

Luke 5:27-39

I'd Rather Die Than Change

People hate to admit they're wrong. In one of the Peanuts cartoon strips Lucy is angry with mom. She is yelling to her mother, "You promised me a birthday party, and now you say I can't have one. It's not fair." Linus intervenes and tries to give her wise counsel. "Lucy, your not using the right strategy. Why not go up to mom and say to her, 'I'm sorry, dear Mother...I admit I've been bad, and you were right to cancel my party, but from now on I shall be good.'" Lucy thinks about the counsel for a moment. Finally she cries out, "I'd rather die."

It's amazing how stubborn we can be, isn't it! How we don't like to face up to our faults and our short comings when the spotlight's turned on us.

But the only way to change is to see what's wrong so we know what to alter in our lives.

Two thousand years ago Jesus faced the "I'd rather die" crowd head on. Out of that confrontation comes some priceless life principles for us today.

Turn to Luke 5:27 pg 996

In the first eleven verses of Luke five we saw the call of Peter and three other disciples. Jesus commanded Peter the fisherman to launch out into the deep waters for a catch. Peter obeys Jesus and had a deeper experience of the power of God and the person of God. Jesus told Peter in verse 10, *"Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men."* Peter moved from the business of catching fish to reaching souls for Jesus.

After the calling of Peter and the other three disciples, we are told that Jesus met a man who had leprosy, and Jesus healed this man of his leprosy. Then Jesus met a man who was a paralytic, and he healed him as well. In all three events the power of God was revealed. It was revealed with the catch of fish. It was revealed with the healing of the leper. It was revealed with the healing of the paralytic. These are all physical miracles, but they are not the greatest miracles of Jesus Christ. The greatest miracle is about to happen. We are about to see the power of God transform a sinner into a saint. That's the greatest miracle because it is the most important miracle. Apart from the miracle of salvation, no one can enter into the kingdom of God.

The first life principle in our passage is this: *The one who has been forgiven should be merciful and have compassion on sinners, rather than condemn them.*

Read vs 27-29

This tax collector's name is given in Mark and Luke as Levi, making it likely that he is a descendent of the tribe of Levi, from whom the priests and Levites descended. Look in the New York City telephone book today, and you'll find thousands of families by this name. Instead of a holy ministry of serving in the temple, this Levi is engaged in an unholy trade.

He's called Levi but the name he is best known by is "Matthew." This is the man who will pen the Gospel of Matthew.

We know from the New Testament that anyone who was a tax-collector was a very unpopular person, synonymous with "sinner" and on a social par with gluttons, drunkards, and prostitutes. This was the bottom rung of the Jewish social ladder. You couldn't sink much lower.

There was more than one type of tax-collector in those days. J. W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels* explains:

Levi was a custom-house official. He sat at the tax office. The Talmud distinguishes between the tax collector and the custom house official. The Gabbai collected the regular real estate and income taxes, and the poll tax; the Mockhes, 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, who himself stood in the Roman custom-house on the highway connecting Damascus and Ptolemais, and by the sea where all boats plied between the domains of Antipas and Philip.

The Jews detested these tax collectors 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 in court. The Rabbis had no word of help for the tax collector.

I'll bet the Jews told "tax collector" jokes.

According to Mark 2, Jesus has been teaching again along the lakeshore at Capernaum. When he is finished, he walks over to the small tax office or customs house alongside the highway. Sitting inside is a despised man, Matthew Levi by name, whom Jesus has seen several times in the crowds as he has been teaching. Jesus looks at him, and says simply: "Follow me."

Think what Levi feels like when he hears those two words tap-tapping like a door-knocker on his soul. He is being called to leave his lucrative trade as a tax collector to sustain himself on the sometimes meager contributions made to his Rabbi or Master. In an instant he is being called from wealth to poverty.

But I don't think the issue of poverty really enters into his decision. Only one thing matters, and it matters very deeply to Levi. That Jesus has sought him out and selected him on purpose.

That Jesus would even engage him in conversation is a wonder. He is despised. He is hated. He has been ostracized from respectable society. And Jesus cares enough about him to stop by when not required by law to do so. Jesus accepts him. Jesus loves him -- one of the most unloved men in Capernaum. And Jesus calls him personally: "Follow me." Since he was a boy he hadn't imagined himself a righteous man. Now he is being called to accompany Jesus. How bizarre! How wonderful!

I don't think that the money has any allure for him in the face of this simple request: "Follow me." That he is wanted, needed, by his Prophet, this Miracle Worker, this incredible Teacher, is enough for him.

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

Oh, I'm sure he turns in to the chief tax collector the money he had collected and submits his formal resignation. But when he stands up the decision has been made, the die is cast, he leaves his tax collection trade never to turn back. Instead, he follows Jesus.

He replies to Jesus invitation by issuing an invitation to his new Master. "Jesus, I would be very honored if you would be a guest in my home this very night." Jesus accepts.

And so Levi heads off to make preparations for a great feast. This is no intimate dinner party for a few guests. Luke describes it with the word *megas*, "great." To his large house suited to a wealthy man, Levi invites a *great number of tax collectors and others*.

Now if you and I were there, we might have sat stiffly in the presence of these social outcasts. We wouldn't be comfortable in the least! These are out and out thieves, unbelievers, open sinners, social pariahs. No, we wouldn't be comfortable at all. We would wait a while, make our excuses, and leave.

Dr. Ralph F. Wilson writes,

But Jesus is comfortable. I can see him enjoying the occasion, getting acquainted with people who have been afraid to approach him before, now enchanted in his presence. He is eating heartily of Levi's sumptuous food, drinking of Levi's excellent wines, and thoroughly enjoying himself. His joy before them lights up this party of outcasts into an occasion that they will remember to their dying day. The afternoon when Jesus the Messiah ate dinner at the same table, shook their hand, put his arm on their shoulder, and embraced them in warmth and friendship. They will never forget, nor will Levi.

But there were some others at the party. This was the, "I'd rather die" crowd.

Read vs 30

There's an old classic, black & white, film; I'm not even sure where you'd get a copy today, but it's called *The Gospel Blimp*. Its about a bunch of guys in a church who decide they want to get the message of Jesus Christ out to everyone in their town in a dramatic way.

They end up getting a blimp from which they bomb people with Christian literature from the air. My favorite scene is of a guy with a clergy collar mailing a letter in a mail box out on the street. A shapely young lady walks by and he's looking out of the corner of his eye at her.

Just then the guys in the blimp throw out a handful of what they refer to as gospel bombs. Of course one hits a dog in a yard. One lands in the gutter and goes down the storm sewer. But one hits this minister who's eyeing the girl. And he goes ~~~~ Like this. He thought the hand of God touched him!

Well, all the while, while these guys are wearing admirals' hats and getting into this blimp thing, one of the guys, Larry, leaves the group and starts spending time with his neighbor. In fact the others see him going off to the beach one afternoon and see the neighbor loading a cooler into his car and they say, "what's happened to Larry? He's becoming so unspiritual. Why there's probably beer in that cooler."

In the end they manage to annoy the whole town with their "gospel bombs" and Larry introduces them to his neighbor who has just trusted Christ as Savior because Larry spent time with him personally.

See the guys in the blimp were sincere, but they were wrong. These Pharisees were sincere too. They sincerely thought that worshipping God was following a bunch of man made rules. They isolated them selves from others instead of getting into their lives like Jesus did.

They had a neat, tidy, clean, safe way of living out their faith. In their pursuit of holiness the scribes and the Pharisees, forgot to serve others. They were more concerned with the Law than they were with lost.

Churches and Christians can fall into that isolation mentality too, can't we. We can surround ourselves with Christians so that we don't associate with the sinners and the outcasts.

Now, I'll be the first to admit, there can be a real tension here. This living in the world while not being of it, isn't easy. We have real questions about associations. But I'll never forget the question a high school age student asked me when I was teaching years ago in another church. This church was constantly hammering these kids with, "don't smoke, drink, or chew, and don't hang around with friends who do."

I was talking to them about reaching out with the message of Christ to their friends and this kid's hand went up. This was his question. If we were not supposed to have any unsaved friends how are we supposed to reach them with the gospel? Good question. You can't have it both ways.

Obviously we have to associate with people who need Jesus. We have to build relationships with those who don't know the Lord.

That doesn't mean that we go and get drunk with them, it does not mean we go and get high with them. It does not mean we participate with them in their sin.

Jesus was the friend of sinners and yet was sinless Himself.

What it means is that the one who has been forgiven should be merciful and have compassion on sinners, rather than condemn them. This can only come as we build relationships with them. This only comes as we associate with people who need Jesus.

Our coworkers, our family members, our friends, our neighbors, who don't know Jesus, need our friendship. They need us to associate with them. They need us to tell them the difference Jesus has made in our lives.

Notice Jesus' answer to His critics: **Read 31 & 32**

How ironic. The religious leaders said these people are sinners but they didn't do anything to reach out to them. Instead they got on Jesus' case for spending time with them.

Picture this. Someone is deathly sick. If they don't get treatment they're going to die. A doctor is called and comes to the sick person to try to help them. There are some other people in the medical profession standing around watching this happen and they start whispering among themselves, "I can't believe this doctor is hanging around with this sick guy. What's his problem. And he calls himself a physician. He's a health professional. He should be associating with healthy people."

Something's radically wrong with that picture. And something's radically wrong with us if we cloister ourselves from the world we live in.

But now things don't stop here for Jesus. There's more questions from these Pharisees.

I. *The one who has been forgiven should be merciful and have compassion on sinners, rather than condemn them.*

Second life principle. *The one who has been forgiven should be characterized by joy.*

Read 33

Fasting and praying was a very big part of the Pharisees' religion. The Pharisees were notorious for their elegant prayers. They would stand in the synagogue and in the streets and pray so that everyone could see how godly they were. They were even more notorious for their fasting. They would fast twice a week, and they made sure that everybody could know that they were fasting by their face and look. They would put on a demeanor of sorrow.

Fasting was a sign of serious commitment among the Pharisees. It was a sign of real piety. So the question was why Jesus and His disciples were having a good time. In reality, Jesus wasn't opposed to fasting and praying. If the Pharisees had known who He was they would have realized that he was a man of prayer and fasting.

Read 34-35

David Gooding in his book, "According to Luke" explains:

For his disciples, his presence, his forgiveness, their release from spiritual bondage, and the new vistas he opened up before them, made their joy like that of a wedding banquet. To have imposed fasting on them at that stage in their spiritual experience would have been highly incongruous and artificial. There is no point in fasting just for the sake of fasting.

The Lord Jesus was saying to the Jews that he was the bridegroom, but he would not always be there. Fasting was for the day when the bridegroom would be taken away. Proclaiming our Lord's violent death on the cross, Isaiah 53:8 says, "By oppression and judgment he was taken away." This resulted in days of mourning for his disciples until the joy of the resurrection, the season of Pentecost some 50 days later, and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Fortunately for the believer today, our bridegroom is in us and with us, filling our hearts with righteousness, peace and joy by the Holy Spirit. "For we know we have been saved by grace and not by works, and we have been born again to a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3).

Joy, not sorrow, not sadness, not mournfulness should be the dominant characteristic of the Christian. The Christian life includes sorrow and suffering and sacrifice, but as one man put it, these are not the melody line of our life, or they should not be. These are the harmony line. Suffering and sacrifice are means, but they shouldn't be the end. Joy is the goal, it is the culmination, it is the reward of forgiveness and fellowship with God.

Why is it that there are so many "dill pickle" Christians around, who are more like the Pharisees than the disciples at Levi's reception? Is it because Satan has warped our concept of the Christian life?

It's the joy of knowing and serving God which should be our strength and our goal. It's also the joy of a believer which ought to draw others to Christ.

The one who has been forgiven should be merciful and have compassion on sinners, rather than condemn them.

The one who has been forgiven should be characterized by joy.

Life principle # 3 The one who is forgiven should be permanently bound to the historical roots of Christianity and at the same time free to minister to our changing culture.

Read vs 36-38

You don't rip up a brand-new shirt to make a patch for an old one; you ruin the new shirt, and the old one looks bad. And you can't pour newly pressed wine into already stretched goat skins, because as the new wine ferments it lets off gas that makes the skin expand. If the goat skin is pre-stretched, it will burst as the gas is released. Then you lose the wine, and you lose the skin. If you have new wine, use a new skin."

There was a big change taking place here. God had given the Jewish people the Law of Moses with its ceremonies to point them to their Messiah when He finally came.

Now Jesus was here. He would die for sin. He would fulfill what all of those centuries of animal sacrifices had prefigured.

There was a message in the Mosaic Law that God wanted His people to

understand: that sin brings death, that a sacrifice had to be made for sin, and that that sacrifice was the innocent dieing for the guilty.

Isaiah the Jewish prophet had written 700 years before Christ: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Jesus came to fulfill all of the Law's obligations. He was the final passover lamb, slain for us.

Things were changing. But people hate change. They can't understand it. It makes them feel uncomfortable.

The Pharisees would have liked to see things continue as they were. In fact, most of us are like that. We tend to view the old as better because it is old, and we suspect the new because it is new.

Read vs 39

Wine that's finished fermenting and has aged tastes better; that's what the experts say. The old is better.

It's easy, even natural, to be attached to old wine skins. We like traditions. We're given to nostalgia. Especially in the church. We look to the church for a sense of roots and history, for a connection with something beyond ourselves.

Jesus wasn't saying forget all about the old. But He was saying, don't try to hang on to the old as if that's all there is. See the foundation of the faith. Understand your roots. Cherish your heritage. But don't get so comfortable with the familiar that the past becomes quicksand rather than a foundation.

In a church its common to confuse traditions with what the traditions are meant to point to. But longing for things of the Spirit, for things ancient and transcendent, is longing for God, not for steeples and hymn books. Sometimes, though, we'll settle for stained glass and familiar hymns _ comfortable, well-worn old wine skins and think that anything else isn't godly.

The old is better. We don't want the new.

Now there's nothing wrong with wine skins. Nothing wrong with the material of ministry. We need it. Every program, every ministry of this church is a wine skin. Everything is a set of clothes that we hope the Spirit will inhabit and animate so that the love of Jesus Christ can be proclaimed and enacted. And at some point every ministry of this church was a brand new wine skin, a risky venture begun with hope and faith that Jesus wanted to do something new here.

But at some point most wine skins age beyond their usefulness, and still we scramble to preserve them. Our love for tradition, for the tried and true, is awesome. Try it once, it's an experiment. Do it again, it's a tradition. Do it again, it's an institution, and we'd better keep doing it until Jesus comes back or feelings will be hurt and we'll be guilty of betraying our history.

If it's new it must be suspect. The old is better. I'd rather die than change.

Unfortunately some churches are doing just that. They're dieing. My vision for Faith Community Church is that we'd be permanently bound to the historical roots of Christianity and at the same time free to minister to our changing culture.

The one who has been forgiven should be merciful and have compassion on sinners, rather than condemn them.

The one who has been forgiven should be characterized by joy.

The one who is forgiven should be permanently bound to the historical roots of Christianity and at the same time free to minister to our changing culture.

The Pharisees, with all their supposed love for God missed God when He came and stared them in the face. Let's make sure we don't miss God. He's come in the person of Christ to pay for sin and to offer eternal life to everyone who believes.