**Jesus Came to Call Sinners**

June 8, 2014

Luke 5:27-39

Key Verse 5:32 “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Today Jesus calls a disciple by the name of Levi. He was a tax collector by profession and a social outcast and a public sinner. He was a most unlikely candidate to become one of Jesus’ disciples. But Jesus chose him to become one of his disciples and raised him up to become St. Matthew. He sees in the outcast an opportunity for God to show his mercy. Jesus has the hope in any kinds of person. Jesus makes a clear mission statement, “I have come to call sinners to repentance.” This led to conflict with the Jewish religious leaders who could not understand Jesus’ associating with sinners. Jesus clearly explained that his disciple making ministry could not be merged with Judaism, but had to be carried out independently and freely, by saying, “New wine into new wineskins.” I pray that God may bless us to invite lost sheep and seek out many sinners to repentance this summer.

I. Jesus calls Levi the tax collector (27-32)

In Jewish society, tax collectors were social outcasts; they were bracketed with public sinners. How did Levi become a tax collector? As a young man, he must have been bright and talented. In Canada, he would have had a promising future. But not in Israel. Under Roman oppression, most Israelites barely survived, without hope to change their condition. Levi’s options were limited. It seemed that he either had to submit to the colonial system, or join the resistance movement. Levi must have struggled to find the way of happiness. At last he decided to become a tax collector. It was a bold decision with clear consequences. The upside was that he would make a lot of money and enjoy privileges with Rome. The downside was that he would be regarded as a national traitor and a selfish parasite, who would do anything for money. Tax collectors can be compared to drug dealers in our time. This decision required Levi to count the cost. Once he became a tax collector, there was no turning back. Levi made such a decision, believing that money would make him happy.

We can understand Levi. In this age of materialism, many people really think that money can buy happiness. The success of greedy people is often admired. In this time of economic crisis, having a good job seems like everything. But there are many things money cannot buy such as happiness, friendship, dignity, or life. Levi found out too late that he had made a foolish decision. He felt trapped. What was worse, he was corrupt and sick, like a spiritual leper. So he sat all alone in his tax booth. Levi was despised by almost everyone. Good Jewish mothers would have scolded him, “Shame on you! Think of your parents!” Then they would tell their children, “Don’t grow up like this wretched man!” The rabbis might have said, “Can you feel the flames licking at your flesh! It is just a matter of time until you burn in hell!”

Now it seemed there was no way to erase his past mistakes. His life was ruined, messed up. His sin of guilt and despair made him powerless. He must have said to himself, “I am too lost!” or “It’s too late!” Since Jesus had been ministering in Capernaum for some time, Levi probably had known him previously. He heard that Jesus welcomed everybody and anybody. He even heard that Jesus welcomed the man with leprosy. He heard that Jesus welcomed tax collectors. He wanted to start a new life in Jesus. He wanted to go to Jesus. But he was powerless to go to Jesus. He was powerless to leave his old life of sin by himself. In that respect he was like a paralytic.

What did Jesus do with this wretched man? Look at verse 27. “Jesus saw a tax collector by the name of Levi.” People ignored him pretending not to see him. But Jesus saw him. The word “see” is “etheasato” in Greek, which means “observe, notice.” Jesus observed Levi as a man created in the image of God. This indicates that Jesus consciously singles out this man. It is no accident that Jesus calls Levi. While people condemned him, “You are not good,” Jesus looked at him and observed him and noticed him with the hope of God. While people turned their eyes away from him, Jesus turned his eyes on him. Jesus saw his potential to be great if only he changes his life direction. Let us see the University of Toronto students with the hope of God like Jesus and observe and notice their great potential. Praise Jesus who sees us with the hope of God. Praise Jesus who noticed our spiritual hunger and thirst. Praise Jesus who came to us while we were terrible sinners.

Then Jesus said, “Follow me.” What does “Follow me” mean to Levi? Simply speaking, it was forgiveness of sins and inviting him to be Jesus’ disciple, who would learn of him, grow to be like him, and eventually be a blessing to others. It was an invitation to a new life. Jesus’ words gave Levi new hope and direction. He believed that he could start over. So he got up from his tax booth, left everything behind, and followed Jesus. As he did so, his despair, guilt and shame vanished. New joy and peace began to flow from his heart. He lost a good income but he found honor. He lost a high-paying job, but he gained Christ, the love of God, and a new life with a new hope.

As Levi walked away from his tax booth, he must have felt a thrill of joy in his soul, and a deep sense of peace came over him. Levi felt that his future was bright. The possibilities were limitless. He was making a brand new start with a clean slate, and with the best teacher who ever lived. With his soul full of hope, Levi might have danced and sang to himself, “Oh what a wonderful, wonderful day. Day I will never forget. After I’d wandered in darkness away, Jesus my Savior I met.” Then it began to dawn on him that Jesus was the Messiah who could give new life to anyone who believed in him. Levi wanted to share the joy of his new life with all his friends, who were mostly tax collectors. Levi decided to host a dinner party in Jesus’ honor. So he took money out of his secret hiding places and went shopping. He bought fattened calves and emptied the aisles of local grocery stores. And they began to celebrate. It was not just a dinner party; it was the celebration of a sinner’s repentance. The joy of the party came from heaven itself. The angels were singing and Almighty God was smiling at Levi’s repentance.

Everyone seemed to be happy. However, when the Pharisees saw this, they were most unhappy. They felt that people who had no right to be joyful were too joyful. They were offended and asked his disciples, “Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?” They thought the best way to deal with sinners was to cast them out of their community. So they segregated all kinds of sinners and refused to have fellowship with them. To their way of thinking, Jesus would be contaminated by sinners and ruin his holiness. But if Jesus did not eat with sinners in this world, he would always have to eat alone. Jesus wanted to correct their view of sinners. So he said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” When doctors see a sick person, they do not think that he is useless. Doctors see the person and the disease separately. Doctors believe that if the disease is dealt with, the person will be healed and become useful. To doctors, it is not the person, but the disease that is the problem. Likewise Jesus sees sinners like a spiritual doctor. Jesus distinguishes between sin and sin-sick people. Jesus sees that if only the sin can be cured, the person can be healthy and become useful. So Jesus treats sinners with great hope, deep understanding and tender care, like a doctor who wants to heal them. When we come to Dr. Jesus with our wounds and sicknesses, he does not criticize us for our mistakes. He accepts us and heals us with his precious blood. Jesus was not justifying Levi’s sinful life. But instead of banishing him to a sinner’s colony, Jesus would make him well.

Here we learn that our view of sinners is important. We tend to criticize sin-sick people and write them off, saying, “They are hopeless.” This is contrary to the view of Jesus. We have to learn from Jesus who had the view of a good doctor toward sin-sick people. When Steve Stasinos in Chicago UBF first came to worship service, he had long hair, a heavy metal t-shirt, and chains hanging from his pants. Many people were afraid of him. But M. Sarah Barry said, “I like your hair style. It looks like Jesus’ hairstyle.” She embraced him with love and hope. Then he could begin to grow spiritually and he met Jesus personally at the 1997 MSU conference through John 14:6. Suppose he had been cast out from that first worship service. We would have lost a gifted American gospel worker. But when God’s servants embraced him with the mind of Christ, he began to change into a man of God. Our ministry must be a place where sinners meet Jesus and begin a new life. Let’s learn the heart of Jesus who came to call sinners.

II. New wine into new wineskins (33-39)

The religious leaders brought another issue to Jesus. They noticed that John the Baptist’s disciples often fasted and prayed and so did the disciples of the Pharisees. When these men began religious training, the changes in their behavior were obvious. However, Jesus’ disciples went on eating and drinking with no notable change in their behavior. Jesus’ disciples might have had pockets full of food they had taken from Levi’s party. Perhaps they were munching and crunching at that very moment. The religious leaders were puzzled by Jesus’ disciples and they were also upset that Jesus’ disciples seemed to be having so much fun, while their own lives were dull and boring. They wanted everyone to be as dull and boring as they were.

How did Jesus respond? Look at verse 34. “Jesus answered, ‘Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?’” Jesus compared his disciples to guests of a bridegroom at a wedding. A wedding is a time of joyful celebration. It is not a time to fast and mourn. The guests of the bridegroom rejoice because they share his joy. Jesus is the bridegroom, and he had come to claim his bride by calling sinners to repentance. When one person receives forgiveness of sins, they are overjoyed. There is great joy in heaven and great joy in Jesus; his disciples share that joy. So they must celebrate and eat and drink freely. However, there would be a time to fast and pray when Jesus was taken from them to go to the cross.

The Pharisees had a fixed idea of religious life, and they wanted to press Jesus’ disciples into it. So Jesus told two parables to illustrate that his call to discipleship could not be combined with their religious practices. Jesus compared Judaism to an old garment, or an old wineskin. This indicates that it is hard and inflexible. Jesus compared gospel ministry to unshrunk cloth, or new wine in new wineskins. It is dynamic, life-giving and transformative. There was no way that the gospel could be contained by the Jewish system as it was being practiced. Instead of trying to combine the two, Jesus made a new beginning with his disciples. Jesus did not hesitate in saying in verse 38, “No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins.”

In terms of these parables, Jesus’ disciples were like new garments and new wineskins. They were flexible because they were willing to learn from Jesus. Jesus helped them, not by means of regulations, but by teaching them his own mind and heart. They would change from the inside out through the life of Christ in them. Jesus was willing to invest his time, his love, his wisdom and everything in these men to bring about this transformation. Jesus would bear with them patiently, even though they made many mistakes and did many embarrassing things. Jesus was sure that in the end, his disciples would become like him. At the center of Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ. Through relationship with Christ, we are transformed. We can grow when we come to Jesus in repentance and receive his forgiveness and healing.

Finally, Jesus commented that those who have gotten used to the old wine like it better than the new. Those who have fixed habits and patterns of life have a hard time changing. Jesus knew the religious leaders were rigid. Jesus understood them. They were condescending and sure of themselves because they really thought their way was better. But in this condition they could not contain the new wine of the gospel.

In this passage we learn the mind of Jesus. Jesus came to call sinners to repentance. Jesus forgives our sins and leads us into a new life of learning of him and of growing to be like him. It is the most joyful and meaningful life. Have you accepted this call? Let’s accept it today. Let’s also remember that Jesus’ gospel, like new wine, cannot be contained by old wineskins. Let’s yield our fixed ideas and habits to Jesus as he lives in us through the Holy Spirit, and allow him to change us as he pleases.