

The Saviour's Call

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- [0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 5, starting at verse 27. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belong to their sect complained to his disciples, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?
- Jesus answered them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. This is the word of the Lord.
- This slide is not working. It's alright, I can deal without slides. Good evening, welcome to St. Silas.
- My name is Darren, I'm on the vestry here, I work for the Navigators. You can ask about both those things later if you want. But you're quite happy and free not to. We are going to look at this short little passage tonight about Jesus and his interaction with this guy called Levi.
- And we're just simply going to follow through what we see Jesus do in the passage. We're going to follow him, see what he does, and see how people react. Because that's part of the heart of what it means to be a Christian, is to see, look, observe, and follow Jesus, to see what he does, and see how we react to the invitation, to the call of who he is, and who he calls each one of us to be.
- [1 : 4 1] And as we do so, I think, I know my experience has been constantly being surprised to the kind of things that Jesus comes in and does. He disrupts things. He challenges a lot of our concepts of the ways we think the world exists and the way we think we function within it.
- And I think this tiny little passage, this six verses, will really unpack not just a radical message for who each one of us are, but the God behind that message at the same time.
- I'm going to pray. And maybe the slides will be fixed by then. I'll pray for that too. Father, I thank you that you call every single person to yourself. I pray that as we look at your word, as we look at the person of Christ and his interaction with this man, Levi, that you'd help us to see something of the beauty of who you are and the reality of what it means for truth to come and live and dwell and walk among us.
- I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen. So one of the things I think you see really Jesus get to the heart of in this passage, which is right at the start, I think.
- I need the Bible, don't I? Is what it means for us to be successful. The kind of things of the things we look to in life to give us meaning, to give us purpose, to give us identity.
- [3 : 0 1] We have principles in the world of the way we think it works, how things go, how things operate. And one of the ones about our lives and our culture is clearly that to get by in life, you need to be successful.
- And in order to be successful, you need to work hard, you need to do the right things, you need to be well-connected, you need to have the right amount of money, you need to be in the right amount of places. And if you're not, then you need to get there.

And so that becomes like our operating system. It becomes the way we make decisions. It's almost like a background thing. I know it is for me, it's like the thing that is constantly going on in the background. But if we don't fit into that category, if we're not people who automatically are able to do that, then this operating system doesn't really have a lot of space for people who are broken, for people who fail, for people who are doing all that but it's still not working.

And all the system really has to say to us is, well, just try harder. I went to see this film last two weeks ago called The Peanut Butter Falcon.

Has anybody seen that film? Apart from you. One person. Brilliant. You should go and see it. The premise of this film, there's a poster about to come out in a second.

[4 : 10] Once they're finished. No? Right. Anyway, the premise of this film is about this man who has Down syndrome. And he is locked away in a kind of old folks home, because that's where the government has put him.

But he has this real ambition to be something different. He wants to be a professional wrestler. And he kind of comes in contact with Shia LaBeouf. And Shia LaBeouf is the only person who actually calls him to something new.

Everybody either patronizes him or tries to put him away into some sort of institution and look after him. But actually, the film itself came about because some producers met the actor at a camp, a training camp for disabled actors.

And this guy really wanted to be an actor. But he lives in a world which says, well, you cannot do things like that. You do not have the building components. You don't have the right kind of stuff to live and operate in that way.

So they decided to make a film. And Shia LaBeouf got involved, and they make this beautiful film, which in and of itself has an equal message of somebody quite unexpected being called to something new and something different.

[5 : 13] It's the very thing you see Jesus through all of Luke's gospel. Up until this point, Jesus has been calling people to himself, quite unexpected people, fishermen, people on the fringes of society, the people that he heals in the beginning of this chapter, a leper, somebody who is crippled, these are people who in that society at that time would have been absolute rejects.

They would have not been cared about. They would have been seen as the fringes. And Jesus wanders into these people's lives and calls him to himself. But the story we have tonight is a slightly different kind of guy altogether.

This is the story of Levi, the tax collector. There's a painting about to come up by Caravaggio. Well, that's Jesus on the right, kind of pointing to this guy sitting at the end of the table.

This is his tax booth. He's slumped. And Jesus kind of wanders right into the situation. And it's quite an abrupt little story. Jesus appears. He says, follow me. This guy goes, sure, leaves everything.

And then they go and have dinner together. And some people get really annoyed by this. And it feels quite abrupt. But I think as we push into the calling and the nature of the calling, we'll start to really see the radical nature of what Jesus is up to.

[6 : 28] And so the first thing we're going to think about tonight is the God who calls us. This is a God who calls. It's a phone. And he says, follow. It's pretty basic.

That's all Jesus does. He says, you, come follow me. And why would a man just hear that and get up and go and say yes? Well, there's a few things as to why I think Levi does that.

So Levi would have been operating in this world that we see and hear in the first few chapters of Luke where you see Jesus start to do his public ministry. He's starting to preach in a way and teach in the scriptures that people start to comment they've never heard teaching like this before.

But it's not just teaching. The kind of people Jesus is hanging out with are quite radically different people. And more than that, Jesus isn't just being nice to these people. He is demonstrating real power and authority through the preaching of the scriptures, his ability to heal.

You see at the beginning of chapter 5, he has this dialogue with a paralyzed man. There's people desperate to get him. They cut a hole in the roof just so this guy can get near Jesus.

[7 : 35] He also heals a leper earlier on in that chapter just before that. And so Levi would have heard some of Jesus. He may have even seen some of what Jesus was up to.

There's a good chance that if being in that community, he might have been at the temple one day and even heard Jesus open up passages like Isaiah and talking away about the fullness of who God is where they might not have heard before.

Because one of the things Jesus does, he doesn't just appear out of nowhere. Where he is invested in the lives of these people. And Levi would have known that. He would have been engaged with that on some level.

And he decides to take a chance on this rabbi who has demonstrated real authority and real power in the world. But Levi isn't just some random guy like a fisherman or something like that.

He is a tax collector. Now tax collectors aren't particularly like today, I don't think. I'm self-employed. Sorry if you're a tax collector. I hate doing tax returns.

[8 : 35] But back then, somebody who took tax off somebody was even worse than just somebody who took some money and maybe gave it to the council and you're not really sure what they do with it. Other than give more green bins everywhere.

And then, which never get emptied. Now in this part of the world, this is a Roman controlled part of the world where they had Herod as a kind of puppet king.

And everything in this society is kind of geared towards the rich. You have huge communities of people working hard to try and get what they can get.

So this small government, Herod, would then take money for himself. They would take money for Rome. And everything in this community is connected. It's not the way our culinary culture works. Like work and temple and politics, they're all uniquely connected because that was the way the community worked.

And so you have this community which probably were really hard pressed. Especially under the rule of Herod. Because Herod had such a luxurious lifestyle. There was tax everywhere. And literally everything was taxed. Right down to the types of rope that fishermen would use.

[9 : 39] They would have that taxed as well. And then you have this guy whose job is to represent the government, this oppressing force that is ruling your country, to come in and take money off you for the oppressing forces.

And they were well known for not just taking money that they needed, but taking a bit extra for themselves. And if you didn't give it to them, they had the whole force of Rome behind them to back them up. So these guys were particularly disliked not just by the common man.

Because the common man was like, these are taking what little money we have and extra for yourself. Really pushing down on the poor. Yet to the religious elite, they were like the worst of the worst.

Because they were reinforcing the position of an oppressive government who were seen as the enemies of God. This is somebody who was working against the people of his own culture.

And Jesus, having come out of a building where he's just healed probably somebody from the lower section of society, comes and meets this guy. I don't know what you would think that Jesus comes out.

[10 : 40] He's seen the reality of somebody who is crippled and done something about it. And he walks out and he meets one of these exploiters. What do you think Jesus would do? He'd throw over the tables?

Is he going to have an absolute go at this guy? No, he says, you. You come and follow me. It's quite radical, this kind of person that he is asking to follow him. Because Levi isn't like poor.

He'll be one of the social elite. He'll have loads of money. The verses tell us, like he says, he just quite quickly throws a great banquet together for Jesus at his house. So he's clearly got loads of mates.

He's clearly got loads of food. By our standards, Levi's doing pretty well for himself. He's the kind of guy that we would look at and think, he's successful. Well, he's got friends.

He's got money. He's hanging out with a rabbi. Maybe he wouldn't have that in your category today. But back then you would have because rabbis would have been a very strong public position with a lot of respect.

[11 : 38] But Jesus decides to enter into this guy's life as well. Because Jesus has no divisions. He doesn't have the sense of, I'm only here for the poor or I'm only here for the good. I'm only here for this type of person.

And it's in complete contrast with the kind of situation Jesus has just come from. And then there's the nature of the call. So in this culture, again, this is a wee bit, sorry, I'm going to do a wee bit more of what the culture was like.

Again, not only was the work based around a culture where they had the temple at the center, but the education would be as well. So, you go to school back in the first century in Jerusalem, the Torah, the first five books of the Bible would have been at the center of your education.

You'd have learned it, you'd have memorized the first five books of the Bible. And most kids, after they get that, they start to kind of veer off in their educational discipline to do the family trade or whatever they're going to do.

But the best kids, the best ones, they'd have gone on to do the next stage, which is learning the rest of the Old Testament. It's actually, and they're learning how to discuss and ask questions. It's something you see Jesus do in Luke's gospel where he's like 11 and he's asking the temple people questions.

[12 : 52] He is in that stage of education. And then the best kids, the best of the best of the best kids, they would go on to be like the top disciples. And they would apply to work with rabbis. These were like the elite religious guys of their day.

And if they were good enough, they would get to go with the top rabbi. And a rabbi would invite them to follow them. And it wasn't just learn what the rabbi knew, it was to become like the rabbi.

So when you see guys who are fishermen, and you see guys who are tax collectors, well, they're clearly not the best of the best of the best, are they? They're doing their jobs.

They're not these top elite guys when it comes to religious training. It would be the equivalent potentially of Jesus walking past a theology college into Aldi and saying, you, you're the guys who I want to follow me.

Or walking into a bank of some high-powered guy who's made all his money off of selling loans to the poorest communities and saying, you, you come follow me.

[13 : 53] It's a radical call to the most extreme groups of people. And there's something about this guy where they say yes to it. And it's a call that draws every aspect of who we are and challenges and disrupts the kind of people we think God engages with and the nature of what it means to follow.

And what happens next, I think, is even more radical. Jesus comes round for dinner. Then Levi held a great banquet, in verse 29, for Jesus at his house.

And a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with him. So in this culture, again, coming to somebody's house is like one of the biggest signs of public honoring you could do.

Jesus does it later with Zacchaeus. That's what he does. He's like, I'll come round to your house. And he says, salvation will come to your house. This is a hugely honoring thing Jesus is doing. He's saying, yeah, cool, I'll come and hang out with you.

And I'll come and hang out with your friends. Again, it's quite unexpected. I don't know what you think God is like, that if God says, you come follow me, what would you do next? Maybe he would launch you into a 10-point plan of how to change your life.

[15 : 06] Or maybe he would give you all these things you need to go away and do first, and then he'll come back and visit you in a few weeks to see how you're getting on. But there's this deep relational invitation that Jesus comes into the depths of his life.

And he has dinner with him and his friends. It's quite a powerful picture of who God is. Because that's one of the things Jesus is doing when he is in the world.

He is showing us what God is like. He'll ultimately show us what God is like in the giving of himself for all people. But in the way Jesus acts, in the way Jesus communicates with people, the way Jesus engages with people, we are seeing something of what God is like.

This is what God is like when he meets people and he asks them to follow him and they say yes. One of the first things we see Jesus do here is sit and have dinner with him. It's one of the pictures of the new creation you read at the end of the scriptures of what heaven and the new eternity looks like.

It's this giant banquet of God with all his people gathered around him. And the Pharisees really do not like this. So the Pharisees would have been the religious leaders of the day.

[16 : 13] They would have been the religious elite. And it says here in verse 30, But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belong to their sect complained to his disciples, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

They really don't like what's going on here. It's the equivalent of like, what are you doing with that guy? Why are you spending time there? I notice the Pharisees don't actually complain to Jesus himself.

They go to the disciples, which is, I'm quite convicted of that. Sometimes as Christians we don't like to confront anybody. We like to kind of keep it quite nice so we do things behind people's back.

And it can get quite disruptive. And you see the Pharisees go over to the disciples and start to question what Jesus is up to. Because if Jesus is spending time with people like this, Then this gets right to the heart of the way they think successful living is.

Because the Pharisees had built up a picture of religion where, yeah, God is there and he is true, But you have to work hard to be the best people to be near God. And anything that would fit, kind of come out with the rules that they created, Which were man-made rules alongside the laws of God, Then you were not good enough.

[17 : 33] They controlled, had a system of control of, This is what it means to be successful. This is what it means to be accepted by God. This is what it means to be at the top of our society. And if Jesus is hanging out with people like this, Then what does that say about these rules that they have got?

And there's a real tragedy at the heart of what this little passage is saying. That sometimes the people who can see the work of God, See this radical invitation from God, The ones who have a heart of criticism towards it, Are actually religious people.

To be culturally on the ball, I've got a Kanye West reference from his new album. In his song, Hands On, he says this, And he's talking about people who have observed his faith, Who are Christian, who are religious.

If they only see the wrongs and never listen to my songs, I was going to try and rap it, but I won't. It's so hard to get along if they only see the slight from their love of religion.

What have I been hearing from the other Christians? They'll be the first ones to judge me, Make it seem like nobody loves me. We get called halfway believers, Because we've only halfway read Ephesians.

[18 : 44] Only if they knew what I knew. I was never new till I knew the true and living God, Yeshua. He is, whatever you think of him or his music, There's something going on in culture today, Where you have a group of people who are quite religious, Being like, well, he cannot possibly have changed, Because we know what he's like.

Yet you have another group of people who are the other observers, Who probably loved him, being like, Well, who's Kanye West to tell us anything about what to do with life? We have a huge track record of what this guy's been up to. Levi would have probably been, Maybe not similar in terms of career, But similar in terms of invoking that kind of reaction from the public, Would have been like, This guy, why is he hanging out with Jesus?

And religious leaders would have been like, Well, he's not good enough to do that either. And when Jesus comes into the life of a person, It changes things round about us. But one of the things it can invoke Is this critique of what is God up to.

This does not fit with the way we think the world works, And how success works. And Jesus has a brilliant and beautiful nuanced response to their criticism.

Verses 31 and 32. It's not the healthy who need a doctor, But those who are ill. I've not come to call the righteous, But sinners to repentance.

[20 : 09] I don't know what Levi and his mates would have thought When they're sitting having dinner and Jesus says this, Well, I'm actually here for the sinners. It's quite a profound thing Jesus is saying, In the company of the people who he's having dinner with at that time.

And Jesus could have responded a couple of different ways, couldn't he? And it would have probably chimed to some of the pictures we have of God. He could have agreed with the Pharisees, And he said, You know what? You're right. This guy isn't quite up to scratch yet.

I'll send him away and help him, And maybe give him some tools, And he might get better. And that could be a picture of God that I know I had for quite a long time. Because it's a picture of a God who's powerful, sure, But he's quite distant.

He's quite distant. He's just kind of like, Yeah, I'd come back when Levi is up to scratch. When he's as good as you guys, Then that's what will happen. It's a picture of a God who's just absent.

He's kind of there. But until you're up to scratch with his standards, Standards which the rest of the scriptures tell us we can never live up to, Then we will not be fully accepted by Jesus. So Jesus doesn't affirm that approach of the Pharisees, Because he stays.

[21 : 15] He kind of defends Levi at the same time. But it's a very tempting picture to have of God. I think for the first even two years, I became a Christian at university. In the first couple of years, I still had this default image of having gone from nominal agnosticism into some sort of faith.

The first few years was still like, Yeah, there's a certain group of people God really loves. They're the good Christians who, I don't know, We're Christians straight out of the womb, And have never done a mistake in their entire life. And they have moral perfection.

And there's another group, The B group, Who I would put myself in. God kind of tolerates those people. He loves them because he has to. They've believed the right things, So they're kind of in the club.

But there's a bit of a nuisance that they're there. And actually, The heart behind a God like that is just, Keep trying harder. Keep trying harder. And one day, Maybe you'll be as good as the other people.

And when you hear them talk about their prayer lives, When you hear them talk about all the good things God gives you, Then maybe you will get all that too. And there's an exhausting form of religion. Because it's like, Love is just tangled just far enough away for you to keep chasing, Aware of your own inability to do so.

[22 : 21] But Jesus doesn't leave with that option. Leave us with that option. Equally, Jesus could have done the other opposite end of the extreme of that. Where he could have said to the Pharisees, Leave Levi alone.

Levi is fine. There's absolutely nothing wrong with him. You guys are the worst. And I sent them off. But he doesn't do that either. There's another very tempting picture to have of God. That God is very close, Very intimate.

But he's powerless. He doesn't really do anything. He just hangs around with us. I took my six-year-old niece to St. Silas last week for the first time. She doesn't really ever go to church. And on the way home, After a spectacular argument on Great Western Road about cake, We had this conversation where, It's quite hard to talk to a six-year-old about God.

I have new respect for your job. She was like, What is God? So what is God? And I was like, Oh man, How do you explain that to a six-year-old? So I had a stumble and attempt of, Well, God is everywhere.

And, you know, He sees and He loves. And she was like, Oh, okay. And then later she was like, So what's prayer then? I was like, Well, prayer is talking to God. And she was like, Okay. So from what she had coupled together, From what I had said, I turned around at one point, She was standing with her eyes closed, Staring at the sky.

[23 : 28] I said, What are you doing? She was like, I'm praying. I was like, Oh, What are you praying about? She was like, I'm asking God for a new Barbie unicorn. And I was like, Um, Okay. Well, I guess you can ask God for things.

That is part of God's remit. I was like, That's more Santa's remit. That kind of thing. And I tried a bit more. Well, God is about, God sees who you are and how you feel, Whether you're happy, Whether you're sad.

And He's, Because of Jesus, He loves you. And he's like, She was like, Okay. I started walking. And again, She stopped. And she was praying again. And I was like, Oh, What are you praying about this time? She was like, Well, Because, I was quite astounded by this.

It was really convicting. She was like, Well, I guess because of that, Then I'm just quite thankful. I'm thanking God for all the things I've got. And all the things I've done today. And I was kind of like, Come on, My trap.

But her first interpretation of my cobbled together answer was, God is essentially this nice guy. He just gives you what he wants. And just leaves us at that. Jesus does something unique.

[24 : 22] He doesn't affirm a distant God. He's like, I've got power, But I'm not going to be near you until you're better. He also doesn't affirm some God who's on the other end of the extreme, Where he just talks about love, And actually doesn't do anything.

He talks about this kind of unique thing in the middle. And he calls that repentance. It's a returning to who God is. So that we may be something new.

So while Jesus does not dispute the claim that Levi is a sinner, He equally in that very moment, Is defending his presence of intimacy and dinner, And reclining with him.

And he uses that word reclining. They're like, Really, Like it's really intimate, The picture of hanging out with each other. And repentance, I don't know what you think of that word. You can maybe have images of somebody with like a placard on the street, Saying this action leads to hell after death.

And if you don't repent, God's going to come after you. It's got more of this tone of, That we have entirely, And that picture, Whatever you think of that, Kind of reduces sin and brokenness, Down to if you do a certain thing, God's not happy with you.

[25 : 29] Whereas repentance goes far deeper than that, And it's far bigger than that at the same time. It challenges this heart concept, That ultimately, I am completely and utterly devoted to myself.

I'm completely, I'm not talking about me, I can't talk about any of you, But I'm completely obsessed with myself. All my thoughts, All my daydreams, All my anxieties, All my worries, They're about me.

My default position in the world, Is how can I get what I want? How can I be successful, Comfortable, Get what I want? Whatever it might be, It takes up all my energy, It takes up all my decisions, It takes up all my time.

And Jesus says, And using repentance, To turn away from that, But return to something. It's not just turn away and do nothing, Or turn away and do a new program, It's return to God, To return home to God.

And the only way that that can happen for any of us, Is by this call at the beginning, To follow the Son. To trust who the Son is. To trust who Jesus is. Who the types of people Jesus is for.

[26 : 32] So the kind of people who think, Well Jesus wouldn't really be for me, Because of whatever the blank you will fill in. Jesus quite exclusively says, Throughout the entire gospel, No. And for all people.

Yet at the same time, He says, You can't really do it yourself. You don't have the strength, The capacity. Therefore my death and resurrection, Will bring new life, To each and every one of you, Who puts your trust in me. Repentance is about returning home.

Returning to the God, Who is for his people. And has actually been pursuing, His people for generations. The very picture that Jesus is sent, He pursues Levi.

He comes to Levi. Levi isn't out in the streets, Looking for Jesus, Trying really hard to get God. God comes up to him, And says, You come follow me. And in the response, Of leaving behind, Potentially his career, Potentially all the things, That have made him successful.

Why would he do that, Unless he knew something about, The nature of what God is like, And the radical nature of, In his society, That kind of person, Being called to God. We are going to finish here, In a second.

[27 : 42] And I want to ask, We are going to do, A kind of wee two minute, Reflective exercise, If that is alright. But what I want to kind of, Finish on, Is the reality of, This beautiful picture, Of what Jesus is doing.

I don't know what you, When you think of these little stories, When Jesus just pops in, And says these words, Come follow me, And people just automatically say yes. You have this picture, Of Jesus being like, I don't know, Like some sort of wizard, Who just zaps, And we all robotically go yes.

But he is engaging, In the lives of people, Throughout the scriptures. He is rubbing shoulders, With the poor, The oppressed. And in this story, He is at the other end, Of the spectrum. He is calling people, To himself all the place, And he still does that today.

That is still Jesus' heart, That is still Jesus' desire, That he calls, Each and every single one of us, To himself. And in doing that, He calls us, To this invitation, To dinner essentially, Is more than dinner, But it is an invitation, To deep relational knowingness, In the lives, With people, Who we are living alongside.

And it is a call to change, Because that call to repentance, Isn't just, An idea of, Okay, Intellectually assent, To the idea, That I need to return. It is the transforming, Of our lives, Away from the direction, Of the things, And the stuff, We used to put our trust in, Into a person.

[29 : 05] As James said right, At the beginning, It is not to a set of ideas, It is to a person, Who is actually God. And a God, Who then gives us, The power to do it, By putting his spirit in us, And that is the only way, This thing actually works.

If Jesus said, Yeah, Come change, All the best, Tell me how you get on, Then that is not, Transformational living, In the reality of the spirit. But instead, Because of his resurrection, Given us, His very presence in us, Which brings, Complete love, And acceptance, Of who God is.

It dismantles, The previous places, Those shaky places, Where we put our trust, The things, We are radically chasing after, Not that they are bad, And not that, God often says, Stop doing those things, But the things, That they have become, In our lives, It replaced, With the son of God, Who makes himself, Known, And present, In our lives.

Levi, Is not left unchanged, Levi will go on, To be part of a group, A pretty ragtag group of people, He is about to hang out, With some fishermen, Who he was probably, Taxing the heck out of, A few weeks ago, And they are going to be, Called brothers together, And not only that, They change the course, Of human history, In fact, Later on in the Bible, You hear criticisms, Of these people being like, Well they are not just fishermen, Who are these guys?

Yet they turn the world, Upside down, Because of the trust, Of the son of God, Who is for them, And reigns in them, So as we finish, I am just going to ask, We are going to pray, For a couple of minutes, I just have three questions, To reflect, You pick one of the questions, Based on which one, Applies to you most, So in this call to follow, How do you hear that, If you haven't heard it before?

[30 : 49] What does it mean, For Jesus to walk into your life, Walk into your workplaces, As he did here, And have him say to you, You, You come follow me, You see this call, To relationship, So we might have said yes, To that call to follow, But this deep intimacy, Of God making himself, Known to his people, What does it mean, What's the reality, Of that picture like for us, Of Jesus sitting, With us, With our friends, Who again, Equally would have been, In the outskirts, They would have been, Similar people, And to be known, By Jesus in that way, Yet also, What's the call, To repentance mean, To change, That God doesn't just call us, And hang out with us, But he calls us, To something new, To reorientate our lives, Back towards the God, Of who he calls father, He says, I'm for you, And I love you, Therefore live your life, In response to who I am, So I'm just going to, Finish there, And we're just going to have, A couple of minutes of silence, As you think about that, And then Greg will,

Whenever you feel, Thank you. Thank you.