

7.45am & 9.30am

'Luke - The Doctor Is In'

6 November 2016

The Sick and The Sellouts

Luke 5:12-32

Introduction: The Odd One Out

I wonder if you remember that kids' game where you are given a set of pictures that look almost identical, and you're asked to spot the odd-one-out.

In today's passage, Luke records Jesus' contact with three very interesting people, and the events surrounding that contact. They are a leper, a paralytic, and a tax collector.

If I had to ask you to spot the odd one out, I'm sure you could do it.

It's obviously the tax collector, a man called Levi in Hebrew, and Matthew in Greek.

The leper and the paralytic were both physically unwell. They were the victims of bodily suffering. For one, his physical condition made him a social outcast. For the other, his physical condition a social burden.

But the tax collector? He had chosen a profession and accompanying lifestyle which made him an enemy of others, and which fed the all sorts of greed, tyranny and even violence.

And yet, Jesus treatment of each one is remarkably similar. Jesus shows no favouritism, and demonstrates concern for each one no matter what his circumstances.

Let's look at each of these guys and their contact to Jesus.

Jesus Cleanses a Leper (5:12-16)

We've skipped over a section in Luke's gospel where Jesus calls two sets of brothers, the fisherman Simon and Andrew, and James and John, to follow him as his disciples.

And so it is that when Jesus arrives in one of the cities with his four new-found followers, he meets a man who is full of leprosy.

Leprosy is a gram positive bacterial infection which causes granulomas in the nerves, respiratory system, skin and eyes. It is not as highly contagious as once thought, but even today in areas where leprosy is still a problem, like tropical Africa and India, those infected become social outcasts, and sadly remain untreated.

However, what we have described as leprosy in the Bible may not actually be this particular disease after all. The Greek word here, *lepra*, simply means 'scaliness'. In the Old Testament law, not just people but even cloths and building could be 'leprous' and become ritually unclean. It could even have been an autoimmune disease like psoriasis, or a fungal infection.

Whatever this man had, thought, it was more than just a physical illness. It fitted the description in the book of Leviticus well enough that he was declared ritually unclean.

Here's the rule about people with a leprous disease from Leviticus 13:

““The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

(Leviticus 13:45–46 ESV)

‘Cleanness’ and ‘uncleanness’ are very important terms in Old Testament Law. This wasn’t just about sanitation, it was about being included in or excluded from God’s people, and in being either in or out of relationships with God himself.

“That which is clean or pure is in its proper place, whereas that which is unclean or impure is disgustingly out of place. ... Uncleanness is especially opposed to holiness, and so OT laws attempted to separate the unclean from the holy. ... Ancient Israel’s purity laws were concerned with the nation’s relationship with God. Since the holy and the unclean were incompatible, it was necessary for the sacred to be protected from pollution.”¹

It’s also very important to point out that uncleanness is contagious, and cleanness is not. A clean thing touching an unclean thing would itself be made unclean, and not the other way around.

So when the leper comes to Jesus, he doesn’t ask for healing. We read that

“...he fell on his face and begged him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me **clean**.””

(Luke 5:12 ESV)

What faith, to recognise not just the divine power, but also the divine prerogative of the Lord Jesus.

And then Jesus does something utterly remarkable.

¹ “CLEAN AND UNCLEAR,” Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, 262.

“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him.”

(Luke 5:13 ESV)

You don't touch people with leprosy! In fact, you don't touch anything that's unclean! All you would do is make yourself unclean!

Mother Teresa was even once quoted as saying,

“No, I wouldn't touch a leper for a thousand pounds; yet I willingly cure him for the love of God.”²

But Jesus compassion overrides ritual protocol. There's something so caring about physical touch in the midst of suffering. For this man, this might have been the first time in years that another person has put a compassionate hand in his shoulder.

For anyone else, to touch the leper would have made them unclean. His uncleanness would overpower their cleanness. Not Jesus. His cleanness overpowers the man's uncleanness. At his touch, the leper is not just healed, but made clean.

And being made clean, he is restored - to his family, to his friends, to his community, to his home, to his livelihood, and even to his God.

At his cleansing, this man I'm sure wanted to immediately cast off the shackles of the Old Testament law that made him an outcast and separated him from his people and his God, in favour of the Jesus who is able to do what the Law cannot do, and reconcile him to God.

But the time has not come for that yet. So Jesus commands him to follow the Laws prescribed in Leviticus 14 for the cleansing of lepers, in order that he may be

² <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/touch.html> (Accessed: 2 Nov 2016)

officially declared clean in his community. Jesus is yet to fulfil the Law, and so it still stands.

Of course, what has happened can't be hidden, and so Jesus' reputation not just as a healer but also as a teacher, and perhaps even more, continues to grow.

But Jesus, ever conscious of the ultimate purpose the Father has for him, spends devoted time away from the gathering crowds to speak to his Father in prayer.

Just as an aside, we were talking about this in our Grace Community Group on Thursday night when a similar editorial comment from Luke came up in last week's study.

Jesus needed dedicated, undistracted time with God in prayer. I know this is true of myself, that one of the first things to go when things get busy is that prayer time. Or, we don't cut ourselves off from all distractions for a period in order to get that time: the phone is still in our hands, we're sitting in front of our computer, we're driving in our car.

How can we honestly think we are capable of getting by on less than what Jesus himself needed? How can we honestly seek to have a fulfilling relationship with God, to fight sin, to grow in Christ, to understand his Word, to see the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and the lives of others by only touching base with God on an *ad hoc* basis?

Jesus spent dedicated, undistracted time with God in prayer. I found this personally challenging. We don't need less than what Jesus needed; if anything, we need more.

2. Jesus Heals A Paralysed Man (Luke 5:17-26)

We then follow Jesus to a new location, where we find him teaching yet again, proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

But this time, his audience was slightly different. You see, word about this man who “taught with authority” had got around, and to the Jewish religious heavyweights had come to check him out.

“On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.”

(Luke 5:17 ESV)

You’ve probably noticed the really interesting statement at the end of v17 that really jumps out. “And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.” (Luke 5:17 ESV)

What should we make of Luke’s comment here? It seems almost redundant to say such a thing of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

We’ve spoken before of the importance of context. Reading this comment from Luke in isolation, we might think that Luke is saying that Jesus sometimes had God’s power present with him, and sometimes not. This can hardly be the case.

Instead, Luke is actually showing an important continuity in Jesus ministry: he is the one on whom the Holy Spirit descended at his baptism, marking him out as God’s Son (3:22); he is the one who returned in the power of the Spirit from temptation by Satan in the desert (4:14); he is the one that the Spirit of the Lord is upon to proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom (4:18).

Here in the house, things are no different. Jesus remains empowered by the Spirit of God to do God’s work.

So as Jesus continues to teach, a rustling and scraping noise is suddenly heard overhead. Some people look up, and a bit of dust falls in their eyes.

Suddenly a shaft of light slices into the warm and dingy room, and dust particles dance in the air. This is then interrupted by a strange-shaped shadow, which gradually turns into the form of a man lying on a pallet, being let down on ropes by some men on the roof. The crowd gives way as the pallet continues to descend, until it finally comes to rest on the floor right in front of the teacher's feet.

Luke tells us in v18 that these men were bringing their paralysed friend to Jesus, but finding no way to get him into the house because of the crowds, they got inventive, hopped up on the roof and let him down through a hole they made in the tiles.

I'm sure it must have brought a hush to the gathering. Of course, it's Jesus who breaks the silence with the incredible words of v20:

““Man, your sins are forgiven you.””

(Luke 5:20 ESV)

Is Jesus just excusing him for gate-crashing his seminar? The next few verses show it's far more than that.

“And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?””

(Luke 5:21 ESV)

The 'sins' in view here are the unavoidable, natural inclinations of the fallen human condition which alienate us from our Creator and invite his just judgement. And so the religious leaders are asking the right question, “Who can forgive sins but God alone? Who does Jesus think he is?”

You see, they were intrigued by Jesus' word. When that word taught God's Word, they were interested. When that word commanded demons to depart, and command sickness to be gone, they were astonished. But when that word pardoned sin, they were offended.

Luke goes on:

“When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, “Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” — he said to the man who was paralysed — “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.” And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God.”

(Luke 5:22–25 ESV)

We could spend a whole message sermon on just this event in Jesus' ministry. It's just fantastic. Instead of debating the theology of what the religious leaders' were thinking, he gives them a divine object lesson. Of course it's easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” How would anyone really know? Much harder to say, “Get up and walk.” Everyone will be able to see if there's any power behind those words.

Quite right, only God can forgive sin. Jesus just said he forgave the man's sins. The assumption was that Jesus was in no position to forgive the man's sins, and that it was a great sin itself to claim that he could. But how would anyone really know?

But if Jesus can make a lame man walk, what's to say he cannot forgive sins as well. And if he can forgive sins... well, he must be God himself.

And like Jesus has done before with demons and with sickness, the authoritative word of the Son of God commands the paralysed man to get up and walk. And in defiance of his paralysis, he obeys.

And of course, the religious leaders are left speechless. A quote from Jewish teachers of the time says: “A sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven him.”³ Well, there you have it!

Luke simply closes the section saying:

“And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen extraordinary things today.””

(Luke 5:26 ESV)

Just to go back for a moment, if you saw a man who was completely paralysed, what would you say his greatest problem was? Being unable to care for himself, being dependant on others?

Do you not find it surprising that Jesus looks at the paralysed man and says to him before anything else, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” (v20)?

Of course, we don’t know what the paralysed man really thought, but you can almost imagine him thinking, “Thanks Jesus, that’s real nice of you. Now could we get down to the business at hand, please?”. Or he may have been insulted, thinking, “I’m paralysed, I can’t move, and you want to judge the state of my heart?”

But this goes back to what we were talking about last week. Jesus cared about the suffering of mankind, but especially about their eternal suffering. His love wasn’t limited, but it had purpose.

³ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 3; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 138.

Matthew Henry, the Welsh Bible commentator of the 17th and 18th centuries, said this about **Jesus actions here:**

"Man, thy sins are forgiven thee, that is the blessing thou art most to prize and seek; for if thy sins be forgiven thee, though the sickness be continued, it is in mercy; if they be not, though the sickness be removed, it is in wrath."⁴

That's worth remembering when it comes to balancing physical needs and spiritual needs. Physical needs met without ever offering the hope of the gospel are destined to be undone by the destruction and decay of the physical world. Spiritual needs met with faith in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, followed by physical needs met in love, those are things that will ring God's praises into eternity.

3. Jesus Calls a Tax Collector (Luke 5:27-32)

Now we come to the odd-one-out, a man called Levi, who was a tax collector.

Knowing something about the tax system of the first century Roman Empire is helpful here.

Levi wasn't just some office clerk for the Roman Tax Office. Under the system of the day, he would have bought a contract from the Roman government at considerable expense to himself. This payment effectively paid the taxes for the communities in a given region during a set period.

The contract then allowed a tax collector like Levi to collect taxes from the local communities at a rate he was at liberty to set, and using whatever means he had at his disposal. In this way, he would regain his initial investment and make as much profit as he could on top.

⁴ from <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/luke/5.html> (Accessed: 05 Nov 2016)

Some tax collectors even made use of the local militia to ‘assist’ in the collection of taxes, if you understand what I mean. And it was all within the law. As long as Rome got its revenue, it was happy.

So you can just imagine how ordinary people must have felt about a guy like Levi. But Levi wasn’t just a regular income tax-man, he was a customs and excise tax man, which is why he had a special booth.

Listen to this description of the “Mokhes” as they were known in Hebrew, by 19th century Bible scholar Alfred Edersheim, who himself turned to Christ from Judaism.

“If this [regular taxation] offered many opportunities for vexatious exactions and rapacious injustice, the Mokhes might inflict much greater hardship upon the poor people. There was a tax and duty upon all imports and exports; on all that was bought and sold; bridge money, road money, harbour dues, town dues, etc. The classical reader knows the ingenuity which could invent a tax and find a name for every kind of exaction, such as on axles, wheels, pack animals, pedestrians, roads, highways; on admission to markets; on carriers, bridges, ships, and quays; on crossing rivers, on dams, on licenses — in short, on such a variety of objects that even the research of modern scholars has not been able to identify all the names. But even this was as nothing compared to the vexation of being constantly stopped on the journey, having to unload all one's pack animals, when every bale and package was opened, and the contents tumbled about, private letters opened, and the Mokhes ruled supreme in his insolence and rapacity.”

He’s talking about the kind of guy Jesus saw at the tax booth in Luke 5:27. To make matters worse, Levi himself was a Jew, collaborating with the Roman occupiers, the very force which was repressing Jewish national autonomy. These men were excommunicated from the synagogues, and could not be witnesses in Jewish courts.

Perhaps to add insult to injury, are we to determine from his name, Levi, that this tax collector was actually member of the tribe of the priestly tribe of Levi, the tribe God had set aside to act as representatives between God and his people?

And yet this is the very man that Jesus commands in v27:

““Follow me.””

(Luke 5:27 ESV)

Perhaps what's even more surprising is Levi's response.

“And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.”

(Luke 5:28 ESV)

This was a man for whom money was his life. And yet, when Jesus calls him, he simply obeys, and forsakes everything to follow Jesus. You can almost imagine the tax booth with all the money, the scales, the official documents... suddenly, it was worth nothing to Levi anymore. All the money he'd invested in his taxation contract, the queue of people waiting to pass his toll point, not worth a penny to him. The Greek grammar here indicates a decisive break with his former life of greed and extortion.

Luke is frustrating economical with the details here! What did Levi know of Jesus? What was the kicker that made him follow like this?

Perhaps we'll never know. What we do know is that this man followed Jesus for the rest of his life, and even came to write a book on the life and ministry of Jesus, to help persuade Jews that he was the promised Messiah. We know that book as the Gospel of Matthew.

And what happens next is just beautiful:

“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.”

(Luke 5:29 ESV)

Levi quite literally put his money where his mouth was. As someone said, he threw his own retirement party! In fact, it wasn't so much a party for Levi, but a banquet in honour of Jesus. Levi shows Jesus such gratitude, and clearly wants those in his social circle to meet the man who turned his life right-side up. The 19th century English bishop J.C. Ryle once said, "A converted man will not wish to go to heaven alone."⁵

But here we have a bizarre sight: the Son of God, the Messiah, sitting at the place of honour, surrounded by yet more tax collectors, and "others", as Luke says. In Matthew's own gospel, he identifies these others as the Pharisees do, as "sinners" (Matthew 9:10). These were possibly Levi's business associates, non-Jews whom a pious Jew would not associate with, and certainly not eat with, for fear of becoming unclean. We've already covered the cleanness issue the account of the leper.

So the Son of God is the centre of celebration in his honour, being celebrated by those who could not possibly be further from God.

The religious leaders are clearly still smarting from their earlier encounter with Jesus over the paralysed man. This time, they're incensed.

"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 5:30–32 ESV)

⁵ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 3; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 140.

Of course, Jesus is probably being a little bit ironic in referring to the Pharisees as “the righteous”. For certainly they were righteous, but in their own eyes. They are very different from those who know they are desperately unworthy, and call out to Jesus in humiliation for mercy.

Here there is such a stark contrast: on the one hand, the compassion, love, and humility displayed by the King of Heaven in sharing food with those whom religious society had declared to be unclean, and outcasts, contrasted with the arrogance and pride of the Pharisees who are aren’t prepared to risk their own comfort, reputation or theological ‘system’ for those they deemed to be suffering the just punishment of their poor life choices.

Conclusion

As we move to a close, can you see how Jesus treats the sick no different from the sellouts? He cares about every single person who crosses his path. It doesn’t matter to him if a person is a victim of circumstances or choice, he holds out the same gospel for the forgiveness of sins to them all.

He gave each one of these three a new life for the present, and a new life for the future. To the leper, he restored more than his health - he restored his access to God.

To the paralytic, he restored more than his movement - he restored his soul before God.

To Matthew, he restored more than his reputation - he restored his purpose under God.

Don’t you find that when it comes to the need to love others and care for others in their suffering, we make artificial judgements about who is more worthy of our care? I know I do.

For example, those who come to us asking for help often appear to be more worthy of our care than those we have seek out ourselves. We're often too concerned for our own comfort.

Or what about those who suffer as victims, rather than those who suffer because of poor choices? Would we rather help the victim of domestic violence, than the drug addict? Would we rather help the terminally ill than the homeless person. I've had Christians say to me, "People are only homeless because of their own choices. They could choose to go back home if they really wanted to."

Jesus does not make such distinctions regarding who he cares about, and neither should we. I'd like this to be our big idea for today.

If we are going to imitate Jesus in this regard, and be concerned for all suffering, and especially eternal suffering, then we are to be as indiscriminate as Jesus was in his concern. To him, the leper was no different to the paralysed man, and the paralysed man was no different to the tax collector - all had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all would be justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

We need to learn to see our world through Jesus' eyes. We need to see the people around us through Jesus' eyes. We need to remember that we too are desperately unworthy of his love, that we too were sick with sin, that we too suffer the effects of a world caught in the grip of decay, and that we too were captive to our own foolish and selfish choices. And yet Jesus cared about us. How can we not show the same love to anyone else out there?

We need to learn to say with **Paul**

"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

(1 Timothy 1:15 ESV)

...and then let that conviction shape the way we love all of those around us.

Let's pray.