

Luke 5:27-31

27 After these things He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." 28 So he left all, rose up, and followed Him. 29 Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them. 30 And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" 31 Jesus answered and said to 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."

It's been said that you can tell a lot about a man by the company he keeps. So far in our study of the gospel according to St. Luke we see Jesus keeping company with such persons as:

- a man with an unclean spirit
- persons with various diseases
- lowly fishermen
- a leprous man
- a paralyzed man

From this morning's text we can add to that list a tax collector. What a crew huh?

In those days a tax collector was generally a Jew who worked for the Roman government by collecting taxes which had been imposed upon them. Almost without exception they would also impose their own 'personal tax' or collection fee on top of the already burdensome amount required to be given. Needless to say they were not very well liked by their Jewish brothers and were viewed as 'sell outs' to the Roman oppressors and a constant reminder that God had certainly forsaken them and given them over to the enemy.

Bible commentator Matthew Henry had this to say about Jesus' interaction with Levi the tax collector:

'It was a wonder of his grace that he would call a publican, from the receipt of custom, to be his disciple and follower. It was wonderful condescension that he should admit poor fishermen to that honor, men of the lowest rank; but much more wonderful that he should admit publicans, men of the worst reputation, men of ill fame. In this Christ humbled himself, and appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh. By this he exposed himself, and got the invidious character of a friend of publicans and sinners.'

What kind of savior is this? The kind of savior you want to follow! The kind of savior that straightforwardly calls Levi to **'Follow Me!'**

The title of this morning's message is **'Follow Me!'**

Verse 27 says **'after these things'** which is in reference to the story we discussed last week. Jesus might have needed a breath of fresh air after His latest confrontation so the scripture tells us **'He went out.'**

1. Jesus went out

I am so glad Jesus goes out aren't you?

Luke 19:10 reminds us of Jesus primary purpose: ***'For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.'***

In the book Why Christians Sin J.K. Johnston writes:

Jesus met unbelievers where they were. He realized what many Christians today never seem to. According to one count, the gospel records 132 contacts that Jesus had with people. Six were in the Temple, four in the synagogue and 122 were out with people in the mainstream of life.

Did you realize that? I never did. 10 at religious gatherings and 122 while He was out. Amazing don't you think?

Jesus didn't holler 'Follow Me' from the sanctuary but from the sidewalk! That is one of the many things I love about Christ United Church: we go out!

EX: Tuesday night TNT this past week, Arlen Stovall and I visited three families. We had a great time.

Last Monday night Anthony, Jeff Ervin and I went to my first associational meeting in New Castle. The Executive Director for Southern Baptist's in Indiana, Dr. Steven Davis shared a message entitled 5 Signs of a Dead or Dying Church. It was an inspiring word! His main points were:

1. The church is living on a past reputation rather than a present reality.
2. The church is run for the benefit of the insiders and ignores outsiders.
3. The church's ministries become mundane instead of meaningful.
4. The church has no enthusiasm.
5. The church has no body life.

I was stunned at just how close his content matched the message I preached last weekend. Church, we have not arrived by any stretch of the imagination but we are on our way. We are going out!

Tuesday night TNT; Back to School bash is in the planning stages; Impact World Tour is ramping up; I am reviewing material for workplace evangelism training.

So that 'after these things' [Sunday morning celebrations; mid week Bible studies that equip and prepare us] we go out!

[while He went out...]

2. Jesus looked out

Verse 27 goes on to tell us that Jesus *'saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office.'*

Hey, don't fool yourself into thinking that everybody gets seen just because they are there.

Question: how many times have you driven past the guy that has been standing fore several weeks at the end of the drive down on 37th Street by Wal-Mart and looked the other way so you wouldn't 'see him?' The answer would be probably as many times as I have.

EX: Ringing the bell for the Salvation Army at Christmas a couple times and the way people 'see' you without really even 'seeing' you or else they see you, look the other way and act like they don't see you.

*Monk and Neagle 'The 21st Time'

Nowhere to live
Nowhere to fall
He used to have money
But he's wasted it all
His face is a photograph burned in mind
But I pretend not to see him for the twenty-first time

He sleeps under stars, it's all he can afford
His blanket's an old coat he's had since the war
He stands on the corner of Carter and Vine
But I pretend not to see him for the twenty-first time

He may be a drifter who's grown old and gray
But what if it's Jesus and I walk away
I say I'm the body and drink of the wine
But I pretend not to see him for the twenty-first time

She's 29 but she feels 48
She can't raise three kids on minimum wage
She's crying in back of the welfare line
But I pretend not to see her for the twenty-first time

She may be a stranger trying to get through the day
But what if it's Jesus and I walk away
I say I'm the body and drink of the wine
But I pretend not to see her for the twenty-first time

This is a call for a change in my heart
I realize that I've not been doing my part
When I needed a Savior, I found it in Him
He gave to me, now I'll give back to them

Drifter or stranger, daughter or son
I'll look for Jesus in everyone
'Cause I am the body and drink of the wine
And I'm thankful there's more than the twenty-first time

However, Jesus saw Levi, a tax collector, sitting in custom house. Let me give you a little more information about this occupation.

In The Christ of the Gospels, W Shepard writes

'There was more than one type of tax-collector in those days. Levi was a custom-house official. The Talmud distinguishes between the tax collector and the custom house official. The tax collector, or Gabbai collected the regular real estate and income taxes on the poll tax; while the custom house official, or Mockhes, collected the duty on imports, exports, toll on roads, bridges, the harbour, the town tax, and a great multiplicity of other variable taxes on an unlimited variety of things, admitting of much abuse and graft.

The very word Mockhes was associated with the idea of oppression and injustice. The taxes in Judea were levied by publicans, who were Jews, and therefore hated the more as direct officials of the heathen Roman power. Levi occupied the detestable position of a publican of the worst type—a little Mockhes.

The name "publican," which applied to these officials, is derived from the Latin word *publicanus*—a man who did public duty. The Jews detested these publicans not only on account of their frequent abuses and tyrannical spirit, but because the very taxes they were forced to collect by the Roman government were a badge of servitude and a constant reminder that God had forsaken His people and land in spite of the Messianic hope, founded on many promises of the ancient prophets. The publicans were classed by the people with harlots, usurers, gamblers, thieves, and dishonest herdsmen, who lived hard, lawless lives. They were just "licensed robbers" and "beasts in human shape."

According to Rabbinism there was no hope for a man like Levi. He was excluded from all religious fellowship. His money was considered tainted and defiled anyone who accepted it. He could not serve as a witness. The Rabbis had no word of help for the publican, because they expected him by external conformity to the law to be justified before God.

When the verse says that Jesus saw Levi, the word saw means

1. to behold, look upon, view attentively, contemplate (often used of public shows)
 - a. of important persons that are looked on with admiration
2. to view, take a view of
 - a. in the sense of visiting, meeting with a person
3. to learn by looking, to see with the eyes, to perceive

This is no casual glance. Not only did Jesus not avoid glancing in Levi's general direction, He beheld Him, and probably not only with His eyes but with His heart as well!

That's how Jesus looks at you and me; beyond the ugliness of our sin.

Jesus looked this way at a man named Saul who was implicated in the stoning death of the first Christian martyr Stephen.

Acts 26:9-20 The Message

9-11 "I admit that I didn't always hold to this position. For a time I thought it was my duty to oppose this Jesus of Nazareth with all my might. Backed with the full authority of the high priests, I threw these believers—I had no idea they were God's people!—into the Jerusalem jail right and left, and whenever it came to a vote, I voted for their execution. I stormed through their meeting places, bullying them into cursing Jesus, a one-man terror obsessed with obliterating these people. And then I started on the towns outside Jerusalem.

12-14 "One day on my way to Damascus, armed as always with papers from the high priests authorizing my action, right in the middle of the day a blaze of light, light outshining the sun, poured out of the sky on me and my companions. Oh, King, it was so bright! We fell flat on our faces. Then I heard a voice in Hebrew: 'Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me? Why do you insist on going against the grain?'

15-16 "I said, 'Who are you, Master?' "The voice answered, 'I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down like an animal. But now, up on your feet—I have a job for you. I've handpicked you to be a servant and witness to what's happened today, and to what I am going to show you.

17-18 "I'm sending you off to open the eyes of the outsiders so they can see the difference between dark and light, and choose light, see the difference between Satan and God, and choose God. I'm sending you off to present my offer of sins forgiven, and a place in the family, inviting them into the company of those who begin real living by believing in me.'

19-20 "What could I do, King Agrippa? I couldn't just walk away from a vision like that! I became an obedient believer on the spot. I started preaching this life-change—this radical turn to God and everything it meant in everyday life—right there in Damascus, went on to Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside, and from there to the whole world.

[Jesus went out, looked out, and ...

3. Jesus called out

The last part of verse 27 reads *'And He said to him, "Follow Me."*

It's one thing to go out and to see a tax collector, but to actually call out to one? Wow. What was He thinking? Others might hear Him and what if Levi actually did follow Him?

The invitation to 'follow me' means Jesus invited Levi

1. to follow one who precedes, join him as his attendant, accompany him
2. to join one as a disciple, become or be his disciple
 - a. side with his party

Don't confuse this 'calling out' to be Levi's invitation to be one of the 12 disciples. This does not happen until Luke 6:12-16 when Jesus goes up into the mountains to pray concerning this important decision.

It is probable Levi had heard Jesus teaching by the sea side since this story is generally believed to have occurred in Capernaum where Jesus has spent quite a bit of time teaching and healing. Who knows, He might have seen Levi 21 times. Now, Levi has a personal invitation.

Let's shift gears a bit and look at Levi's response in following Jesus:

4. Levi threw away his past

28 So he left all, rose up, and followed Him.

Pretty dramatic response huh? Leaving everything behind, getting up and walking away from it all and heading towards Jesus!

Even though his occupation was despicable in the public's eyes it was considered to be very profitable financially so Levi's *'leaving it all behind'* is no small feat.

Peter had a question about such devotion and loss experienced while following Jesus' call to 'follow me' and Jesus had an answer:

Luke 18:28-30

'Then Peter said, "See, we have left all and followed You." So He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life."

Jesus left His home in heaven and His Father for the sake of us finding the kingdom of God. He is not asking us to do anything that He has not been willing to do Himself in an even greater measure.

[Levi not only threw away his past...

5. Levi threw a wild party

29 Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them.'

One might think having thrown everything away that Levi would have had a wake rather than a party. Not so!

With all due respect and reverence I believe Jesus loves a good party! Hey, the Bible says the angels in heaven do:

Luke 15:8-10 The Message

8-10"Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she'll call her friends and neighbors: 'Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!' Count on it—that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God."

Luke 7:33-34 TLB

33 For John the Baptist didn't spend his time eating bread or drinking wine, and you say, 'He's possessed by a demon.' 34 The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, 'He's a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!'

Whatever! Some people just are not happy about anything! As my mother used to say ***'some people would complain if they were hung with a new rope.'***

What can we glean from all of this and apply in our own life?

Since we see that Jesus went out, looked out, and called out and that in following Jesus Levi threw away his past and threw a wild party, what might we do?

- Follow Jesus
- Have compassion rather than condemnation towards sinners
- In order to do that we must have contact with them

Question: how many of us can name 5 friends they spend any reasonable amount of time with that are lost?

The lesson which Jesus was trying to communicate to the Pharisees is vitally important to Christians today. These two fundamental principles are the key to penetrating our society with the saving grace of God.

If we have compassion, we will not spend all of our time and energy condemning sinners, but will rather call them to repentance.

If we would obey our Lord by calling them to repentance which is the essence of the great commission, then we must learn to have contact with sinners in such a way as to be comfortable with them and they with us, without conforming to their ungodly ways.

This is what our Lord did, and this is what our Lord calls us to do. We, in the name of separation from sin, are often sinning by not showing compassion to sinners and by not having contact with them so as to be able to share the gospel.

The apostle Paul had to correct similar misconceptions in the church at Corinth:

1 Corinthians 5:9-11

'I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one'

From 'The Kingdom of God is a Party' by Tony Campolo

Tony Campolo told how, upon arrival in Honolulu, he made his way unwittingly to a seedy part of town for a snack at 3:30 in the morning, to be surrounded by eight or nine prostitutes who had just taken the night off. He overheard the prostitute beside him saying to her girlfriend, "Tomorrow is my birthday." Her friend rebutted, "So what do you want from me? You want me to get you a cake and sing, 'Happy Birthday?'" The birthday girl protested, "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? Why should you give me a birthday party now when I've never had a birthday party in my whole life?"

When the prostitutes left, Campolo decided to decorate the place the next night and give the birthday girl a surprise party with the help of the bartender, who happily chipped in the cake. The next day, the stunned girl was so taken back when the whole bar sang a birthday song to her. She first refused to cut the cake, then asked if she could keep the cake a little longer, and finally, for some unknown reason, even dashed home with the cake after promising to return with it later.

Campolo offered to say a prayer for the woman before the stunned crowd, and after prayer, the bartender remarked, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" Campolo replied, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning." The bartender then sneered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it."