

THE RADICAL RABBI: "A RADICAL PARTY" (Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32)

9.6.20

INTRODUCTION

Last week we featured a physical healing from Christ that was used to underscore the authority He showed in a spiritual healing from the ravages of sin. This week is purely a spiritual healing that paves the way for a commission of lifetime service to the Master. And while last week Mark was our primary storyteller, this week Luke will carry the narrative ball. But first, let's share in a moment of prayer.

TEXT: LUKE 5:27-32 (with harmony)

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to Him, and He began to teach them - Mark 2:13.

So Jesus is still in Capernaum and is now moving away from the site of His healing of the paralyzed man that we talked about last week, Luke telling us that this next moment in Christ's ministry occurs right after that healing, with Matthew telling us that Christ had moved on from where He had done that miracle. Mark then takes up the story, telling us that Jesus "went out beside the lake," referring to the Sea of Galilee. And, probably inspired even more by their witnessing this latest healing, a large crowd again "came to Him, and He began to teach them. Remember that Jesus had told His followers: *"I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God . . . because that is why I was sent"* - *Jesus Christ, Luke 4:43*. Christ was always looking for those opportunities; He was always intentional in His sharing the good news.

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi [son of Alphaeus] [also called Matthew] sitting at his tax booth - Luke 5:27a [Mark 2:14a, Matthew 9:9a].

It is interesting that Mark includes the detail that Levi was the "son of Alphaeus" in his account. As Mark is thought to have received the bulk of his gospel information from Peter, there is a suggestion that, being from Capernaum and being a commercial fisherman there, Peter may have already known Levi as one of the guys he paid taxes to and, as might be expected in a small town, that he may have known, at some level, members of his family as well. In addition, it turns out this guy is known by two names - Matthew and Levi (it was common for people in that culture to have two, and sometimes even three, names) – and, being a tax collector, probably known by some unflattering names as well.

Now it is possible that Jesus was teaching the crowd even as He was walking. We know that this was a normal occurrence, that crowds would be following after Him wherever He was going. Then, as He is walking, all three gospel writers report the same thing - that Jesus saw a man sitting at the tax collector's booth.

Now we know that, in Capernaum, a permanent tax office was located there, along with a permanent detachment of Roman soldiers (possibly as a consequence of that permanent tax office). It was a logical placement due to the constant revenue stream provided by the fishing industry that prospered on the northern part of the Sea of Galilee. So, somebody manning that tax booth would have likely been the norm for people to see.

But that being said, nobody would have had, or wanted to have, anything to do with anybody associated with tax collection. Tax collectors were hated, despised, whatever word you want to throw in there, because they were seen as collaborating with the equally hated Roman occupation, making them traitors in the eyes of most people. They were also seen as rip-off artists - not only working with the Romans but, whenever they could, collecting more taxes than necessary simply to

enrich themselves. To think of them as leeches and parasites would also have been the norm for that Jewish crowd. Because of their work with the Romans, and because of their alleged reputation as thieves, they were essentially cut off from their communities; their homes were considered unclean (meaning that entering a tax collector's house rendered that person unclean) and they were expelled from the synagogue. But for many collectors, the potential money to be made was worth all the grief that came with the job.

Now, all that said, the normal expectation of anybody in the crowd that day would have been to just assume that Jesus, in seeing that guy sitting in his tax office, would have simply continued His walk. But no - instead He stopped.

What's He doing, I'm sure many in the crowd wondered. Is He making a payment? Is Jesus behind in His taxes? Must be; why else would He stop?

"Follow Me," Jesus said to him - Luke 5:27b.

So, instead of just continuing on His way, Jesus walks up to this tax guy and does something that probably nobody else in the crowd that day would have done. He issues him an invitation to join with Him that all three gospel writers report: "Follow Me."

Some amazing things are declared by Christ in that moment of invitation:

- 1) Jesus will minister to anybody and everybody; no one is outside His attention - which means that Matthew is equal in status to everybody else in Christ's eyes, including everybody in the crowd following Him that day.
- 2) Jesus has instantly restored Matthew, cut off from so many things because of his profession, into a new community and fellowship, starting with Jesus Himself.
- 3) Jesus knows the reputation that tax collectors have in that society. But by saying, "Follow Me," Jesus focuses Matthew's attention not on the perceptions or attitudes of anybody else, but rather on Him. It's Jesus' perception of him that He wants Matthew to respond to. So whatever Matthew was before, however he was viewed before, is done; like so many other things that change the moment people meet Jesus, his past "is finished."

So, what happened? ***Levi got up, left everything and followed Him - Luke 5:28.***

There must have been incredible power in those two simple words with which Jesus addressed Matthew: "Follow Me." Contrary to Peter and Andrew, and James and John, who had had prior exposure to Christ, none of the gospel writers give any indication that Matthew had had any previous encounters with Jesus. Nevertheless, the gospel writers all report that Matthew gets up and follows Christ.

So, what was Jesus saying when He told Matthew, "Follow Me"? The Greek tells us that to follow as Jesus was using it meant to join Him, literally to come into union with Him as evidence by walking in the same way, following the same path. Think of it as when you were a little kid and there was a deep, deep snow. Your father went ahead of you and, for you to follow, you used his footprints to be your steps. That's the kind of following that Jesus had in mind here - making His footprints yours. This is what Peter had in mind in his first letter when he wrote: ***To this you were called, because Christ ...[left] you an example, that you should follow in His steps - I Peter 2:21.***

But I love what Luke includes in his narrative: Matthew left "everything." Now, if that sounds familiar, it should: Luke used the same phrase to describe how Peter and Andrew, James and John began their journey with Christ: They left "everything." And Matthew was leaving something potentially even more lucrative than the other four. As they left a profitable fishing business, so Matthew left a moneymaker as well; despite the ugly reputation that tax collectors had earned, there

seemed no shortage of men available who were more than willing to endure society's hatred for the profits that were possible. But here's a big difference: Unlike the others, who could return to Capernaum and start their fishing enterprise all over again if necessary, Matthew could not do that with his job. Tax collecting was essentially a contract let out to somebody, and it was theirs to keep for as long as they wanted it. So, for Matthew, this was an incredible "no turning back" moment for him. Nevertheless, Matthew "left everything" to follow this Radical Rabbi. But the story doesn't end there.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them - Luke 5:29.

Luke brings us the next immediate setting: Matthew held a "great banquet for Jesus at his house." The Greek word for "great" is *me-gas* - the same word we use as a prefix, as in "megastar" or "megahit" or "megadeal." In our terms, this wasn't just some put-together, fast-food, "let's grab some McDonald's" type meal. This was a big deal.

And Luke further tells us that "a large crowd" was there - in other words, a whole bunch of people. His possible ill-gotten gains as a tax collector had probably afforded him the size of house required to host this kind of event. And due to Matthew's exclusion from all proper community life because of his profession, the people who showed up at this banquet were very likely people who, like Matthew himself, were not welcome in most places. In fact, all three of the gospel writers inform us that this was not exactly a "red carpet," black-tie, fancy society crowd. Sure, the Nazarene and some of his closest followers were there but, otherwise, quite the contrary: The attendees of this gala were what would have been considered the lowlifes, the ragged edge, of their society - tax collectors (possibly coworkers of Matthew or at least some tax-collection acquaintances) and other people, collectively referred to as "sinners." Now while that term could have been applied to virtually anybody other than Christ, in this context, "sinners" referred to the obviously wicked who failed on a regular basis to keep God's law - at least according to the standard that the religious leaders felt necessary.

Yet Mark tells us that that was what many of the people who followed Jesus were. And now here was Christ and His disciples openly eating with such people. Now in the Middle East, sharing a meal implied friendship; in fact, it was a rather loud and proud declaration of declaring yourself connected to the person or people with which you were sharing this meal - regardless of what anybody else might think of that association. So doing this in such an open, public manner told anyone looking on that Jesus had no problem being considered the "friend" of these people. In fact, it was very likely His manner of showing mercy to those often considered "outcasts," and His unapologetic willingness to be seen with them, that played a significant role in attracting them to His message. He didn't avoid them or somehow block them from being with Him; on the contrary, He welcomed them.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to His disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" - Luke 5:30.

The Pharisees and other religious leaders simply could not fathom how anybody, let alone somebody who seems to consider himself a rabbi, could allow themselves to be seen in any kind of fellowship with "those" kind of people. In their view, to not be confronting the impure lifestyles of others simply betrayed God's call to Israel to "be separate" from people who weren't His children, who didn't live or even care to live according to His law; sin required judgment and punishment, not mercy. And these people were sinners! Overall, the religious leaders had two concerns with Jesus:

- 1) That He was making Himself ceremonially unclean by His having fellowship with people

- living so obviously outside the law; and
- 2) That His fellowship with sinners would imply some level of acceptance and even approval of their lifestyles as sinners.

In Luke's telling of this story, it says that the leadership "complained" to Christ's disciples. The Greek word means to mutter or grumble. It is often used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, when referencing the Israelites' complaining against God during their time in the wilderness. Bottom line: They ain't happy, and they are being none too subtle to let their displeasure be known. But Jesus has an answer for them.

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" - Luke 5:31-32.

Jesus heard what was going on, and His response cut right to the incredibly large difference between the heart of relationship and the heart of religion. His initial response is almost like that of a proverb, but it makes the point that it is the most ill that gets a physician's attention. But beyond the bounds of that point, Jesus gets to the heart of His dispute with the religious leaders - their lack of empathy for the lives, both physically and spiritually, of those around them. And Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus takes them back to an OT verse from the prophet Hosea that they themselves would have known - and understood: ***"[G]o and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 9:13a (quoting Hosea 6:6a).*** What is Jesus trying to tell them? A part of any claim to be followers of the one true God would be to display His compassion for those around us - regardless of their personal walks with God. And the whole purpose of Christ's coming to earth was to connect righteousness with unrighteousness, God with man. And the Pharisees should have understood, particularly in light of Scriptures they themselves would have known, the sinful reality of everybody and anybody - including themselves:

- 1) ***The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one - David, Psalm 14:2-3.***
- 2) ***We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way - Isaiah 53:6a.***

And beyond that, Jesus would have seen the Pharisees and teachers of the law as falling far, far short of the mandate that they had been given to be God's representatives in caring for His people - all His people - as given by God Himself to the prophet Ezekiel: ***"Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ... You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally" - God speaking, Ezekiel 34:2b, 4.***

And then His final declaration to them (in Luke's words): ***"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" - Jesus Christ, Luke 5:32.*** But wait a minute; that doesn't even make sense. Both Jesus and very likely the Pharisees as well would have known, as David mentioned, that there is none righteous. As he had written about a thousand years before this: ***[N]o one living is righteous before you - David, Psalm 143:2b.*** So, if that's true, who is Christ referring to?

He was referring to the Pharisees, and teachers of the law, and pretty much anybody else in the religious leadership of the time. Now David's words are absolutely correct - before God, nobody is righteous. But that's not how the religious leaders saw themselves. They deeply believed that they could earn God's favor because they believed that they could live such a righteous life that God would be pleased with their efforts. It was because of that attitude that none of them would have ever thought to approach Jesus with the humility of acknowledging that "they were wrong," that

their lives were being lived with a false hope, and that they needed to fall before Him to find the mercy of God through Him. That they would never do.

On the other hand, many of those following Christ knew that their lives were broken beyond hope. Christ offered the same path to God's mercy and, unlike the Pharisees and others like them, many of the people following Christ understood their desperate need; they understood that they were "sick." Jesus made God's word so attractive because Jesus delivered God's word with love, compassion, mercy, empathy - and open arms. Everybody was welcome - no limits. Jesus understood that, to connect people with the "good news of the Kingdom," you needed to be connected with them and to them.

And a vital part of His "good news" to them was the invitation to "repentance." So, what is He talking about there? For many of us, to "repent" means to say, "I'm sorry; please forgive me." That's a part of it, but the biblical idea of "repentance" is so much more. The Bible teaches that repentance is a "u-turn," a complete change of thought and behavior, a new way of living, thinking and reacting. It's what was behind Paul's famous words to the Corinthian church: ***[I]f anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! - Paul, II Corinthians 5:17.*** And then that's what the Holy Spirit does, to continue to melt us and mold us and keep making us even more and more into that "new creation" that will continue to reflect that "u-turn" that was the move from living my life to living Christ's life!

APPLICATION

There are some wonderful lessons to be learned from today's story:

- 1) As Christians, we need to be welcoming of everybody because Jesus was welcoming of everybody. Just look at the people at Matthew's banquet - including Matthew. There is likely no other place at which any of them would have received a welcome. Yet Jesus completely and unreservedly welcomed them to His side, to His table. Jesus' desire to welcome everybody is best understood in His "go" commands to His disciples - and by extension to us:
 - a. ***"[G]o and make disciples of all nations" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 28:19a.***
 - b. ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" - Jesus Christ, Mark 16:15.*** Literally, "go to all, preach to every!"
 - c. ***"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" - Jesus Christ, John 20:21b.*** And how did the Father send His Son? He sent Him into the entire world, for the sins of the entire world, because ***God so loved the world - John 3:16a.***
- 2) As Christians, we need to make living a life pleasing to God attractive because Jesus made living a life pleasing to God attractive. After all the churches I have been in, and all the years of ministry with which God has blessed me, I have learned one lesson above all when it comes to a church's ability to reach out to the community around them, and it's this: Nobody coming into a church is going to be impressed with the Bible verses shared or the message or the music or the prayer time or anything else - ahead of one all-important detail: How friendly is the place, how welcoming, how inviting, how joyful. Everything else in a church's ministry is obviously huge, but nothing beats making people feel like they are the most special people in the world - because at that moment, they are. And to do that with the irrepressible joy that should flow out of lives redeemed by Christ just adds another layer of attraction to the mix. Paul's words here resonate so well in this regard (and I particularly love how the ESV states it): ***Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God - Paul, Romans 15:7 (ESV).*** The Greek used here tells us to "receive" one another, meaning "to take to oneself"; used in this way, it always signifies a special interest on the part of the

receiver - in other words, a personally affecting welcome.

- 3) As Christians, we need to be intentional in sharing the gospel because Jesus was intentional in sharing the gospel. It was certainly about being intentional that Paul wrote to the church at Rome: ***"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?" - Paul, Romans 10:13-15a (quoting Joel 2:23).***

CONCLUSION

Last week, we talked about living our lives through the filter of joy found in realizing the miracle of forgiveness. Just think about this: As Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians: ***When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." Colossians 2:13-14.***

Now this week we get to celebrate a second miracle, and it is this: the miracle of Christ's presence. I can't imagine what it would have been like to have been somebody like Matthew, sitting at his place of business, and then having this Radical Rabbi come and say, "Follow Me." But that's exactly what he does. He's got a great business, but he leaves it. He can afford a lot of luxury, but he leaves it. He doesn't even know where this is going to lead, but he leaves everything about his life behind for a life proclaimed by this stranger from Nazareth.

Now, what about us? As Christians, we also live with the presence of Christ. When Jesus entered our lives, he did so by washing away our sins. And then, he deposited himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, into our lives, into our very being. That's how he could say: ***"[S]urely I am with you always" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 28:20b.***

CONCLUSION

One of the themes that we have been sharing for some time now is that this faith that this Radical Rabbi brought, that faith that has claimed us, and that we in turn proclaim, is supposed to look like something. Well, that also means that all the component parts of that faith - love, joy, peace, patience and so on also need to look like something. And having the presence of Jesus in our lives continues to teach us and inform our lives, our decisions, our emotions - everything! The idea? That every day we are becoming more and more the image of Christ. The miracle of forgiveness gives us the desire to live in His image. And the miracle of His presence gives us the means of being able to live in His image.

The point of all this is that this body of believers should desire to be seen by people outside these walls as people transformed - unlike anything they see in the world. And the world, with all its divisiveness and outright hate, needs to be able to see something different. There is something different, Someone different, to know and experience, and He lives within each one of us whose lives have been surrendered to Him.

Have you experienced that forgiveness? Do you live with that wonderful divine presence in your life? If not, see me after the service. Don't put it off. There is no more wonderful a moment than the moments we are found in the Son. Let's pray!