



Luke 5:27-39

“The Problem Of Conventional Religion”

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“Following Christ from City Center”

VB2, LUKE 5:27-39¹ "THE PROBLEM OF CONVENTIONAL RELIGION"

2/4 Controversy Stories

2) 5:27-39 DISCIPLE MATERIAL: CALL OF LEVI AND KINGDOM TEACHING. RENAISSANCE

Follows 5:12-26, Jesus Engages Sinners/ Social Outcasts

a) vv.27-28 The Call Of Levi the Tax Collector//5:1-2. INITIATE AND INVITE UNLIKELY (1)

//Mk. 1:16-20, 2:13-17, Mt. 9:9, Changes To Mk. = Red

27 After this he (i.e. Jesus) went out, and saw a tax collector, named Levi, sitting at the tax office; Not Chief, 3:12-14
and he said to him, "Follow me." 5:10b, 9:23, 59, 19:22 Lit. come after me, Jewish Outcast

28 And he left everything, and rose and followed him 14:33, Began Following, Receptive/Obedient, Forsakes All (S)
Opportunity! Clear Break, Life/Loyalties, No Levi in 6:14-18

b) vv.29-39 Banquet Plus Dialog In Levi's Home. Acceptance WORK YOUR CIRCLE AT HOME (2)

Who's Your Circle? Your Mission Field. The One Is The Key To The Many

29 And Levi made him a great feast in his house; 19:10, Joyful Evangelistic Dinner Party With Associates
and there was a large company of tax collectors and others sitting at table with him (Jesus). Recline, \$ To For Banquet

Banquet + Dialog (10x Lk.), First Act Of Following

(1) vv.30-32 First Controversy: Issue of Religious Association, Clean and Unclean. 18:9-14

Quarantine (Separation) v. Open Lifestyle DEFEND THE GOOD NEWS (3)

30 a And the Pharisees and their scribes murmured against his disciples, saying, Triangle, Broke Holiness Code
Question "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Labels, Question Meal Company Of Disciples, Jesus
Rabbi Hillel, "The common people cannot be pious."

31 b And Jesus answered them, Rom. 14:17, Jesus Defends His Followers
Answer "Those who are well have no need of a physician, Is. 3:7, Image + Mission, Proverb Speaks Well Of Doctors
but those who are sick; Not Stay Sick! KNOW YOUR MESSAGE AND AUDIENCE (4)

32 I have not come (and continue) to call the righteous, Ezek. 34:1-16, Mission: I have come/ not come
but sinners to repentance." Life Turns To God, Acts 11:18, Self-understanding As Healer/Preacher

First Come Into Grace = Power To Change, Who Is Well? Who Is Sick?

(2) vv.33-39 Second Controversy: Spiritual Timing And God's New Thing.

Kingdom Presence As A Wedding Feast

33 a And they said to him, Accused Of Laxity, Non-Ascetic = You are not serious!
Observation "The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees,
but yours eat and drink." Ties This Section To Party Scene, v.30b

34 b And Jesus said to them, WHAT TIME IS IT? EMPHASIZE THE JOY AND BENEFITS (5)

Answer "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? New Day! Kingdom Now, Preparation Is Past
(Of course not! It's party time!) Proverb Question

35 The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, Prophecy Of Jesus' Absence
and then they will fast in those days." Restoration Of Fasting After Cross/Resurrection

TEACH TIMING, THE DISCIPLINES (6)

36 b' He told them a parable also: HOW DO WE RESPOND? Metaphors/ Figures Of Speech/Analogies

No One 1) "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; New/Old Allegory/Parable 1: New/Old Garment
Not Match = Incompatible

Loss 1 if he does, he will tear the new, On Washing/Shrinking SHAPE NEW PRACTICES/ STRUCTURES (7)

Loss 2 and the piece from the new will not match the old. Incompatible, Only In Luke
He Does Not Repair But Reinvents

37 2) And no one puts new wine New/Old Parable 2: New/Old Wine and Skins

No One into old wineskins; BEWARE OF MIXING (8)

Loss 1 if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, New/Old/New/Old/ New/Fresh

Loss 2 and the skins will be destroyed. Destroyed = What A Waste! Foolish

38 But new wine, New Wine Is Still Fermenting: Explosive!
is for fresh skins. Jesus Is New Wine = New Form Of God's Acceptance

39 a' And no one after drinking old wine; v.33 drink As Lk. Inclusion, BE REALISTIC ABOUT RESISTANCE (9)

No One desires new; Issue Is Deep Satisfaction, Desires, Parable 3: Old/ New Wine
Loss For he says, 'The old is good.' v.39 Only In Luke: Miss Out! Discouraging About Change With The Satisfied

Slow To Surrender Expectations JESUS CALLED SINNERS, FORMS NEW COMMUNITY!

¹ Here Luke follows his source, Mark 2:13-17, 18-22, with variations/additions indicated in red.

Brief Treatment Of Luke 5:27-39

This thought unit consists of a call story (vv.27-28) which leads to a banquet where Jesus teaches his critics the radical meaning of God’s grace (vv.29-39). He is the true philosopher whose behavior matches his words. Jesus offers a holiness of engagement rather than isolation. He is *the friend of sinners* who does not expect change to precede welcome. First grace and love, then change as an enabled response: this is the new way. Luke follows his source (Mark 2:13-17, 18-22) but edits the two scenes into a single presentation since both deal with issues of *eat and drink* (v.30b, 33b). Jesus’ feasting with outsiders and his avoiding fasting raise questions for the Pharisees and scholars. Jesus is vividly aware that with the advent of the powerful new reality of the kingdom (i.e. God’s immediate availability through the Son, himself!), a new sense of joy is fitting. No one fasts at a wedding feast; it shows a terrible sense of timing.

As Jesus moves about, his attention is divinely directed to Levi at the toll booth. Known for greed and dishonesty, such men had constant contact with unclean Gentiles and were to be avoided. But Jesus called him to *Follow me*. Luke takes care to note that Levi *“left everything, and rose and followed him.”* Peter retains boat and nets, but Levi lost his job. Such is the power of Jesus’ word. So great is the effect, Levi soon hosts a party to introduce his cronies to his new friend. Here we learn that *the one is the key to the many* and that *new converts are our best evangelists*. Leaving everything does not mean Levi forfeits accumulated prosperity, but his means are now at Jesus’ disposal to promote the cause.

The dialog begins with a hostile question , “Why do *you* (plural = Jesus + followers) eat and drink with *tax collectors and sinners* (i.e. those whom we avoid)?” They see lax practice as contagious and by their strictness guard Jewish identity against the encroachments of paganism. There are times when strict separation is a wise strategy to protect the treasures of the faith, but that time is now ended as Jesus brings a new confident style that goes on the offensive to restore the lost people of God. Jesus is not polluted by the unclean; rather, outsiders are brought back into right relationship with God in his presence. Jesus is stronger than sin and its effects; in him light scatters darkness. Note that while the disciples are asked the question, Jesus answers on their behalf in two parts: 1) a proverb about physicians (v.31), and 2) an *I have come* mission statement that invites Pharisees to give up their approach for his own. By adding the phrase *to repentance* to Mark 2:17b, Luke defends Jesus against moral compromise. Jesus loves sinners and loves them too much to leave them in their current state! Radical acceptance precedes radical reformation, and this reformation is not about keeping the holiness code but following *the holy one, Jesus!*

The second debate (vv.33-39) is shaped in a concentric pattern (a-b-b’-a’) with *drink* (v.33) // *drinking* (v.39) as the inclusion. The central components (b/b’) are distinguished by separate introductions: *And Jesus said to them* (v.34a) // *He told them a parable also* (v.36a). Note that the singular *parable* covers two metaphors (garment, skins) which share a *new/old* contrast. Since fasting is a discipline of repentance, it testifies to the longing for God’s presence. But, since Jesus is now that presence, it’s time to loosen the belt in a season at least as joyous as a wedding. Fasting will be restored when Jesus is *taken away* in death and resurrection. The second image is from viniculture where the new vintage is fermented in flexible new skins, not last year’s dried-out ones. The new kingdom presence requires fresh, flexible forms. It is through such periodic revivals across the history of the church that new forms of worship and mission are developed. By adding his own tradition (v.39) to round out the event, Luke shows his realism. It’s his way of saying to a missionary church, “Don’t be surprised by resistance!”

THE PROBLEM OF CONVENTIONAL RELIGION

“And he (i.e. Levi) left everything and follow him (i.e. Jesus).”

Radical response to an unexpected call.

L U K E 5 : 2 8

Centuries ago workmen were seen dragging a great block of marble into Florence, Italy. It came from the quarries of Carrara, and was intended to be sculpted into a great Old Testament prophet. But when the great sculptor Donatello saw the flaws, he refused it at once. There it lay in the cathedral yard, a useless block.

One day another sculptor caught sight of the flawed block. As he examined it, there rose in his mind something of immense beauty, and he resolved to sculpt it. On January 25, 1504, the greatest artists of the day assembled to see what he had made of the despised and rejected block, among them Boticelli, daVinci, and Perugino, the teacher of Raphael. As the veil dropped, the statue met a chorus of praise. Succeeding centuries confirmed the judgment. Michaelangelo's *David* is one of the world's great works of art.²

Throwaways and castaways, outcasts and the ignored can become masterpieces if the artist has an eye beyond the obvious. Jesus sees what we do not, in ourselves and others, and calls it forth. So let's pay close attention to the encounter that transformed a scoundrel into an apprentice of Jesus and eventually into one the church calls St. Matthew. It is a conversion story of *before* and *after*, a call story that leads into a new life. It's a church growth story that opens up a whole new market of Levi's friends to Jesus. It's a renewal story that teaches us much about the necessity of church reformation and why it is so hard for mainline churches like Main Street to recapture the sense of spiritual adventure that characterized our origins.

We love the ways things are, or rather, the way things were in some idealized past; we don't want them to change; we like the old wine better. We're not sure we

² R. Kent Hughes, *Mark* (Westchester, ILL: Crossway Books, 1989), 69-70.

want a bunch of riff-raff coming to church messing up our deal. We want our pastor to take good care of us. How easy for churches to become something other and something other than soul-saving stations. How easy for us to focus on keeping up cultural standards than to reaching out to lost people. How easy to think our mission is to make people become like us rather than us all becoming more like the Jesus who constantly drew outside the lines by hanging the wrong kinds of people. John Wesley told his early preachers that they had no other business than saving souls. My job is not to make Main Street a comfortable place. My job is not to return you to your former days of glory. The way forward is not the way back. My job is to invite people to follow Jesus Christ, and to make sure that in the process I keep following him as well, lest after preaching to others I become a castaway. Robert Munger wrote, “The church is the only fellowship in the world where the one requirement for membership is the unworthiness of the candidate.”³ When backslidden Methodists, which we have on our rolls by the hundreds, rediscover new life and hope in Jesus Christ, and when outsiders, those with no Christian heritage, are drawn to Christ by the quality of our love, we will understand what it is to be the church.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The Call Of Levi (vv.27-28)

To set the stage for Levi's call, let me ask a few questions. What would happen if an NAACP leader was invited to join four Klansmen for supper? What would happen if a radical feminist was invited for a guest lecture at NASCAR? Polarities would clash. Ridicule would likely be the most common form of communication.

That is just the kind of creative tension Jesus builds into his inner circle when he called Levi the tax collector to be a disciple. Thus far in Luke we have four fishermen, two sets of brothers- Simon and Andrew, James and John- a homogenous grouping into which a noxious, foreign body was inserted, and his name was Levi.⁴ They thought only fishermen could follow Jesus, that he loved fishermen best of all, that people had to come *like them* before they could *follow him*. We like those who are *like us*, but Jesus likes everybody and issues his calls without checking with us.

³ Quoted in Charles Talbert, *Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 64.

⁴ Luke 5:1-11, especially vv.10-11, for the call of the first four disciples.

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A little background on Levi. He worked for the Jewish client-king Herod Antipas who was owned lock, stock, and barrel by the Roman administration. Levi had a tax franchise, and, if he was like most of the others of his day, used intimidation and extortion to collect more than was due. Jews who collected taxes had sold out their religious beliefs, were excluded from synagogues, and were continually rendered ritually unclean by their constant contact with Gentiles. Levi was a Jewish backslider who decided working for the winners was more important than his faith. Tax collectors were, to put it mildly, religious and political scum.

And who did Jesus call next but Levi. He didn't ask the permission of Simon, Andrew, James, or John. If he had, they would've said, "No. Not him, Lord. He's a traitor." Following Jesus is like the military. You don't get to choose who you serve with. The Wesleyan Covenant Prayer contains this sobering petition, "I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, *rank me with whom thou wilt*" (ital. ad.).⁵ Following Christ as a disciple will inevitably mean spending time and building relationships with people who are unlike you in every way except their commitment to Christ. Until we do that we never understand that what we share in him is more important and more binding than all the other issues that divide us. The disciples were all alike till Levi was invited to join the insiders club. In contemporary terms, it was time for some Jesus-style *diversity* training. They were all southern boys; Levi was a Yankee. They were all Carolina grads; he was from Clemson. They were blue collar fisherman driving trucks, Levi a white collar bureaucrat with a Prius.

"After this," writes Luke in verse 27 to give us a sense of sequence, Jesus passed the toll station where Levi sat with his account books and receipts. Jesus looked at Levi, rather he looked through him, looked past his occupation deep into his heart, past his lifestyle of accommodation and issued the same invitation he had to the others, "Follow me." And guess what? He did. "And he left everything, and he arose and followed him." Levi was ripe to be called.

Luke emphasizes the financial cost of Levi's decision, "And he left *everything...*" Levi left a career in private contracting for the government to become an under-study to Jesus. It was a mid-life career change, a call to ministry no one in Capernaum could believe. Not Levi! Anyone but Levi!

⁵ "A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: the United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), No. 607.

Any Levi's here this morning? Far enough into your career to have achieved some success and also far enough to know that it can never satisfy the deeper yearnings of your heart? Let's make an appointment soon to talk and pray together. Maybe the Lord's sees more in you than you see in yourself; I guarantee his dreams for you are bigger than any you'd dream for yourself. Just ask Levi.

Luke knew how to tell such stories because the call story was a standard literary form in ancient biographies. The teacher/disciple relationship was prominent in Greco-Roman thinking. Xenophon, for example, was a loyal disciple of the philosopher Socrates. When a later writer wished to show how Xenophon was faithful to the lifestyle and teaching of his mentor, a call story was told:

"The story goes that Socrates met Xenophon in a narrow passage, and that he stretched out his stick to bar the way, while he inquired where every kind of food was sold. Upon receiving a reply, he put another question, 'And where do men become good and honorable?' Xenophon was fairly puzzled. 'Then follow me,' said Socrates, 'and learn.' From that time onward he was a disciple of Socrates."⁶

Even at first hearing, the similarities to Luke's account are apparent. The Master intrudes into the life of the potential follower, issues a call and promise to which the disciple then agrees. Same basic outline, whether the call is to follow Jesus or to follow Socrates. But there are differences as well. Jesus does not ask questions; there is no preliminary exam. As the Spirit-energized Son of God, Jesus knows who he wants and issues commands. A second difference is that the emphasis is not on honor or goodness or learning, as important as those things are. It is on being given a share in Jesus' mission. If Simon and Andrew, James and John are called from their nets to become fishers of men, then Matthew as a tax collector is called to gather people into God's treasury. To a modern mechanic Jesus might say, "I will make you into one who repairs people." To a lawyer, "I will teach you to prosecute God's case

⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (II:28) as quoted in Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 70. On discipleship in the ancient world, see Vernon K. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984), Chapter 4. Also Fernando F. Segovia (ed.), *Discipleship in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985). On the strategy of investing in a few to reach the many, see Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003), Chapter 3, "Why Jesus Invested in a Few," 59-74.

and to defend those under indictment by the devil.” To an at-home mother he might say, “Come tend God’s kids, old and young.” Wherever he finds you, in whatever occupation, Jesus can use you as part of his team. By using and yet modifying the standard form of the call story, Luke tells us three things about the Christian life.

First, that Jesus himself is the issue. He calls people to himself. *Doctrine* is the way we structure and understand the relationship after long reflection on who he is. *Sacraments* are the forms of community remembrance. *Ethics* is the lifestyle appropriate for his followers. But the issue is Jesus. Who he is. The Son of God, crucified and risen, who calls others to personal love and loyalty and sacrifice. It was a good but not necessarily an easy life. Hear what Calvin Miller says about modern, *feel-good* discipleship:

"Many Christians are only 'Christaholics' and not disciples at all. Disciples are cross-bearers; they seek Christ. Christaholics seeks happiness. Disciples dare to discipline themselves, and the demands they place on themselves leave them enjoying the happiness of their growth. Christaholics are escapists looking for a shortcut to nirvana. Like drug addicts, they are trying to 'bomb-out' of their depressing world. There is no automatic joy. Christ is not a happiness capsule; he is the way to the Father. But the way to the Father is not a carnival ride in which we sit and do nothing while we are whisked through various spiritual sensations."⁷

Jesus knows your name, history, shoe size, besetting sins and private indulgences, and he calls you to follow him. You’re never a number with the Lord. Invitations are never addressed to *Occupant* or *To whom it may concern* but always to specific names: to Peter and Andrew and James and John and Levi and Phil and Lori and Mary and Wilbur and Harriett. The core of the Christian life is attachment to the person of Jesus Christ, a willingness to say Yes to him whatever your life circumstances. Nothing happens without that.

The second item on Luke’s agenda is that discipleship always includes other people. To be a *believer* and not a *belonger* is a contradiction in terms. The call of Christ is a call to community. First thing Jesus did after his entrance into public ministry was to form a small group and to put them on the road with him. Levi was

⁷ *The Taste of Joy* (Waco: TX: Word).

number five. You *work it out* with him, and you *live it out* with other people. No solo performances allowed. No lone rangers. And what's more, they didn't get to choose who their traveling companions were. This is not a democracy; this is discipleship, and the Lord chooses who we spend time with.

Put simply, you cannot have Jesus without all the strange people who are his followers and sit with you in church on Sunday. As much as we would like to separate the two, a perfect Jesus and imperfect church, they are a package the Lord himself has joined together. People who flit from church to church like honeybees, people who stay away because the church is full of hypocrites, and those who come at precisely 11:05am and leave as soon as the service is over have all missed the point. Christian faith means loving, patient community with all sorts of strange people. When you come to Jesus, all your people prejudices come up for review. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Sometimes when I encourage a church member to invite their spouse or a friend or relative to worship they give me this excuse, "Oh," Pastor Phil, "they're not *the church type*." What, in heaven's name is *not the church-type*? Drinks too much? Smokes dope? Uses bad language? Shackled up with their girlfriend or boyfriend? Loud? Rich and irreligious? Skeptical about the church? Mad at God? I'm not sure I want a church full of *the church type*. Church was never meant to be a religious hothouse. It's a place for religious and irreligious sinners to do business with Jesus. Levi was definitely *not the church type*. Earning money was more important to him than being a loyal Jew. The dollar was his god. His occupation excluded him from the synagogue. He was an outcast because he chose to be. But Jesus reached past all the stereotypes and touched the guy's heart with an invitation to make his life more than a well-diversified stock portfolio. And he left it all for the sake of hanging out with the Lord. It was a good decision.

How many people do we miss because they don't match our profile of what we think a *good church member* would be? New Christians fresh out of the world ask tough questions. They haven't yet been *churchified*. The rough edges are still there. Levi is the patron saint of all worldly rogues whose hearts are hungry for Reality *with a capital R*. And if God sends us some, we need to give them a warm welcome no matter the color of their skin, the length of their hair, the number of earrings in their ears or nose, their politics, or their marital or sexual history. A church without room for Levi's is a church without room for Jesus who invited such a man into the leadership training team. We are not the standard; Christ is, and whom he welcomes

we must welcome. Pastor Kent Hughes shares the following story:

"In nineteenth-century England, there was a poor woman who attended a church women's meeting. She had been living with a man of another race by which she had had a baby, and she brought the child with her. She liked the meeting and came back again and again. But then the vicar (i.e. the pastor in an Anglican church) came to her and said, 'I must ask you not to come to this meeting again.' Seeing her questioning look, he continued, 'The other women say that they will stop coming if you continue to come.' Looking at him in poignant wistfulness, she asked, 'Sir, I know that I'm a sinner, but isn't there anywhere a sinner can go?' Fortunately the Salvation Army found her, and she was claimed for Christ."⁸

The church is not Burger King; you don't get it your way; I don't get it mine. We don't set the guest list or the menu. *We follow him* together. Our only vote is whether to say Yes or Not when Jesus taps on the shoulder, "Hey, follow me, and watch me turn you into something very different. Beneath the accumulated crud, I see something in you I really like. Let's hang out together."

"But what about those other four guys," said Levi, "I know them, and I know they don't like me at all."

"You let me work that out," said Jesus. "One day, I promise you will love these guys. Stick with me." And he did. One of the gospels now bears his name.

A Party At Levi's House (v.29)

Verse 29 present us with the most marvelous picture. The word *sitting* in the phrase *sitting at table with him* is not quite accurate. It leaves us with the wrong picture. They were not sitting in chairs around a table as we do but rather *reclining* on either couches or carpets in a banquet. And there lay Jesus, propped on one arm, perfectly relaxed, telling stories and laughing. A goblet of wine in one hand, a plate of food before him, not stiff and religious and up tight but a wonderful guest honoring one of his newest followers. Levi had thrown a party to celebrate his new life and invited all his tax collector buddies and all the community outcasts he could find. The first thing he spent money on after meeting Jesus was an evangelistic dinner party for all his backslidden Jewish buddies; his house was full of folk who never darkened the

⁸ Hughes, *Mark*, 71.

door of a synagogue; he wanted them to meet the man who changed his life. That, I submit to you, is a picture of the church in mission, mixing it up with people on their turf because of the joy of the Lord.

There are three basic postures the church can take in the world: isolation, assimilation, or mission. Churches that chose isolation see the world outside their walls as a wicked place and threatening to their holiness. They peek out at the world and shake their heads in disgust. Better to isolate than be polluted. If they want what we have, the door is open, but they had better be prepared to accept our standards as soon as possible. The church, in this model, is *out* of the world. Not many contemporary Methodists are prone to this extreme. It was the stance of the scribes and Pharisees who were keenly worried about the loss of Jewish identity.

At the other end of the scale are churches that drift towards assimilation. They become so much one with the world around them you can't tell the difference. This is the current threat to most mainline Protestant denominations, especially in the area of sexual ethics. Believers are found in worship most Sundays, but otherwise their lives and lifestyle are little different from the world around them. The church is treated with about the same seriousness as the civic club and the PTA. The world, in this model, is *in* the church. Both isolation and assimilation render the church ineffective. Hiding from the world or merging with it are both dead ends.

But there is a third alternative, and it is the route Jesus chose, the way of mission. *In* but not *of* the world. Free association with all kinds of people on their turf, but not letting them compromise our belief or ethics. Remaining distinctive and yet closely related at the same time. Isolation is based on fear, assimilation on collapse, but mission requires spiritual maturity, deep love, and lots of risk.

In my early Christian life I needed a season of isolation for survival. As a freshman at Wake Forest I joined the KA's in search of a place to belong. I bought some good time friends. A bit of chivalry and nostalgia for the South. Initiation rituals dressed up in satin robes like the Klan. It's hard to believe that was still going on forty years ago. Lots of partying. It fit me because that's who I was in 1971, a lost eighteen year old away from home for the first time. But that next summer in a conversion experience I was reclaimed by the faith I'd left behind. Jesus said "Follow me," and I said, "Yes, sir. I ain't doing so good right now."

I went back to my fraternity that fall hoping to let my light shine. It was tough,

and at times my little light of faith and new lifestyle flickered near extinction. The old temptations were much too close. I remember the day the Lord spoke to me, as clearly as if audible, "It's time for you to leave the fraternity." I still remember the fear with which I stood and made my feeble witness, that I cared for them but could not longer be a part. Then I went to my room and wept. That frat house had become a toxic environment for my fragile, new faith, and I needed a safer place for a season with others who were interested in discipleship, not dissipation. Isolation may be necessary for a season of spiritual consolidation, but it is not a long term strategy.

The portrait of Jesus found in verse 29 is worth meditating on. Not isolation-hiding from the world, not assimilation- giving in to the world, but mission- bearing light to the world on its own turf. Hear the laughter and the stories, "And Levi make Jesus a *great* feast in his house; and there was a *large* company of tax collectors and others sitting with him."

If we are not as at ease and loving with lost people as the Lord was, something is amiss. A faith that must be hidden and protected in a hothouse is fragile indeed. Spending all your time with Christians, as most of us pastors do since we keep the machinery running, is the death of vital Christianity. Jesus refused to be isolated. He was as comfortable in the marketplace and in a tax collector's home as in a synagogue pulpit. He was free to be anywhere and with anyone because he was secure in his relationship with God and clear about his mission. His spirituality and psychology were both deeply grounded. Building friendships with unbelievers ought to be on the job description of every pastor. Don't ask me how many church meetings I attend; ask me how many friendships I am building with those who are not-yet-Christian.

The Defense Of His Associations (vv.30-32)

It's hard for us to understand how offensive Jesus' eating habits were. It was as if he was collaborating and offering solace to the enemy. His free association with sinners and other religiously unclean persons was a direct challenge to the Pharisaic system of strict separation. So the gossip started. It is framed as a question, but it was an accusation, "Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus, as you know, was a master of the one-liner. He gave no long argument in reply, just a vivid word picture, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." And then a commentary on his call of Levi and his table mates, "I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

If we examine the analogy we learn that sin is not just a morally offensive action but a disease process which eats away at soul, sapping life and moving the subject towards death. Also that Jesus describes himself with medical terminology as a physician, a wise and skillful healer. An oncologist does cancer, an orthopedist broken bones, a gynecologist babies, and Dr. Jesus does sin, applying the only sure therapy which is the love and mercy and guidance of God. That is not something that can be done from a distance but only on the wards, one patient at a time, making rounds with his junior residents Simon and Andrew, James and John, and now Levi who learns the art from the master. “A physician is found among his patients,” said Jesus to his detractors. And that is where the church is to be. We are a hospital for the sin sick, not a display case for ideal specimens.

But there is an edge here that is easily missed. After hearing Jesus I am left with a decision. Who is really the sick one here? The tax collectors who are near the Great Physician, or the Pharisees who stand apart lest they catch some spiritual contagion? And who are the righteous? The sinners who flock to Christ like moths to a flame, or the ones who hold him and them at arms length? The problem with us good church types is that we forget that we need him as much as the outsiders.

But then, the other side of love is provided by Luke who makes it clear that the call of Christ is not merely to luxuriate in mercy but to change, to repent and find a new way. In the company of Jesus the sin-sick are called to the healing of repentance. Jesus gives hope for a new life and the help to begin the journey. If we collapse on the side of mercy, as liberals often do, we eventually assimilate. If we collapse on the side of demand for change, as biblical conservatives often do, we isolate. The art of the thing is to stay in mission with the tension. Yes to people on their own turf, but No to sin on their own terms. Nothing is more demanding; it is not easy or simple to apply to ourselves or to others. Jesus enables whatever changes he demands.

The Old And The New (vv.33-39)

Because I have spent my time this morning with the call of Levi, there is not the leisure to deal as thoroughly with verses 33 through 39. On these important verses I offer three simple summaries:

1. Ours is a time to recover the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer. The bridegroom Jesus is not with us physically, and we feel the effects of his absence. Ours is not a wedding time of joy, but of painful separation.
-

Healings and conversions are rare. The church seems asleep. We sense the Holy Spirits only in fits and starts. Until Jesus returns, the church is to fast and pray in longing and yearning. More new books have been written on fasting in the past ten years than in the previous one hundred. Are you willing to live with a little hunger to give focus to your prayers? Are you willing to learn the classical disciples that keep us open to the flow of grace?

2. If God grants our prayer and sends revival, it means we will have to find new structures to hold it and new traditions to channel it. Trying to patch the old with the new will not work anymore than putting fresh, fermenting wine in old cracked wineskins. The substance of the gospel doesn't change, but the packaging must change. And if you can't tell the difference between the product and the package, then v.39 applies to you. "And no one after drinking old wine desires new; for he says, 'The old is good.'"

3. How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? Four. One to change it and three to form a committee to discuss how good the old one was. Change is hard. We like what we like. I'm not here to ruin your church. I'm here to serve as pastor and to week by week challenge us all with what Jesus said and did. I live on what I teach and try always to apply it to myself before I preach it to you. We must care for the church we have, even as we begin to grow a new church in the shade of the old. And that will take all the prayer and patience and love and listening to the Lord that we can together muster. It's much easier for churches to grow old and tired and die than to be reinvented for faithfulness in a new day. Jesus was honest about resistance and warned us. "And no one after drinking old wine desires new; for he says, 'The old is good.'" Everything is fine, preacher.

CONCLUSION

Jackie Robinson was the first black to play major league baseball. He faced jeering crowds in every stadium. While playing one day in Brooklyn, he committed an error. His own fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated. Then shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie Robinson, and they faced the crowd together. The fans grew quiet in the face of such solidarity. Robinson later said that arm around his shoulder saved his career.⁹

⁹ "To Illustrate: Brotherhood," *Leadership*, Spring 1990, 48.

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When is the last time you reached across a racial or moral or class or cultural barrier to befriend someone whom others despised or else despised themselves? It is an act of courage based on faith. Simply put, it's what Jesus did every day, and what we must do if we are to be known as his disciples. Levi is the key to our future. Who is God calling you to pray for and reach out to in love? Take a minute in silence for the Lord to bring their face before you. Begin praying for them today. In your heart bring to the Lord's table with you. Ask for his help and guidance in how to bridge the gap. Then let me know what happens.

Appendix I: How Jesus' Call Differed From Other Rabbis

	<u>Rabbi Jesus</u>	<u>Other Jewish Rabbis Of The Day</u>
1. Call/Initiative:	Whom he chooses	Waits to be chosen by others
2. Place of teaching:	Synagogues, fields, homes, market, temple	Synagogue
3. Followers:	Twelve, women, children, tax collectors, sinners	Males only, Serious Jews, no others
4. Authority:	Underived (from above)	Precedent and tradition, School of interpretation
5. Potential:	Never exceed master	May exceed master
6. Allegiance:	To Jesus, "Follow me."	To Torah

Appendix II: The Two Forms Of Ancient Call Stories

Summons And Response Pattern (Greco-Roman Model, 5 th - 2 nd Century B.C.)						Attraction Pattern
7 Parts	1 Kgs. 19:19-21	Socrates Xenophon	Mk. 1:16-18	Mk. 1:19-20	Mk. 2:13-14	Mk. 10:17-22
1) Travel	v.19a	1	1:16a	1:19a	__2:13-14a	10:17a
2) Initiative	Elijah	2 Socrates	Jesus	Jesus	Jesus	Rich Man
3) Sees Names Given Occupation	v.19b v.19b v.19b	___x	1:16b 1:16c 1:16d	___1:19b 1:19b 1:19c	___2:14b 2:14b 2:14c	x
4) Parents	v.20	x	x	v.20b	x	x
5) Dialog	v.19c-20a v.20b-21a	__3 (Easy) 4 (Hard)	x	x	x	10:17c-19 10:20-21
6) Call Promise	v.19c	___5a 5b	1:17a 1:17b	1:20a (Implied in called)	2:14d x	10:21b 10:21a
7) Cost Obey/ Not	vv.19c-21a v.21b	___ 6	1:18a 1:18b	___1:20b 1:20c	___2:14e 2:14f	10:22b 10:22a

**Appendix III:
Contrasting Biblical Discipleship & Modern Church (Club) Membership (Thraillkill, et. al.)**

Ancient Christian Discipleship	American Church (Club) Membership
Risky, High Cost	Safe, Low Cost
Contributor & Stakeholder	Consumer & Observer
<i>In The World As A Clear Alternative Community</i>	<i>Of The World With A Few Moral Variations</i>
Total Self Involvement	Segmented Self (Sunday Faith) “Come a little bit, do a little bit, give a little bit, and say a whole lot.”
Obey In Behavior	Assent In Beliefs/ Doctrine
Active, Involved	Passive, Observers
Always Serious, High Adventure	Mostly Casual, Low Demand, Minimal Adventure
High Supernatural Exposure: Miracles Expected	Rare Exposure To Supernatural: Skepticism Is The Norm
Always On The Move	Rarely On The Move
At The Vital Center Of Life	Around The Edge Of Life As A Possible Option
High Challenge	High Comfort
Group Orientation: <i>We First</i>	Individual Orientation: <i>Me First</i>
Allegiance: Tight Bond, Severance Required	Affiliation: Loose Bond, Easily Abandoned
Home As Hospitality, Place Of Teaching	Home As Refuge, Hiding Place, Entertainment
Offer Life And Substance	Pay Club Dues
High Expectation For Transformation	Low Expectation For Transformation
Intense Training, Change Expected	Observing/ Critique Expected
Largely Outdoors	Largely Indoors
Organic Bond: Shared Life	Institutional Bond: Shared Space In Buildings
Follow Jesus, Learn His Ways, Share His Ministry	Admire Jesus, Worship Him, Pay Others To Do Work
Jesus As Leader, Model And Mentor	Jesus As Savior From Sins Worst Consequences
Confrontive And Blunt: Being True!	Convivial And Affable: Being Nice!
High Accountability	Low Accountability
Intense Fellowship: 24/7 + Conflict	Occasional Fellowship: Coffee/Cookies + Avoidance
Disciples Often Look Bad, Goofy, Incompetent	Members Focus On Image-Management, Looking Good
Location: Front Lines	Location: Behind the Lines
Ministry By Amateurs (for the love of it)	Ministry By Professionals (career clergy)
All Are Spiritually Gifted Ministers	Pay The Professionals (Clergy + Staff) To Do It For Us
Jesus And His Kingdom Mission Draw Resources	Institutional Maintenance Draws Large Resources
Holy Spirit As Creative, Disruptive Presence	Low Tolerance For The Unexpected

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