



Catalog No. 1915

Luke 5:27-39

15th Message

John Hanneman

January 20, 2013

A FEW (NOT SO) GOOD MEN

SERIES: *THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

When my wife and I were dating and getting to know each other I was delighted to hear her say that she loved camping. Being from Nebraska I was eager to explore the Sierras. My idea of camping was backpacks, sleeping bags, tents, and being out in nature. When we got married I was very surprised to encounter my wife's resistance to camping. I said to her, "You told me when we were dating that you loved camping." She said, "When you talked about camping I thought you meant camping like in going to tennis camp." Her idea of camping involved cabins, food cooked for you, and people to take care of you. I discovered that we had completely different perspectives towards camping, and after a few years I abandoned my pursuit. While in marriage we live with different points of view and in fact come to appreciate them, there could be no such union between Jesus and the religious establishment of his day.

We are in the portion of Luke where Jesus is teaching, healing, and calling disciples to follow him. Also, as we began to see last week, he is beginning to face opposition from the Pharisees and scribes because of their different perspectives. We will see those differences today in how Jesus sees people, how Jesus relates to people, and what Jesus thinks about religious traditions. Our text includes another call scene followed by controversy over Jesus' radical conduct, which directly challenges the status quo. Jesus turns everything upside down. To follow Jesus means to embrace a lifestyle that goes against the current of our culture, our natural inclinations, and sometimes even the traditions of the church.

The Calling of Levi

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. (Luke 5:27-28)

This is the second of three call scenes in Luke. We looked at the first call scene a couple of weeks ago when Jesus called Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and told him that he would be a fisher of men. Just as the calling of Peter took place after a healing scene, so does the call of Levi. The last call scene will be the choosing of the Twelve as apostles in chapter 6.

Levi is almost certainly Matthew, the author of the Gospel of Matthew; in that gospel, Levi is called Matthew. Levi is a tax collector. The term used here indicates that he was not a chief tax collector, like Zacchaeus, but a lower level tax collector who reported to someone else. He worked for either the Romans or for Herod. Tax collectors were extortionists, skimming money off the top. They were considered traitors to their own people, the scum of the earth. As a result Levi was hated and viewed as an outcast. The leper was an outcast due to a physical disease. Levi was an outcast due to his occupation. No one would have wanted to associate with Levi in the same way that we would not want to associate with a hedge fund manager who had ripped us off. This week Levi might be Lance Armstrong.

Luke's account of the calling is amazingly brief. One day Jesus sees Levi. Matthew and Mark tell us that he was in the tax booth, the place where tax collectors would collect the levy as people went from city to city. Jesus consciously singles the man out. He probably had been observing him for some time. Jesus invites Levi to follow him, and like Peter and his fishing buddies, Levi leaves everything and follows Jesus.

Jesus seems to make a very odd selection in choosing Levi. This is not a choice we would make or approve of if we were establishing the kingdom of God, starting a company, or even choosing people for a pick-up game of soccer. Obviously, Jesus sees something in Levi that no one else notices. He accepts him with unconditional love and empowers him to a new life.

I am captivated by the call of Levi and so was Caravaggio. I want us to reflect on a painting by Caravaggio, *The Calling of St. Matthew*, that hangs on a wall in the Contarelli Chapel in Rome. The painting is very large, 10 ½ feet by 11 feet, and thus the figures are life-size. There are two other paintings in the chapel, one depicting Matthew writing his gospel and the other his martyrdom. In her book, *Contemplative Vision*, Juliet Benner points out the significant aspects of the painting.

The scene is inside and we assume that this is the tax collector's office. There are two halves to the painting. On the left are five men dressed in the European style contemporary to Caravaggio. On the right are two men dressed in the attire of Jesus' day. One is Jesus and the other is Peter.

Jesus is pointing at Levi with an outstretched arm. There is a faint halo over his head so that we do not miss his identity. Levi is in the middle of the five men. He is pointing at himself as if to say, "Who Me?" The invitation to follow Jesus would have caught Levi totally off guard.

Caravaggio was a master of light and darkness. We see a light coming from the right side of the painting from a different source than the window. The light is supernatural and it pierces the darkness.

The two men on the left are engrossed with the counting of money. They do not even look at Jesus. The young man leaning on Levi's shoulder seems to be paying attention, but is hesitant. The man on the right straddles a bench. Perhaps this is an indication that he has a foot in two worlds. He is listening to Peter who also has an extended arm and is pointing like Jesus. Peter is learning to be a fisher of men.

The five men are of varying ages, indicating that Jesus invites everyone, no matter how old. And again, Jesus and Peter are dressed in plain dress of the 1st century indicating that Jesus calls people in every generation, not just his own.

The outstretched arm of Jesus is right under the window and the frame forms an obvious cross. To follow Jesus means we must leave

everything, take up the cross and die to self. Levi will have to give up his wealth in order to follow Jesus.

Who catches your attention in the painting? With whom do you identify? Can you imagine Jesus pointing to you and inviting you to come out of the darkness into the light despite all your sin, brokenness and unworthiness?

The disciples were very common, ordinary men; some even of questionable character. They were just like us. Jesus calls us to follow him and become a disciple. This call is not based on our worthiness, ability, training, or social status. What is important is not worthiness but willingness to follow. The Marines want a few good men. Jesus has a different perspective.

Paul told the Corinthians: “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29 ESV)

We live in the age of superstars, in sports, business, movies, and even in the church. We are enamored with superstar pastors, worship leaders, and authors. The average Christian can feel inadequate and think they have nothing to offer. We think it is better to defer to the charismatic, outgoing people who are natural leaders. This story tells us that this is bogus thinking. Jesus chooses us in our unworthiness and empowers us to live a new life. We don't have to be a superstar and it doesn't matter where we came from. We are a valuable and important contributor to the mission of God. What is important is simply the willingness to follow and the openness to teaching. Jesus can do the rest.

The Friend of Sinners

And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:29-32)

Next we see that Levi throws a party for his new friend, Jesus. He invites everyone he knows. Of course, they are all tax collectors because he doesn't have any other kind of friends. Levi is already following Jesus. He is using his home to bring the message of Jesus to others.

The Pharisees are greatly upset. They approach the disciples, not Jesus directly, and ask them what is going on. This would have been at a later time, because the Pharisees and scribes would not have been caught dead at the feast. The problem is that Jesus is eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. He is reclining at table, meaning that he is participating in table fellowship. This is not just having a casual conversation at the grocery store, but sharing a meal.

Remember the issue that we talked about last week in regards to the leper? The issue was purity and apartness. To have table fellowship with sinners rendered a Jew unclean. In the mind of the Pharisees Jesus should have refused the invitation to join the

party. His acceptance was a powerful affront to the way things were supposed to be done.

The Pharisees are grumbling, just like Israel did in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, complaining to Moses about the lack of water and the lack of food. They wished they had stayed and died in Egypt where they knew the rules. Once again the sons of Israel are unhappy about how God is doing things. They don't want to change even though what is ahead is so much better than what is behind.

Jesus responds to the grumbling with a statement of his mission. He came to the sick, not the healthy. Jesus is a physician of the soul. Luke, being a doctor, must have loved this statement. If you are physically sick you go the doctor and get the medicine you need to be well. If you are spiritually sick you come to Jesus. Wellness comes through repentance, to reorient oneself to God on his terms, to shift your view of things, to turn around and follow Jesus.

Of course in order to get well, one has to recognize they are ill and in need of a doctor. The ironic thing is that the Pharisees would have seen themselves as the righteous not as the sick. However, they have the same need as the tax collectors and sinners.

It seems that Jesus' choice of Levi is becoming a lifestyle. Jesus sought out sinners and social outcasts; he accepted them and spent time with them even though others frowned on such personal relationships. “Jesus shows us the extent of his compassion and the depth of God's grace.”¹

How do we choose the people we want to be friends with, the people we want to associate with and share table fellowship with? When you are in a large group of people how do you position yourself at the table? Our natural inclination is to be with people we enjoy, who provide upward mobility, make us feel good, and accept us as part of the “in” group. Like the Pharisees we desire to stay clean and avoid the undesirables and difficult people. However, to follow Jesus means to be very intentional about the relationships we foster.

Who has God put in your life to impact for the kingdom of God? What we are talking about here is spending time not with believers, but with unbelievers, people who are in need of a spiritual physician. What we are also talking about here is not a ten-minute conversation, but hanging out over a meal. What we are talking about is not throwing the four spiritual laws into someone's face, but entering into a relationship with our neighbors, family, the people we work with, folks at the gym, or the parents at our children's schools. What we are talking about is hospitality; welcoming someone else into our space, opening up our home and our heart, engaging others as human beings, and providing a place for someone to feel safe.

Living relationally and hospitably can create a great deal of fear. We fear being contaminated and defiled and so we wall ourselves off for protection, kind of like guarding against the flu. But as we saw last week in the case of the leper, we don't get infected by the unclean but rather we can offer cleaning and healing to the people who need it and are willing to recognize their need. We may well face rejection and skepticism. Jesus did. But we also will encounter people who genuinely want what the gospel offers.

Today is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday and Donna shared about the work of Real Options. This is a great example of who we are supposed to be in the world. We seek out people who are struggling and in need, offering hope to the downtrodden and shining light in the midst of darkness.

To Fast or Not To Fast

And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.” (Luke 5:33–35)

The controversy now continues but shifts to matters of the Law associated with Jesus’ dinner conduct. This thread will continue into two Sabbath controversies that Bernard will talk about next week. Luke’s writing is very compressed and the setting is distinct from the previous verse. A question comes not from the Pharisees but from some people who come to Jesus. If the questioners had been the Pharisees they would have referred to themselves as “we.”

The question revolves around fasting. John’s disciples and the Pharisee’s disciples fast and pray while Jesus’ disciples eat and drink, referring to eating and drinking with sinners in verse 30. Confession and intercession usually accompanied times of fasting.

The practice of fasting was a highly regarded practice by the Jews. There were fasts for specific occasions. Some were national fasts, like the Day of Atonement. There were three-day fasts, week long fasts. There was a four-day fast to recall Jerusalem’s downfall. The zealous fasted twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Jesus himself fasted, as did the early church. Fasting was a central act of piety and seen as virtuous. One fasted to focus on God and pray.

Jesus responds to the question with a wedding metaphor. A wedding celebration would last a week. This week would be characterized by joy and there would not be any fasting. In the Old Testament, there are several passages that use the wedding metaphor as a sign of the messianic age, the messianic wedding banquet. We also know that the metaphor of bridegroom and bride are used as references to Christ and the church.

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God has arrived. This is a time of joy and not fasting. There will be a time when the bridegroom is taken and then fasting will again be appropriate. Thus fasting is not rejected but the emphasis will change. No longer will it be regulated or seen as a test of spirituality. Fasting will be a practice to focus on God and to look forward to the consummation of the kingdom, the return of the bridegroom, and the restoration of creation and the church. Fasting expresses a longing to be in the presence of Jesus and experience wedding joy.

The Times They Are A-Changin’

He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’” (Luke 5:36–39 ESV)

Jesus offers a further explanation through the use of parables. Specifically, he gives two metaphors and a proverb highlighted by the threefold use of “no one.” These explanations will carry over to the Sabbath controversies in chapter 6.

The first metaphor involves old and new clothing. No one would take a piece from a new garment and use it to repair an old garment

(unless you were a hippy back in the 60’s). The mixing of the two doesn’t work. Both garments are ruined. The old cloth and the new cloth don’t fit together. The parable means that Jesus is new and can’t be mixed with old religious ways and traditions.

The second metaphor involves wine and wineskins. Wineskins were made from sheep or goats and the neck of the animal would be the spout for the wineskin. Old wineskins became brittle and if new wine was put into an old wineskin, the new wine would ferment, expand, and burst the brittle container. No one would do such a thing. The lesson of the second parable is the same as the first. You can’t put the new wine of Jesus into the old way of thinking and doing things. New wine can’t be contained within Judaism without destroying both.

Both of the parables mean that you can’t mix the old covenant with the new. You can’t slap a little of Jesus onto the old religious traditions. You can’t mix them together like a salad. You can’t take what you like from both and come up with a new religious system, even though that is exactly what happens in every generation. The old system has to be thrown out, abandoned and the new completely embraced in its totality. Jesus isn’t tacked on to our lives or religious beliefs. He changes everything or nothing. The world of the Pharisees and the world of Jesus don’t mix. Neither do Jesus and our world. This is not like having different ideas about camping.

The proverb states that old wine drinkers are satisfied with the old wine of the Law and don’t want to try the new wine of Jesus. They are content with the old and don’t want to change. The old wine drinkers are the Jews, but the proverb provides a warning to all of us. The tendency is to get set in our ways. The way we have done things in the past is good enough. We like the rules we have. Don’t rock the boat. But, following Jesus means to be open to change, to desire to grow, to be willing to be stretched, and to give consent to the ways that Jesus wants to rearrange our lives. What might Jesus want to change about us individually and corporately?

Mike Mason writes: “Often people are unhappy because they resist change If they were guaranteed happiness as a reward, they might be willing to make one or two small changes, but instinctively they know it wouldn’t stop there. Remaining happy would require more and more changes, until continuous growth became a lifestyle. By digging in their heels and making changes only under duress, they never know the joy of abandoning themselves to a God whose purposes for His children are so unlimited that there’s no time for coasting.”²

During these last few weeks in Luke I have been struck by how encompassing and comprehensive and all pervasive a relationship with Jesus is intended to be. Jesus doesn’t call us into a relationship to fix us, but to transform us. He doesn’t want to patch up the old, he wants us to be completely new. He doesn’t want us to just long for heaven, he wants us to be restored *now*.

Jesus turns our world inside out and upside down. This affects how we see people, how we choose the company we keep, and how we guard against substituting a religious system for a relationship with God.

We don’t seek to rise to the top but to descend into the world of tax collectors. We don’t find our worth in worldly achievements or religious practices. We find our worth in the one who has called us. The Pharisees were good men. They would have made great neighbors. But Jesus doesn’t want a few good men. He wants many

not-so-good people who are willing to be changed so that the kingdom of God is visible in our world.

What we must remember is that the new wine is the wine of the Spirit that empowers us to live in a way that doesn't depend on our effort. As Paul wrote: "Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Cor. 3:4-6)

1 Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 1*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 500

2 Mike Mason, *Champagne for the Soul*, (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 98

© 2013 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino