of Jehovah." It's a nice name and he chooses to call himself by that name. Many people in ancient times, as they do today, have more than one name, two names. It was common. Thomas was called Didymus. Bartholomew was also called Nathanael so it's somewhat common. And he had two names. His names were Matthew and Levi. He is best known to us obviously because of the gospel of Matthew by that name.

And Matthew is a humble apostle, no question about it. In fact, in all the gospels we have no record that Matthew ever said anything. Nothing that Matthew said was ever recorded in the gospels. It is also true that in Matthew's own gospel he only mentions himself twice; once in this incident when he names himself, telling the story about his conversion under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, and only one other time in chapter 10 verse 3 when he includes his name among the list of the apostles. He is a humble apostle.

I think he probably all his life was in awe of where he had come from and to what he had come. To become a gospel writer, to be given the privilege of writing the story of Jesus Christ in the most magnificent and glorious terms in which Matthew is used to write it, presenting Jesus as the great King, I suppose it was always a matter of wonder to him and maybe contributed to his speechlessness. He was the worst of sinners who was given the privilege of inaugurating the New Testament.

Now what about a tax gatherer? Well in the view of the Jews, this was the scum of humanity. This was the dregs of all Israel. This was the lowest of the low. This was the traitor, the traitor. And if you're asking the question, "How deep will the Lord go? How low will He go? Who will He save?" The answer is: the worst, the worst. In fact, it must have been inconceivable to scribes and Pharisees that Jesus would ever save a tax gatherer, let alone make him an apostle, unthinkable.

Here's how the system worked. Rome, obviously, ruled the world and Israel was an occupied country. The Roman occupation involved a lot of things. It involved a military presence. It even involved pagan kings, the Idumaeans such as Erod....Herod Antipas who ruled over Galilee, sort of put in power by the Romans for their uses. The Romans also established taxation for their occupied countries and they established a certain tax amount for Galilee. That tax was to be paid by various tax collectors to Herod Antipas who then paid it to Rome.

What Herod Antipas did, prescribed by the Roman law, was sell tax franchises to the highest bidder. It was a very lucrative business and if you were an unscrupulous person, if you were a crook, if you didn't mind lying, cheating, stealing and abusing people, you would get in line to get a tax franchise. You also didn't have to take your Jewish heritage very seriously because you would become a traitor of all traitors, not only because you abused your people, not only because you extorted money from them, but because you gave that money to Gentiles, unthinkable.

Somewhere along the line, Matthew had sold his birthright, bartered away his heritage and his reputation and any social place at all and perhaps dishonored his family and anybody and everybody who knew him and sentenced himself to a life of association with thugs and enforcers and other tax collectors by buying a tax franchise. The Roman government would establish an amount at the end of the year to be paid. Anything beyond that, the tax gatherer could keep. Matthew was one of those. There were fixed taxes, there were poll taxes, there were duties of all kinds. All of these kinds of taxes left room for larceny and extortion and exploitation. And then when you couldn't pay your taxes, they became loan agents who would loan you the money at 50 percent interest or more. And if you didn't pay, they would send their thugs to break your legs. It was a kind of mafia.

They could stop people at any point in time. They could search their goods and they could tax their letters. They could tax their produce. They could tax what they bought at the market. They could tax them as export or import; that is moving one thing from here to there. They could do it all arbitrarily and they could enforce it with their thugs who would harm the people who didn't pay. Matthew ran that kind of operation. And obviously the Jews that did this were hated and despised and Matthew was one of them. He extorted. He probably took bribes from rich people, abused the poor people and did it all under Gentile authority. And, of course, the Jews believed that the only one they ever wanted to pay tribute to was God, so they despised all of this.

They were barred, they were, tax gatherers, from the synagogue. You couldn't go there. Why? Because they were considered unclean; they were classified with unclean animals in the ceremonial law, classified with Gentiles. They couldn't come into a synagogue or they would desecrate the whole facility, to say nothing of contaminating anybody that they got close to. They weren't allowed in a synagogue. They were forbidden to give testimony in a court of law because they were liars. And the Talmud said, "You can lie and deceive a tax collector any time you want." The rabbis gave the Jews the freedom to do that. It was survival. If you could con him, maybe you could get away with something.

The Talmud also distinguished two types of tax collectors in Jewish history. The first type was called a *gabbai*, g-a-b-b-a-i would be transliterating that word. And the *gabbai* was sort of a general tax collector. They collected the regular taxes. That would be the land tax, like a property tax and that would be income tax. Ground tax also included crops and grains. There was a one-tenth grain tax and a one-fifth fruit and wine tax and the income tax was one percent. That was kind of a fixed tax and the *gabbai* was sort of the big-time person who was over all of those taxes. Zacchaeus, by the way, was one of those and there was plenty of room in that system for extortion, as well, and later one we'll learn about Zacchaeus, further down in the gospel of Luke, and he was feeling so badly about what he had done, remember, that when he was converted he paid back what he had taken fourfold. So he got wealthy, believe me, on this operation.

But then there was some small-time tax collectors. They were called *mokus*. Now they dealt with all of the sort of day-to-day things, duties and import and road tax and poll tax...or bridge tax, letter tax, package tax, market tax, axle tax on carts, wheel tax, sounds familiar doesn't it? Road tax, every kind of tax. And they were the criminals. They were the rankest of the tax collectors. They were the criminals of criminals. And there were two kinds of *mokus*, there was a great *mokus* and a little *mokus* . You were great if you employed people and you had a big franchise and you put people at all your tax stations. They were usually put on roads and they could stop the people who were moving around and tax them for everything. You were a great *mokus* if you...if you had a lot of this operation. And you were called a little *mokus* if you just sat at the tax station. And you were the hated of all hated people because they saw you face-to-face and you told them, "I want your money and if you don't give me your money, you know, I'll break your legs." You were the "in your face" tax collector, heartless, cut-throat, brutal, criminal, the most hated of all. These people were at the bottom rung of the social ladder. The best that could be said about them was they were just a shade below the prostitutes. And there are some Jewish writings that say repentance for them was impossible and forgiveness could never happen. They were unforgivable.

Matthew was a little *mokus*. You say, "How do you know that? It doesn't say that in verse 27." Yes it does, it says, "He was sitting in the tax station." He was the worst. He was the dregs. He was the scum. He was the unforgivable. He may well have been the most hated man in Capernaum. But Jesus noticed him. The word "noticed," *etheasto*, it means to gaze intently. He didn't just glance, He fixed His eyes on him and He had a divine appointment with him. There he was sitting in his little hut.

He walked over to him. Verse 27, He said to him, "Follow Me." Amazing, huh? You're... You're just the kind of guy I'm looking for to be an apostle. Really? You're a perfect fit. Kind of reminds you of Isaiah, doesn't it? "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips who dwell in the midst of a people of

unclean lips." And the Lord said, "You're exactly what I'm looking for, a man who understands how sinful he is."

Jesus knew the heart of this man. And this is an explicit command, "Follow Me." He didn't say to him, "If you can kind of clean up your act, you've got some talents I could use." He didn't say that. He knew his heart. He could read his heart like a billboard. Matthew knew Jesus. It was his home base. Jesus' home base in His Galilean ministry was in Capernaum and the word about Jesus was everywhere, all over the place in Galilee by this time. Jesus was well known as a miracle worker, as a teacher, as the one who announced that God would forgive the sins of the poor, prisoners, blind and oppressed. Matthew had obviously come to the conclusion in his own heart that he was wretched and miserable, that he was a poor, prisoner, blind and oppressed, that he was filled with sin and he, in spite of all the money that he was making, in spite of all the power that he exercised over people, he was very, very distressed and burdened by his sin. Jesus must have looked into his heart, and not only did He see the sinfulness of Matthew, but He saw the hunger of his heart, the hunger for righteousness, the thirst for righteousness, the beatitude attitude. And He said, "Follow Me." If the Pharisees and scribes were shocked, imagine how Matthew felt because Matthew knew more about himself than the Pharisees and scribes did. For them he was just categorically scum. To Matthew he was personally scum. But he had recognized his sin obviously because the Lord doesn't call people to follow Him who aren't penitent.

And I say this again because you need to understand it. He may not have known that Jesus was God. He may not have known that. He may have been a part of that larger group. Some thought He was Jeremiah, some thought He was Elijah, one of the prophets. They weren't yet fully sure who He was. We're still on that side of the cross and what is necessary is to be penitent over your sin to know that God offers forgiveness, which is the message Jesus preached, and to cry out to God from the heart for that forgiveness. And that's where this man was, like the publican in the 18th chapter of Luke, beating on his breast, not saying anything about Christ. I don't know what he knew about Him. But he said, "God, be merciful to me (what?) a sinner." And he went home justified.

God was forgiving sinners on Old Testament grounds, who, exposed to the law of God, saw the wretchedness of their own heart, wanted deliverance from that wretchedness, saw their bankruptcy spiritually. Saw themselves as the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed and desperately wanted forgiveness, desperately wanted a washing and a cleansing and were crying out of their hearts for God to give it to them. And Jesus saw that in his heart and saw that he would have to trust God for forgiveness because he was so unworthy himself. And Jesus forgave him on the spot and called him to be an apostle.

You say, "How do you know his heart was really like that?" Well, verse 28 says, "He left everything behind and rose and began to follow Him." That's not like the rich young ruler, is it? The rich young ruler went the other direction. He wasn't willing to recognize his own sins and submit to the authority of Christ. This man drops everything. There's an utter disconnect. And by the way, the comment in verse 28 that, "He left everything behind, rose and began to follow Him," Matthew leaves out of his gospel, again indicating his humble heart. He will not even commend himself though it is truly what he did. He understood the risk. He was walking away from a career and there were lots of thugs in line to take his place and it wouldn't be a day after he was gone before his spot would be filled, never to be recovered again. And in that sense, I suppose you could say his devotion and his following of Jesus was a far more dramatic break than his fishermen fellow apostles. You could leave your nets, Jesus said, "Drop your nets and come and follow Me and I'll make you fishers of men." But, you know what, you can always go fishing again. There are going to be fish there. And nobody could keep you off the lake. And by the way, they did go back and do that, John 21, didn't they? But once you left your tax place, that was it, maximum risk, career was over. So in some ways I guess it's a greater act of faith and devotion than that of the fishermen disciples who could always go back if they wanted to, and did. He could never go back. But you know what? He didn't want to go back.

You have an aorist here, the immediacy of it. He left everything behind and rose. And then you have an imperfect indicative. He began the process of following which he continued through his whole life. The...the finality of the break, the breach and the continuity of the following indicates the sanctification of the event, right? This is the proof of a real work of salvation by the following works. He made a decisive break and then a continuing pattern. He arose, that was the break, leaving everything behind. And he continued to follow, that was the pattern. He was regenerated. He was a new creation. He had new longings, new aspirations, new affections, a new mind, a new will. And we don't have any record of his words. I'm sure there must have been a conversation and I wish maybe it had been included. But it was clear that he was under the conviction of his sins, that he longed to get out of the thing that he was in, that he must have wanted God to forgive him because it's inherent in this. Jesus calls him to follow and immediately he does. And unlike the paralytic who sought Jesus, Jesus sought Matthew. And He gave him forgiveness and He gave him salvation and He gave him righteousness, something that the perverted, apostate system of Jewish religion told him he could never have as the rankest of sinners. He was desperate in his heart for forgiveness and he received it.

His response was immediate. The traitor, the extortioner, the robber, the outcast, the sinner became the apostle and the evangelist of Jesus Christ. And Matthew lost a temporal career and gained an eternal destiny. He lost material possessions and gained a spiritual future. He lost earthly security and gained heavenly inheritance. He lost sinful companions and gained the fellowship of the living

Christ. He understood why Jesus came, to save sinners. And he was one. In fact, I don't question his salvation at all because in verse 32 Jesus said, "I'm not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance," and that's a commentary on what just happened with Matthew. He is one of those sinners that I have come to call to repentance. The work of the Spirit of God was on...going on in his heart, producing the kind of conviction that brings about a true longing for forgiveness and a pure faith in his heart was generated by the Holy Spirit by which he was prepared for the gift of salvation which Christ gave him, manifest in the break with the past and a walk in a new life.

Another indication of the reality of that transformation is verse 29, "And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house." Now if you give a big reception, we could assume you had a big house. And this is another indication that he was wealthy. He may well have been the wealthiest of all the disciples at the beginning. Obviously he left it behind. But he gave a big reception. This is another indication of what has happened in his heart. J.C. Ryle it was who said, "No true Christian ever goes to heaven alone." And immediately having experienced the forgiveness of sin and the transformation of his heart, he wanted to gather around him everybody that he knew in his world and expose them to the Savior. And so he gives a big reception for Jesus. The Son of God incarnate is going to have a reception. And who are we going to invite? Oh surely the scribes and the Pharisees and the religious elite, and maybe some of the Sadducees, maybe some kings and princes and upper class people. No, not at all.

We're going to give a big reception for Him in his house and there is a great crowd of tax gatherers. Why? That’s the only people he knew, all the people who worked in the tax business, all the bad people. And then I like this, "And others." Others, Matthew calls them sinners. Some crowd, *gabbais* and *mokus* from everywhere. They all knew each other. They had heard about Jesus, the miracle worker. They all probably assumed, "We'll never get anywhere near that man, He's a very religious man, He...He speaks for God, He preaches good news from God and He heals people. He would never heal us, He would never be interested in us, we are the dregs, we are the scum." On the contrary, here one of their own becomes converted, he throws a huge gala celebration, Jesus is the guest of honor and he invites the only people who exist in his social world, all the riff-raff. This had to be the most austere occasion any of these people had ever attended: Thieves, thugs, hit men, enforcers, drunks, prostitutes, all kinds of criminals, outcasts, personally dining with the Son of God. His kind of crowd, you know.

I like this, end of verse 29, "They were reclining at the table with Him." You know why they recline? It's a long dinner. They didn't just sit in a chair and inhale it in twenty minutes like we do here. It was a day. They reclined, you know. And they talked and they ate. There are about ten dinner scenes in Luke because so much profound conversation took place in that setting. Jesus is there, Matthew is

there in the new joy of his conversion, the disciples are there, and then all the scum of the world. I can't imagine what the conversation was like. Talking to each other about who they brutalized, who they beat up, who they extorted, how the prostitution business is going, how the loan sharks are succeeding in their village in their town and what new methodologies they're using. But this is the mission field, folks, this is the mission field.

One of the sad things, I guess, about being a Christian a long time is you have a shrinking acquaintance with this group, don't you? The longer we know the Lord, the more we get isolated from the people that we're supposed to reach. We become surrounded by Christians, and that's good, we love the precious fellowship of the saints. It's those new Christians whose friends are the unbelievers and who have that fresh zeal to reach them. So this was... This was the party to celebrate Matthew's end of an old life, beginning of a new life. But more than that, it was an evangelistic dinner and Jesus was the guest of honor. What an amazing picture, Jesus receiving the sinner.

Secondly, He rejected the righteous. Verse 30, "And the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling." That's an onomatopoetic word in the Greek, a *gogguz*, guuuguuguguu. What’s He doing with these people? They knew this was going on. Obviously they weren't invited to that group. They wouldn't go to that group. They wouldn't go in the house, these are unclean people. But they knew it was going on, they were probably spilling out of the place, they could probably hear what was going on in the town. They were still there from the incident with the paralytic. So they cornered the disciples, probably outside afterwards saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax gatherers and sinners? What are you doing, this is outrageous behavior? What are you doing with these people?"

And I guess you would have to say by the fact they cornered the disciples and asked them the question they at least thought the disciples of Jesus were better than that group or they might have asked some of those guys why they were associating with Jesus and the disciples. So they must have thought that...that Jesus and His disciples at least had some intention to keep the law, some intention to follow the prescriptions. These familiar Pharisees and their scribes...most of the scribes were part of the Pharisees, that's why they're combined that way with a possessive pronoun. Scribes were the fastidious law experts within the separated group called the Pharisees who were so attached to the letter of the law and they were resenting Jesus because Jesus unmasked them and as it goes through the story of His life, it gets worse and worse, more volatile and more volatile, more hostile and more hostile until finally they really perpetrate the crime against Jesus which is His execution. Their resentment of Jesus is intensifying, intensifying, intensifying and it doesn't help for Jesus to say things like, "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees you'll never be in My kingdom."

But they were just shocked, outraged that Jesus and His disciples would associate with this crowd. Why are you doing this? They were the moral majority. But as somebody said, God's not looking for a moral majority. He's looking for a holy minority. They were concerned with externals. They were concerned with what you see on the outside, what you do, what appears, pious and religious. They were moral, they weren't holy. They were void of grace, they were void of salvation. They were without God. Jesus was turning His back on the moral people and making sinners a holy people.

Their statement is intended as a stinging rebuke. It's not really a question, it's kind of a rhetorical question, intended to be vindictive and bitter. It's outrage. Why do you eat and drink with the tax gatherers and sinners? They vent their outrage on the disciples. They indict the disciples with the idea that truly righteous people would never hang around with this crowd, never. And as I said, all through the ministry of Jesus this conflict goes on and on and on because Jesus identifies with the sinners and these people perceive themselves as the righteous.

You know, their thinking is just like this, they assumed that there was no sin in them. They actually were the righteous. And their assumption therefore was that their enemies were God's enemies. And anything but their theology was heresy. And anything but their conduct was iniquity. And anyone who questioned their righteousness questioned God and blasphemed.

Well Jesus overheard their statement. Verse 31, "And He answered and said to them," a three-part answer; two of them are given here, I'll add one from Matthew. The first part of His answer is from analogy, from analogy. "It is not those who are well who need a physician but those who are sick." How obvious is that? Doctors don't go to healthy people, they go to sick ones. Could the Pharisees argue? Were these people sick? They were sick. By their own admission they were the sickest of the sick. If the Pharisees and scribes could see how sick they were and see how sinful they were, then why couldn't they see how important it was that the physician go to them? Boy, this is a very strong indictment of their cold hearts. This is a very strong indictment of their wickedness, of their hatred of these people. They are the whited sepulchers, aren't they, of Matthew 23. And Jesus is none other than the incarnate God, Exodus 15:26, "The Lord who heals you." He comes to the sick. He is the divine *iatros*, the divine doctor, the divine physician. And so Jesus answers them, first of all, from analogy.

Second, He answers them from Scripture, from Scripture. In Matthew 9:13 it says that Jesus said, "Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire compassion and not sacrifice.’" Jesus said, "Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire compassion and not sacrifice.’" And that's quoted out of Hosea 6:6 and it

says, God doesn't want your external sacrifices. He wants a heart of mercy. That's in the beatitudes. "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain (what?) mercy." They were merciless and they would be judged without mercy. And that passage in Matthew 9:13 which records what Jesus also said, starts with the phrase, "Go and learn," and we find that phrase in familiar rabbinic writings and it's a phrase used by a rabbi rebuking unnecessary ignorance. "Go and learn." It would kind of...sort of like the American expression, "Have a thought. Have an idea. How dumb are you? Don't you know God wants compassion and not ritual?" He hates ritual and external morality separated from a heart of penitence and a hunger for righteousness.

And so Jesus answered from analogy, and then He answered from Scripture. And finally, He answered from personal authority. Verse 32: "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Jesus said, "I'm here for sinners." There's irony in that. There's downright sarcasm in that. That bites. It reminds me of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4 saying to the Corinthians, "Now you are kings. Oh aren't you something without us? I wish you were." It's that biting sarcasm that you see here. “I haven't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

That's the heart of the gospel, beloved. It's for sinners. It's for sinners. In the parable of Matthew 22 Jesus goes out and He asks all the people of Israel, the righteous, to come to the banquet for His Son and none of them will come. And so He says, "Just go into the highways and the byways and just get the lowlifes and bring them into the banquet." And He rejects the Pharisee in Luke 18 who's telling Him how good he is and He embraces the publican who is beating on his breast and crying for mercy.

They hated Jesus for this. They hated Him for this. They hated Him for redefining them as sinners. People don't like that today either. But God can't save anybody who doesn't see himself as a sinner. You can't mask sin. You can't gloss it over. You can't trivialize it. You can't underestimate it. You can't turn it into something superficial. You have to preach the true understanding of the desperate, sinful, wickedness of the human heart so that a person understands themselves as poor, prisoners, blind and oppressed, headed for a Christ-less, Godless eternity in hell, having violated the law of God and the God of that law. If that person by the grace of God and the work of the Spirit can come to a true assessment of his sinful heart and an understanding of the grace of God provided through faith in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross, then that person can be saved. These men, Pharisees and scribes, they were so lost that they had no mercy for sinners. They didn't need any for themselves; they didn't have any to give. They raged with hate at the merciful physician. They couldn't even connect with that. They should have known what James said when he quoted Isaiah, "God gives

grace to the humble but He rejects the proud."

Beloved, I tell you this morning, God offers you grace. He offers you mercy. He offers you forgiveness. He offers you compassion. He'll forgive all your sins if you'll come to Him. But He can't do anything for people who think they're okay. Can't do anything for people who think they're righteous, who think they're good. He came to call sinners to repentance. So the church is not made up of the righteous. It's made up of penitent sinners. It's not made up of those who think they're good. It's made up of people who know they're not. It's not made up of people who have brought their righteousness up to God as a satisfaction. It's made up of people for whom God's righteousness has come down as a covering.

I close with an illustration. First Timothy chapter 1, a biblical illustration, which I like to do, 1 Timothy chapter 1, quickly, verse 8, we know that the law is good; the law of God, if one uses it lawfully. The law has a good intention. The law has a good purpose. The holy law of God which is God's standard for morality, for right and wrong, it is good, it reflects His holiness. It is good. In what way is it good? Because it helps us to see that we are (what?) sinners when measured against it. So therefore, verse 9, "The law is not made for a righteous man." It's not made for a righteous man. "But it is made" verse 9 "for those that are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching."

Did you know the law of God was made for that wretched bunch? It's made to expose the heart. That's who it's made for. Verse 11, "According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I've been entrusted." The thing is this, God brings His law, when you look at His law you see your wretchedness and then you become one who can embrace the glorious gospel of forgiveness.

How low can the Lord go to save sinners? Who is He willing to forgive? Well He can only forgive people who are in this group, the lawless, the rebellious, the ungodly, sinners, unholy, profane, parent murderers, murderers of all kinds, immoral men, homosexuals, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and anything else you want to add to the list that's contrary to the sound teaching. Those are the people He saves who have been brought against His law and realize they have fallen short and they are saved according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, the good news that God forgives the sins of those who repent and embrace His Son. From being categorical in those verses, in verse 12 Paul gets personal, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has strengthened me because He considered me faithful." He looked at my faith and He put me into ministry. Listen, not only does the Lord save those

people, He makes them ministers and apostles. "Even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor, and yet I was shown mercy, because I was acting ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was more than abundant with faith and love which is found in Christ Jesus." And the sum of it all, "It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am chief," foremost.

Now he says this, he's in his 60s. He's been a believer for thirty years or so. He's at the end of his life and as I told you at the beginning, the longer you walk with the Lord, the more of your own wretchedness you come to grips with. He didn't say, "I used to be the worst." He said, "I am the worst." And yet for this reason I found mercy.

The only way you're going to find mercy is when you come to repentance so that Jesus Christ can demonstrate His perfect patience with sinners as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. You need an example of how deep the Lord will go to save a sinner? Take Matthew. If that's not enough, take the worst sinner who ever lived by his own admission, Paul.

You say, "Is that really true? Was he really the worst?" That's not the point. That's how he assessed himself and that is a whole, healthy, spiritual assessment. If you're still looking around identifying other sinners as worse than you, that's an indication of your immaturity. Jesus came to call sinners to repentance and He calls this morning. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, I pray that You would be saying to some hearts this morning, "Follow Me." And some would be leaving everything behind and in exhilarating joy making a complete disconnect with the former life, grasping the righteousness for which they have hungered and thirsted, grasping the richness which they have never known in their spiritual poverty, grasping the freedom unknown to them in their captivity, the sight unknown to them in their blindness and the rest unknown to them in their oppression. Lord, may You save sinners even now, forgive them, call them to repentance and a faith in Your Son who died in their place that Your justice might be satisfied and Your grace extended. We are not the righteous, we are the sinners. We're not even the best of sinners, we're the worst. And so indeed in saving us have You displayed Your perfect patience, Your magnanimous mercy and grace as an example to all of how far down You will go to lift up a sinner. Would You do that for Your glory even today, in Your Son's name. Amen.

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