

Luke 5:27-39
The Distinctiveness of the Gospel

I remember my one year of football. It was ninth grade, and I was the second-string tight end. I don't think I weighed 120 pounds, and I did not see a lot of playing time because the first-string tight end was a kid named Hector. Though he was only in ninth grade as well, he was a man. He was big, strong, had facial hair and cussed and talked about girls in a way that left me both puzzled and envious. He spit, smoked cigarettes after school, and scared me to death. He was as pagan as they come.

A few years later, the church college group I was attending got together with students from another church group to play flag football in the park. Much to my surprise (and I will admit still a hint of fear) Hector was there. He had come to faith in Christ. He was still big and unshaved, but he was gentle, gracious, and he loved the Lord. I learned that day that no one is too far from God to be saved. There are no sins too bad or too many to be forgiven.

But how had Hector been saved. Many religions offer many different paths to heaven. For Hindus, all rivers lead to the sea. For Buddhists, it is the eightfold path. Muslims have the five pillars. Jehovah's Witnesses emphasize morality and proselytizing. Mormons have membership in their church and obedience to Joseph Smith and his spiritual heirs as prophets of God. Catholics have the sacraments and good works. Jews have the Law. Christianity has the gospel. For Christians it is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). This is the uniqueness of Christianity. We believe that since we can do nothing to merit salvation, God must do everything. We recognize that we are sinners, that we are utterly incapable of doing anything that could persuade God not to hold us accountable for the countless sins we have committed. We believe in grace.

The Call of Matthew

There is a scene at the end of the premier episode of the show "Downton Abbey" in which Matthew (a distant cousin of Lord Grantham) receives a letter informing him he has become the heir to the title and a vast estate. As he quietly reads the letter, Matthew's mother asks him "what does he want?" Matthew looks up from the letter and replies, "he wants to change our lives."

Jesus is still in Galilee, probably in Capernaum. Capernaum was the most significant city on the north end of the Sea of Galilee, and it was a crossroads for trade in the region. This was a rich area for tax collecting. In the Roman empire, the process for collecting taxes from distant areas was well-organized and effective. Rome required a certain amount to be collected by Herod Antipas. Herod then sold franchises to tax collectors, who paid him for the opportunity to collect in a given area. As long as Rome got what it expected, Herod could keep the rest. As long as Herod got what he wanted, the tax collectors could keep the rest. There could be taxes for using roads and bridges, taxes for land, taxes for income, and taxes for certain commodities (wine, etc) among others.

Naturally the people hated these tax collectors. They were little better than extortioners. They were seen as ceremonially unclean by the Jews and could neither enter the synagogue and, since it was assumed they could not be trusted, they could not give testimony at trial. The Talmud describes two kinds of tax collectors. One collected the general taxes (such as land, income, etc) and were called *gabbai*. The other

collected the specific taxes on certain products, these were called *mokhes*. These were further distinguished by the great *mokhes* who actually did not collect the tax themselves but hired that business out to lesser *mokhes*. With his tax collecting booth positioned strategically near the sea shore (Mark 2:13-14), and along a main trade route between Syria and Egypt, Matthew was one of the latter. That is, he had direct contact with the people (many of whom must have been fishermen) from whom he collected the taxes. It is possible that Matthew was the tax collector for Andrew, Peter, James, and John.

Jesus 'noticed' Matthew (v. 27). The word 'noticed' is the word *theaomai* which means to gaze intently upon. Since Jesus had made Capernaum His main base of operations in Galilee, no doubt He knew Matthew, and Matthew knew Him. The call of Jesus was simple and direct, "follow Me" (v. 27) and the response was equally so, "he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him" (v. 28). It is not possible to know how much Matthew understood about Jesus as the Messiah, but clearly he must have recognized himself to be a sinner in need of the grace of God. He would not have abandoned his lucrative business just out of curiosity. That understanding was enough with which to begin.

It is noteworthy that Matthew's own narrative of this event is remarkably brief. "As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he got up and followed Him" (Matthew 9:9). No mention is made of his leaving behind his thriving tax business. Not to require the reader to take notice of this is genuine humility. Not only the brevity of the account, but its quiet, unemotional style, reflects a person who doesn't want to draw attention to himself.

When Matthew left all, he lost financially. He had already paid money for the privilege of collecting taxes. Yet, Matthew celebrated his decision in two ways. First, he gave a big feast, and secondly he invited his friends. Being a tax collector, that lot must have been a motley group. Tax collectors were a very metaphor for sin, so the associates of Matthew must have been the least valued members of society. Whether it was fellow tax collectors, or those who hung about them hoping for some benefit from their association, this was not a group of polite Jewish society.

That Matthew "gave a big reception for Him in his house" (v. 29) indicates not only enthusiasm but reminds us of the wealth he must have accumulated collecting taxes. A home large enough to host a dinner party (that they were "reclining at table" allows us to conclude that it was a lengthy meal in the fashion of the culture) for a "great crowd" (v. 29) would not be easily sustained without a great income and further indicates what Matthew was walking away from when he followed Jesus.

The Pharisees would never eat with sinners, but that did not keep them from judging those who did. There will always be those in religious communities who see the darker side of everything. They grumble and complain. It was likely at the end of the meal, when the party was going home, that the Pharisees made their presence known. They were 'grumbling' (v. 30) and focusing their attention on the disciples asking "why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?" (v. 30). To eat with someone in this culture implied a relationship. The rabbinic tradition of the Pharisees stated that "the disciples of the learned shall not recline at table in the company of the people of the soil."

Jesus did not leave his new, and quite probably intimidated, disciples without a defender. Perhaps at this early stage of their spiritual journey, Peter and the others were asking themselves the same question. Jesus answered the Pharisees by quoting what may have been a common proverb, “it is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick” (v. 31). His point was not that He was associating with people of low society to become one of them, or to blend in. Quite the contrary. To drive home His point, Jesus continued “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (v. 32).

The irony, perhaps even sarcasm, is unmistakable. Though no one is truly righteous in the eyes of God, if the Pharisees wanted to count themselves righteous, Jesus would not argue. Jesus knew that “the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24). If the Pharisees wanted to achieve self-righteous by obedience to the Law then very well. He simply and clearly indicated that He had come to save those who acknowledged they were sinners. If the Pharisees did not think they were sinners, then well enough, Jesus would have nothing to do with them. A repentant tax collector would do just fine.

There are three quick lessons to take away from this passage. First, the call of Matthew is a great example of the irresistible power of grace. There is no indication that Matthew sought Jesus. Like Saul of Tarsus, like salvation for each of us who are called, this is entirely a work of God. I am certain Matthew had his own agenda for that day. Perhaps people to see and money to collect. Jesus had a different schedule. Jesus had come to call on Matthew, and to call Matthew into the kingdom of God. Jesus wanted to change his life.

Secondly, no true believer wants to go to heaven alone. Matthew, like Andrew and others in Scripture, could not wait to tell others of the good news of Jesus Christ. Like the leper, even those who are enjoined by Jesus to keep quiet cannot resist. If we truly understand Who has saved us and from what we have been saved, it is impossible for us to keep quiet.

Finally, We are adopted into the family of God. Therefore we have no claim over who else is in the family. The Pharisees believed they had some voice in determining who was worthy to be in the kingdom of God. We should know better. We have no right to be there ourselves, so it is inconceivable that we should possess some right of veto over others we deem unworthy. If God is willing to offer them grace, we have no place to argue.

The Problem of Syncretism

Again Luke gives no specifics, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place this event directly after the feast celebrating Matthew’s conversion, so it is reasonable to assume it followed soon thereafter. If there was a bit of a time gap, no problem, since the matter fits in topically quite well with the previous passage. The ‘they’ (v. 33) is a bit more problematic. Jesus had just been addressing the Pharisees, so it seems that Luke is referencing them when he uses the word. Matthew’s gospel, however, has the disciples of John the Baptist asking the question (Matthew 9:14) and Mark’s narrative has both the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist involved (Mark 2:18). No doubt the simplest conclusion is that both groups were present when the question was asked, and Luke is simply continuing his narrative by having Jesus make a particular point to the Pharisees.

That the Pharisees and disciples of John the Baptist would be associated may seem surprising, but it can be easily explained. Not all of those who followed John the Baptist were present when Jesus began His ministry, so there is no reason to assume they all had equal insight about the coming of the Messiah. Also, by this time John the Baptist was either imprisoned or perhaps already dead, so he was not available to confirm or deny the Messiahship of Jesus. The disciples of John the Baptist were spiritually devoted to religious extremes, and the Pharisees would have been a reasonable party with which to find common ground.

The challenge put forward was simple. “The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink” (v.33). The issue was fasting and the accompanying time of prayer. Fasting, prayer, and giving to the poor were the three main expressions of Jewish piety. Though there is only one required fast according to the Law, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-34), there were other times when fasts occurred for either groups or individuals. Some “valiant men” fasted for seven days at the death of Saul (1 Samuel 31:13), “all the sons of Israel” fasted from morning until night after the battle at Gibeah (Judges 20:26), and after the exile, fasts were held in the fifth and seventh months (Zechariah 7:3-5). By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had settled on fasting twice a week (Luke 18:12). For the Pharisees, these fasts, and their accompanying prayers, were done publicly and proudly. Jesus would hold the Pharisees accountable for this on a different occasion (Matthew 6:16).

Since John the Baptist was an ascetic, it is not unusual that his disciples would regularly fast, perhaps as an example of repentance from sin. It may even be that if John the Baptist had been beheaded, his disciples were fasting as a sign of mourning, or if not but he was still imprisoned, in the hopes of petitioning God for his release. There is no indication that the disciples of John the Baptist fasted with the ostentation of the Pharisees.

Nevertheless, fasting is a matter of the heart, not the stomach.

“⁶Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?
⁷Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6-7).

Jesus responded with the illustration of a bridegroom, “You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?” (v. 34). The question is rhetorical. The purpose of the attendants is to facilitate the celebration of the wedding feast. Naturally they ought to be in a festive mood. After all, this is a wedding, not a funeral. That reference would come later.

In the Old Testament, Israel is referred to as a bride of the Lord (Isaiah 62:4-5), and in Revelation the Church is shown as the bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7). John the Baptist used the same idea when speaking of Christ (John 3:29). It is a fitting analogy, because the two characteristics of a bridegroom on his wedding day are love and union. Both of these are well suited to describe the relationship Jesus has with His Church.

Not that all will be perfect, for “the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them” (v. 35). This clearly is a reference to His death and, not for the last time, the disciples did not understand. As Isaiah foreshadowed,

“⁷He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.

⁸By oppression and judgment He was taken away” (Isaiah 53:7-8).

Jesus then used a story to illustrate His point. “³⁶No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. ³⁷And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. ³⁸But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins” (v. 36-38).

If one took their new shirt and tore off a piece to patch an old one, both would be ruined. The first because now it would be damaged, and the second because the patch would not match and it would pull apart when it was washed and the new fabric shrunk. Likewise, new wine, as it fermented would burst through old wineskins that had been stretched tight. Both the wine and the wineskins would be lost.

These two analogies made the same basic point. The old with the new cannot be combined. What Jesus meant was that His gospel could not be integrated into Judaism. Taken in the context of the passage, Jesus is explaining that a works based faith is simply incompatible with a gospel of grace. Repentance has no correlation with works. Humility and self-righteousness are invariably at odds with one another. Focus on the externals can have no place with faith of the heart. The legalistic religion of the Pharisees could simply not accommodate the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, Jesus reminded them that “no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is good enough’” (v. 39). The point here is that the Pharisees, like many, are content with what they have and reject the new simply because they are satiated with complacency. Unwilling to recognize the inadequacies of the Law, the Pharisees were unwilling to accept Jesus as the Messiah.

Throughout this passage, Jesus emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel. It could not be combined with the Law in His time, and it cannot be combined with the world in ours.

Take Aways

Let us rejoice that the distinctiveness of the gospel can call anyone at any time to salvation. There is no one too sinful, too stubborn, or too old for salvation.

Also, the gospel that saves is the gospel of Jesus Christ alone. Nothing else will meet the needs of sinners.

