

# 04/13/25 - Luke 5:27-32 - "A Seat for Sinners"

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Date: 13 April 2025

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[ 0 : 00 ] Luke chapter 5, verses 27-32.

We'll begin our reading in Luke chapter 5, verse 27. And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. There's been a tension in every generation, I would say.

[ 1 : 13 ] I don't think that's an exaggeration. I think in every generation, there has been a tension that wrestles with the question of what it means to be holy.

What it really means to be holy. Or maybe perhaps more to the point of asking, Whom does God welcome?

There have been times in church history when holiness sort of was confused with distance. That you couldn't be within close proximity with people who weren't like you.

And that was holiness. Distance from the broken. Distance from the compromised. Distance from the unclean. And sinners weren't just excluded from pulpits throughout church history.

They were actually barred out of pews. They couldn't sit in church. They had to stand in the back. In the 18th century, John Wesley stood in open fields preaching to coal miners at dawn.

[ 2 : 25 ] Not because it was cool and hip and trendy. But because the Church of England had shut its doors to such people.

The poor, the uneducated, the emotional, the unrefined were unwelcome to the Church of England. So, Wesley said, forget them.

He went to where they were. To the grime and the grits of life. A century later, you might recognize the name William Booth.

He faced similar resistance. He brought the poor, the addicted, and the broken into the Church. All of these to the pews of the Methodist Church.

And he got kicked out for it. What was Booth's offense? Giving the wrong people the best seats in the house.

[ 3 : 26 ] And so, the Salvation Army was born during that time period. But it didn't start out in the 18th century or the 19th century.

It started with Jesus. We see that in the passage today. That the Church isn't a museum for the righteous. But it's a hospital for the sick.

We see that today. See, long before street preachers and evangelists, Jesus Christ clarified what it means to be holy.

Not by withdrawing from sinners, but by actually moving towards them. And in Luke 5, we meet a man whose life would have made any self-respecting religious person squirm.

A man with a reputation. A man believed to be beyond any point of grace. You see, Jesus in this passage, which is the main point, moves towards sinners with mercy, and he sends us to do likewise.

[ 4 : 40 ] Jesus moves towards sinners with mercy, and sends us to do likewise. And so I'd like you to take notes of this sermon title, A Seat for Sinners.

And what we're going to do is unpack in two different sections that Jesus came to call sinners, not to avoid them. He enters their mess with mercy, calls them to repentance, and invites us into the same work.

So I'd like to pray as we enter our time and reflect on these words from Ambrose. Let's pray.

Merciful Lord, Comforter and Teacher of Your faithful people, increase in Your church the desires which You have given. Confirm the hearts of those who hope in You by enabling them to understand the depth of Your promises, that all of Your adopted sons may even now behold with the eyes of faith and patiently wait for the light, which as yet You do not openly manifest, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. All right, so two sections today. And the first, we're going to meet Levi.

[ 6 : 05 ] Jesus calls the unworthy. We're going to see this from verse 27 to 28. Just as what was read this morning, after this, He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth.

Now, like I said, Luke doesn't pack this with much description. He gets to the point. We meet Levi stationed at a toll booth of sorts.

As you can imagine, how we might think of toll booths, whatever comes in your head, you're close. These were booths that were stationed towards entrances, highly trafficked areas, maybe ports to catch the maximum amount of people.

So travelers, merchants, fishermen, like Peter and his crew coming back from their world record catch would be ones to pass by Levi and would have, and Levi would have the legal authority to stop them, inspect what they got, and also tack on some taxes, some tolls, and a couple extra fees.

He was the troll under the bridge. That was Levi. Levi. And so, if you picture the scene, you got, you know, you got Uptown Pizza, you got the mall, you got all these stores, and then you got the toll booth right there, right where all the traffic is.

[ 7 : 47 ] And you got this guy, just the head poking out through the window. Levi. And now due to the absence of checks and balances of the operations of these toll booths, nobody was checking in on Levi, checking his receipts, making sure that he's not overcharging some of these fees and things like that.

This booth would frequently become a target of theft. And tax collectors would inflate the fees. They pocket the excess.

They'd make sure the taxes are paid for Rome, and they would say, well, all right, 20 bucks. Got it. This was Levi's profession.

He was a professional thief. Levi's profession set him apart as unclean, barring him from the synagogue.

Couldn't go in the synagogue. Lumped him together with thieves of this day, prostitutes of this day, and Gentiles of this day. To put it plainly, Levi was irredeemable through public opinion.

[ 9 : 08 ] Irredeemable. Too far gone. In verse 27, Luke takes us to Jesus. Jesus said to him, follow me.

In verse 28, and leaving everything, he rose and followed him. Within these few quick words is an overlooked and profound miracle.

The gaze of Jesus Christ finds Levi's head in the toll booth. Jesus initiates contact with him, calls him, and Levi leaves everything and clings and cleaves to Jesus, meaning a continuous pattern of life.

Indeed, Levi did follow Jesus Christ for the rest of his life, for Levi is none other than the author of the Gospel of Matthew.

Levi in Hebrew, Matthew in Greek. Same fellow. But you might ask, what's miraculous about this scene?

[ 10 : 24 ] It seems pretty straightforward. We could probably get out of here a little bit early, Brent. That's about it. I mean, there's no casting out demons. There's no healing of lepers. There's no raising paralytics coming through the new skylight in the roof.

Right? The miracle lies in the simple fact that Jesus saw the disfigured life of Levi and offered him a new one.

Jesus did that. Just as the paralytic rose from his mat last week to follow Jesus, so too this tax collector leaves everything.

We got really interesting tenses of verbs here, and I've been up to my neck in Greek, and I'm not going to turn this into a Greek lesson, but it is fascinating.

The participles here in the aorist form followed by the imperfect indicative. The meaning of past action is gone, and it's a new, continuous, ongoing pattern of Levi's life.

[ 11 : 35 ] You see, this is the miracle of repentance, church. Not that we find God, but that God finds us.

Right? Not that we climb towards Him, but that He stoops down and speaks life into our dead hearts. Jesus finds us.

Now, we're not talking about Calvinism. We're not talking about Arminianism. We're talking biblical reality here. Jesus finds the sinner and calls the unworthy to come.

God initiates grace, and our response is none other to follow Him and to cling to Jesus tightly. See, our sin is the only qualification that we have to be saved, and God's election is the only means of which we are able to be saved.

You see, the one who has authority, authority has been the common thread throughout the past several weeks. The one who has authority over death.

[ 12 : 44 ] Here, guess what? He has authority over salvation. He initiates. So if you're here thinking today, well, I got a clean record compared to Levi, this definitely isn't for someone like me.

I'm far too gone, Mr. Pastor Man up there. I'm too far gone. I'm too dirty.

You can only imagine what's on my record. It's too late for me. If that is you today, I want you to hear this. That Jesus doesn't wait for the worthy.

He calls the unworthy. It's a theological reality. He doesn't recruit the righteous, the best dressed, the best behaved.

He raises the dead to life. He doesn't just pass by the booth in your life. He's literally out on a search and rescue mission.

[ 13 : 54 ] He doesn't walk past the booth of your life and just say, how you doing? I get it. See ya.

No. He stops. He sees. What does he see? He sees you since the foundation of this world. And he calls.

It's not a drive-by. It's a search and rescue indeed. And Jesus says, come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

If that's you today, find your rest. Rest from your guilt. Rest from your striving. Rest in God's sovereign grace that calls you to everlasting life.

Leave your sin and cling to him by your faith in Jesus Christ alone. We see the second section begin to unpack.

[ 15 : 00 ] Levi is radically changed. Crazy participles, all these different verbs, but it's a new life, a new trajectory. And we see in the second section, Jesus meets with the unclean.

And we see this from verse 29 all the way to 32 to the end of our time. And so Levi's first instinct after meeting Jesus, it's time to party.

Let's throw a party. Get the party planning committee on it. And we're good to go. Throw the party. Levi arranges a farewell party to celebrate the journey ahead.

He invites Jesus to this party. And we have to notice something important for us to interpret this rightly. Jesus Christ is the object of this feast.

We see that in verse 29. And Levi made him a great feast in the house. And there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them.

[ 16 : 12 ] And so now, I've seen my fair share of mobster flicks and things like that. They're not bad. I just wouldn't endorse them from a pulpit on Sunday morning. But I imagine those films being vivid here.

Jesus himself is surrounded surrounded by tax collectors, fraudsters, thieves, the lowest of the low, reclining with the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Imagine the courses that are being served, the cups that are being filled and refilled, the laughter, the talking, the lamps burning low in this house.

Levi invited his co-workers to experience the Son of God. And he joined in that search and rescue mission at this feast.

[ 17 : 19 ] And Jesus, again, is the featured guest. Christ. Why did he do this? Why would Levi respond by saying, friends, come to this party.

You've got to meet Jesus. It's because when a man finds peace with God, he wants others to as well. Each and every one of us here in this room who has been changed, transformed by the grace of God, is eager to say, let me show you where to find bread.

I found the bread of life. This wasn't a goodbye bash after all. It was a gospel banquet.

Levi invited everyone who sat in darkness in their lives to come and meet the light. But in verse 30, not everyone was celebrating.

Pharisees, here they are again. I talked about them last week. Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples saying, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

[ 18 : 44 ] So, imagine the banquet, the joy, the food, the tax collectors and Jesus Christ and Pharisees deeply offended.

Their offense wasn't the feast. It was the fellowship. How can you fellowship like this? How could you holy people, Jews, dine with such unholy people that aren't even allowed in the synagogue?

To the Pharisees, Jesus' guilt was by his association. But to the broken, he was the hope by invitation.

Jesus wasn't compromising righteousness here. He wasn't compromising at all. He was displaying mercy, teaching us, even today in our day-to-day and all the centuries past who got it wrong, what it means to be holy, what holiness is actually all about.

Verse 31, Jesus answered them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, but those who are sick, period.

[ 20 : 03 ] Next sentence, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. You see, this wasn't just compassion.

It wasn't just Jesus getting them. It was mission. Jesus didn't show up to applaud the righteous and the Pharisees for all their achievements, all the Torah that they have memorized.

He came actually to rescue the sick, and that indeed was happening here. In fact, Levi, in his gospel, Matthew, remember Levi, Matthew, same guy, in his gospel, he adds an extra line here.

And now, I'm always careful not to level out all the gospels and just preach them all as one gospel. There's unique attributes in each gospel that have a purpose, but I think that this is important to understand here.

Levi includes an extra line in his gospel. He says in Matthew 9, 13, Jesus also said, but go and learn what this means.

[ 21 : 09 ] I desire mercy, not sacrifice. This is quoted from Hosea 6, 6. This teaching underscores that God values compassionate actions and genuine relationships over ritualistic practices.

It calls believers to embody mercy in their interactions, reflecting God's own merciful nature. What do you call that? Holiness.

Holiness. Mercy is at the heart of Jesus Christ's mission to the lost. And further, those who did not care for sinners were ironically set apart from God, from the Holy One.

They were set apart from the One who set apart. We go to the sick, not to blend in, but to call them out, to bring them good news.

We don't pretend to be the doctors. We're the nurse practitioners that come in with the medicine. And we must be careful because presence can sometimes appear like affirmation or participation, right?

[ 22 : 31 ] You see me at the bar on Friday night, you're probably going to tell Rick and he's going to tell me to stop and go get some help. Right? I know, dropping phones over it, it's amazing.

Yeah, presence can appear like affirmation, a stamp of approval, or like you're participating in that. But in Jesus Christ, because we are set apart, presence for him was a strategy of redemption, not approval of their rebellion.

And the Bible warns us against fellowship with darkness. There's numerous verses out there, and so there is a certain interaction here, but fellowship is not the same as presence.

Presence is not fellowship. Fellowship implies unity, kind of like agreements, approval, and sort of a shared purpose.

Oh, how much did you fraud that guy out for? Oh, wow, that's cool. Yeah, I got 30 bucks out of that guy. Right? Jesus wasn't sharing their purpose.

[ 23 : 50 ] He was bringing a new purpose by his presence. Jesus was present among sinners, but he never joined them in their sin. His presence was redemptive, not reinforcing, not encouraging.

So further from that, presence becomes participation when redemptive purpose is completely lost. And this is important for our day today and for you sitting today.

If the gospel isn't clear, then our presence becomes ambiguous. But if Jesus is the reason you're there, because you have been set apart in Christ, then your presence is a witness, not a compromise.

There's a difference between eating with sinners and feasting on sin. There's a difference. And Jesus did the first to rescue them from the second. I want us to think about a couple warnings from this passage.

Two warnings and three encouragements. First warning we find here is against spiritual elitism, that the church must never become a club of the clean, or what did I say, museum of the righteous, right?

[ 25 : 18 ] Forgetting that we are all sinners saved by grace. We never graduate from grace. We never retire in sanctification until we meet Jesus in glory after this life.

We must never forget that we are sinners and we must therefore never forget those without Christ are lost.

sinners. It is a black and white issue even if they're the best person on the world. Ephesians 2 tells us these are people who are without hope, dead in their transgressions and sins.

So we must keep preaching the gospel, inviting sinners to come to Jesus Christ. Pure hearts need to get their hands dirty once in a while, church.

I pray that our hands are filthy because of the gospel work in this church. Whether it's through the activities in the food pantry that are going on.

[ 26 : 25 ] Thanks, Emily, for coordinating all these baskets of fresh fruit and produce. You see, if our food pantry just turns into a social service and loses the purpose of trying to rescue those people who come in our doors who might not know Jesus Christ or think they know but they don't know, you don't know unless you invite them in, talk to them.

And praise the Lord for everyone who comes to this food pantry. The second warning is against spiritual complacency. I lied, there's three warnings and three encouragements.

second warning is spiritual complacency because some misuse this passage as sort of like a license to blend in with the world.

Well, Jesus lounged with sinners. Why can't I? Never forget that Jesus was God.

That's helpful. And he was the very purpose of that gathering. He was the direct object of that gathering.

[ 27 : 49 ] He was not just a guest but he was the doctor in the house, making a house call. 1 Corinthians 5, I think aligns, realigns our disgust of sin to be more concerned when sin is within the church and less concerned about the sin outside of the church as well.

In other words, we should be more concerned about not about eating at the table of sinners but actually unrepentant Christians, which is the thrust of 1 Corinthians 5.

In both, we have to be on guard of spiritual complacency. And the third warning is against spiritual liberalism. And this is building on the last point because on the other hand, there is also an important danger when Christians who believe that they can embody Jesus Christ's mission, His mercy and methods to the extent that their lives begin to compromise the gospel.

gospel. There's also a danger of compromising the gospel for the sake of relevance. You keep the gospel, you keep the purpose kind of on the back burner just to fit in, to be liked and to have an audience for the gospel.

Well, guess what? The Holy Spirit's in charge of all of that, not your methods. And we must not soften sin in the name of love, which is very popular in our culture, especially in churches today.

[ 29 : 25 ] James 4.4 says, You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend with the world makes himself an enemy with God.

Jesus wasn't worldly. He was with the world for the sake of their redemption. And so, if your mercy never calls for repentance and it's just a good buddy that you can lean on, it's not mercy.

That's permission. It's affirmation. Permission is compromise. And affirmation is compromise. We have to be on guard. The three encouragements for us, I believe, is to safeguard ourselves from any of those warnings.

It's number one, we have to know our limits and our temptations. If you're prone to certain sins, don't flirt with them.

Your presence is actually unhelpful to your own sanctification and your own faith. Don't flirt with temptation. If God delivers you from alcohol, I doubt it that he's going to be leading you to the bar to evangelize.

[ 30 : 42 ] Second thing, we must always keep a redemptive purpose in mind. Be with sinners, but with the central purpose of redemptive hope that's found in the gospel, always being ready to share that.

The last thing is, we must remember that Jesus Christ is our holiness. We are set apart in him.

Right? Don't stand by your own strength, but by his righteousness. God moves through Jesus towards sinners with mercy.

and sends us to do likewise. We are his church. We are his church. We go to booths.

We go to the banquets. We go to where the broken are. Not to blend in, but to bring hope to all of those, to call them out of their booth through the power of Jesus Christ.

[ 31 : 49 ] Christ. Jesus Christ is our holiness, and that can definitely take us to some dark places. But isn't it the dark places that light is most needed?

There's a seat at the table for sinners, and you've already got your seat taken if you're in Christ. The question is, who will be sitting next to you?

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.