

Luke 5:17-31 // The Problem with Jesus...

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[0 : 00] Join me in this morning's reading. You can turn to page 1032 of the Church Bibles. We're actually going to start at verse 12.

! Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.

I am willing, he said. Be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him. Then Jesus ordered him, Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.

Yet the news about him spread all the more. So that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their illnesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

One day Jesus was teaching and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They'd come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem.

[1 : 22] And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal those who were ill. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus.

When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, Friend, your sins are forgiven. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy?

Who can forgive sins but God alone? Now Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier to say, Your sins are forgiven, or to say, Get up and walk.

But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. So he said to the paralyzed man, I tell you, Get up, take your mat, and go home.

[2 : 32] Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on, and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God.

They were filled with awe and said, We have seen remarkable things today. After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth.

Follow me, Jesus said to him. And Levi got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

Jesus answered them, It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

[3 : 36] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Lamont, thanks for reading that for us. It'd be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open. Luke chapter 5, it's on page 1032 in the church Bibles, and you can find an outline inside the notice sheet to follow along as we go.

But let's ask for God's help. Let's pray as we turn to God's word. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts and reflections of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen. Well, one of the marks of our age is that we live in the world of online reviews. I don't know how you find that, but I can find it quite kind of disabling.

It holds me back. We find something we want to do, a place we want to go, a holiday we want to take, and it all looks great, and then we turn to TripAdvisor, and it's like five stars, five stars, five stars, this is good, and then one star, and you're, oh, hang on, what's wrong with this holiday?

And you look, and you have to think, what did this person mark it down for? And when you're looking at an online review, you have to think to yourself, is the problem with the product or the

holiday or the hotel, or is the problem with the reviewer?

[5 : 01] One TripAdvisor reviewer wrote, lovely room, fantastic pool, great food, but the waiter smiled too much, and I don't like forced cheerfulness.

Another said, it's a great hotel, but the ocean is far too loud at night. One review left on TripAdvisor for a Michelin-starred restaurant marked it down with the comment, the spoons were too shiny. And another restaurant review said, the steak was amazing, but the napkins were folded in a really funny way. So these reviewers will not be going back to the places that they reviewed, but we have to decide, how much does their rejection bother me?

Well, in Luke's gospel, he's told us that he's written an orderly account of Jesus' life so that we can have every confidence in Jesus. He wants you to set your hope on Jesus.

He wants you to confidently proclaim Jesus. He wants you to let yourself be transformed by Jesus. He wants you to live life differently because of Jesus.

[6 : 16] But for his first century hearers, there was a big obstacle to having that confidence, and it was this. The religious establishment rejected Jesus.

So if Jesus is the Savior God has promised for centuries, fulfilling all those promises, how could the people who'd inherited those promises, who knew their Bibles, get it wrong about Jesus?

They had a problem with Jesus. Is the problem with him? Or is the problem with them? Now just glance across the page to chapter 6 verse 11, and you can see where we end up by the end of next week.

Chapter 6 verse 11, but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.

So what is their problem with Jesus? And as we reflect on it today, I think it sheds light on why Jesus is rejected today by lots of upstanding people, lots of respectable people, lots of people who, because they reject Jesus, maybe that's holding you back from being really confident.

[7 : 33] Maybe you have doubts because the people around you reject him. Well our first point, the problem with Jesus, the impact he has, is just so disturbing.

The first disturbance is that a man, in verse 12, covered in leprosy, is in the town. This is not right. This is unsettling. Leprosy was highly infectious.

He should be out of town, in a colony, or shouting, unclean, unclean, wherever he goes, so that people can keep their distance from him. But when Jesus comes into town, men like that come into town as well.

And he runs up to Jesus, and he falls on his knees, and he pleads with Jesus, Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean. And Jesus reaches out and touches him.

And he says, I am willing, be clean. And the leprosy leaves him immediately. So the man's leprosy here, and how it was handled, serves like this mega picture for us, of the effect of sin in our world.

[8 : 42] That we are not the people we should be. We've not treated God as we should. And that has meant that suffering has entered our world. So a man covered in leprosy in those times illustrates how sin has wrecked things.

Because he is suffering, and he's alienated from God, spiritually unclean, and he's alienated from people. He's ostracized.

But Jesus can put things right. So look at verse 14. Then Jesus ordered him, don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.

In other words, the man comes to Jesus, and now he is clean to be with God again, and to be with other people again. But if you're in a religious society where things are very carefully structured, where the fabric of day-to-day life is rigidly focused on categories like clean, and unclean, and holy, and defiled, and you place people in those categories, and you've got systems to separate everyone out, and everything out, and you think that doing that keeps you on track with God, well, Jesus is throwing all the cards up in the air, isn't he?

He's upsetting the whole thing. Who is he to do that? No wonder then that in the next scene, everyone is rocked up, all the religious elites.

[10 : 17] Look at verse 17. One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee, and from Judea, and Jerusalem, and the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal those who were ill.

Well, the journey from Jerusalem to where Jesus is in Galilee was about 80 miles, so it's not far off the West Highland Way. It was four days travel on foot, but they've come from far and wide, and the credibility of Jesus' claims is going to be weighed up by them before their very eyes.

And we move to our second problem with Jesus. The claims he makes are just so audacious. It's an electrically charged moment, isn't it? The leaders are there, the room is packed, the power of God is on Jesus to heal, and some men go to extremes.

It's loaded with eyewitness details here, so we can picture the crowd sitting there, standing there, standing room only. You can't get in, and then you start to see debris falling from the ceiling, and you look up, and there's lumps of clay being kind of ripped off, pulled off, and thrown out of the way, and you can see sky in the roof.

And then, absolute scenes. In verse 19, they start lowering someone down, this man on a mat, their friend on the mat, and he's swaying in front of you, and he comes down right in the middle of the crowd as it parts ways for this scene, right in front of Jesus.

[12:04] But perhaps most startling of all is what Jesus does next in verse 20. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, friend, your sins are forgiven.

Now, would you not be thinking if you were there, I'm not sure that Jesus has read the room right at that moment. Clearly, these men had something else in mind that morning when they decided to go to all that trouble for their paralyzed friend.

But this is Jesus living out his promise that he made in Luke chapter 4 of what his mission will be. He read out Isaiah the prophet's promise that someone would come from God to proclaim good news to the spiritually needy.

And Jesus is fulfilling that promise. He's proclaiming the Lord's favor for people who are under the judgment of God for their sin. Jesus can look at a man and address his biggest problem, his moral failure.

And the religious leaders gasp at the audacity of a man claiming the right to do that. Verse 21, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy?

[13:22] Who can forgive sins but God alone? Now this makes sense, doesn't it? If a number of us park our cars on Sundays behind the St.

Andrew's building, together, so lots of our cars from church are parked in the same place, if today as I got to my car and was just about to drive home, Dave, who led the service, reversed his car into mine and made a wreck of it, and Mark, who's on the back row there, ran across from his car and said, it's okay, Dave, I forgive you, I would be thinking, Mark, that is quite random.

He's hit my car, not your car. Well, when it comes to sin, God is the offended party, and so it is up to God whether he is going to forgive, or he will hold it against that person and hold them to account. So then Jesus, knowing what they're thinking, verse 23, says, which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven, or to say get up and walk?

So which of those is easier? I take it he means that in the moment, it's easier to say your sins are forgiven, because it is unverified, unverifiable.

[14:52] Did it work? Who knows? If you say get up and walk, you are immediately held to account, right? And then he ramps things up further.

He says, verse 24, but I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. Now the Son of Man is a human who the prophet Daniel, 500 years before this, saw in a spirit-inspired vision.

He saw a man, he called the Son of Man, go into heaven itself, into the presence of the living God. And the living God bestows on the Son of Man authority, glory, and power, and he gives him an everlasting kingdom, and he promises that people of every nation and every language will worship him.

God will be so Jesus is taking that title on himself. In other words, if you think about what's just happened there, the religious leaders from far and wide are all gathered in the room, knowing that they are offended by Jesus' claim that he can forgive sins, rather than roll back, he doubles down and says, in effect, I can forgive sins because I am God's forever king, with all the authority and power and glory of God, to reign forever.

People's jaws must have dropped, people's eyes must have widened, audacious, but then verse 24 is apparently effortless for him, verse 24, he said to the paralyzed man, I tell you, get up, take your mat, and go home.

[16:42] Immediately, he stood in front of them, took what he'd been lying on, and went home, praising God. So Luke says in chapter 1 that he's carefully investigated everything.

I take it Luke might have interviewed some of the people there that day, and one or two of them might have said, it was an incredible day. We gathered to see Jesus, a paralyzed man came in through the roof, he left out the door, walking, leaping, and praising God.

But if Jesus had just healed the man, I take it everyone would have gone home content. The real drama, and the real problem here, is who Jesus says he is, and what Jesus says he can do.

It is going around claiming to be God that is pushing all the wrong buttons. means, and it means that when Jesus asks you and me, who do you say I am, a good moral teacher cannot be where we land, not with claims like this one.

And yet, if we'd been there, as we poured out of the door that day, surely we would have thought, that miracle though, that healing miracle means you have to take this man at his word.

[18:03] And we also learn that from that day, again, his priority, what he's come for, his mission in action, there were so many good things Jesus could have done with his power, are they not?

There are so many problems all around him that he could have sorted out, but he's come to deal with our spiritual problem, that we are alienated from God, and we need to be forgiven.

I was helped to grasp this with a thought experiment about what could have happened next that day in the life of the paralyzed man. His wife is at home, she helped his friends take him that morning, she waved him off, and she's been waiting for him to come back, wondering how on earth are they going to get him to Jesus, why did they set off so late, why did they take so long to get going?

She's looking down the street for the men to come back, half expecting they'll be bringing her husband back on the mat again, and then suddenly he appears, her husband running towards her and up the path into their home, and he's dancing around the room, and there are gasps of delight and astonishment and hugs and leaps for joy, and she says, how on earth did this happen?

And he says, praise God, it was Jesus. He just said, get up and walk, and I felt my legs were suddenly working again, and the muscles were restored and strong, and I could stand up and look at me now, and she gasps, and she says, this is wonderful, and as things calm down, he says, yeah, and Jesus said something else as well, a strange thing really, he looked me in the eye, and he said, friend, your sins are forgiven, I don't know what that was about, and the man walks on, and he lives the rest of his life, and he grows old, and he dies, and he's standing before the gates of heaven, and there's an angel at the gates, and the angel says, welcome, we've been expecting you, come on in, and he says, really, that can't be right, I wasn't perfect, and the angel says, oh right, well, that doesn't matter, I've got your name down here in the book, and it says here, there's nothing on you, and he says, are you sure?

[20:26] I did loads of things wrong, and the angel says, well, it doesn't matter, it definitely says here, your name, nothing on you, you can come right in, and the man says, really, what's it like inside?

And the angel says, oh, it's wonderful, God is there to be with his people, and there's no more suffering, and there's no more sadness, and there's no more sin, and the man says, that's amazing, how long can I stay?

And the angel says, forever, you can stay forever. How wonderful for that paralyzed man that Jesus had the authority to forgive his sins, and that he made it his priority to forgive sins.

But if Jesus can forgive sins, he can also welcome all kinds of people, all kinds of sinners. So that's his critics' third problem with Jesus, the company he keeps, is just so disreputable.

Have a look with me at verse 27. After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. Now, I know most of you will know this, but tax collectors then were nothing like the HMRC workers that we might know today, who I'm sure are respectable and likable.

[21:47] The Jews were under Roman occupation, and the Romans extracted duty from these people who they were oppressing by persuading corruptible Israelites to collect the money for them and pass it on to them.

So they were traitors, and they were thieves as well, because they could take a share for themselves and just pass on what the Romans asked for. Who would we think of in such low esteem today?

I'm not sure, but I was wondering, having watched Bank of Dave 2, of payday loan sharks, you know, the kind of people who prey on vulnerable people when they are at their most desperate for

money, and say, well, I'll lend you some money, but at an extortionately high interest rate, so that within days they can't really afford to pay them back, and they get trapped in debt.

That's the kind of esteem that a tax collector would have had among the people around them, a kind of visceral upset at the injustice of them.

I think it's curious that he's called Levi. Levi is a very religious name. Perhaps his parents were devoutly religious, but he's turned his back on the faith that they had for his own personal gain.

[23 : 11] But the guy has one good thing going for him, Levi, as he sits at the tax collector's booth that day, he would surely know there is no use pretending.

He is absolutely clear in his own mind he is not good enough for God. There is no religious facade for Levi to hide behind. It would take a miracle for a man like him ever to be made right with God.

We don't know how much he'd already heard of Jesus or seen of Jesus or heard from Jesus in his messages, but in verse 27, Jesus, walking past, turns to Levi and says, follow me.

And we read verse 28. Levi got up, left everything and followed him. As Levi walks away from the booth and he leaves all the money behind, it's a visual expression of how he has changed direction now in his life.

He's accepting Jesus' invitation of a fresh start with God, a new life following Jesus now. But what about the phrase, you can tell a man by the company he keeps?

[24 : 27] What would God's promised spirit-filled savior forever king be doing associating himself with a scoundrel like Levi? It goes from bad to worse in verse 29.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with him.

Well, none of these people really deserve God's favor, do they? So what would Jesus be doing with them? If you're a self-righteous person, if you're a person who's proud of who you've become, this is not tolerable.

And we see that 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?

You see what's going on in their minds. I've got a friend who basically says you can divide the world, everyone you meet in the world, into two kinds of people. Basically, there's two kinds of people.

[25 : 31] There are policemen and there are bandits, right? There are police officers and bandits. In fact, he says, and you can think about this for the people you know and for yourself, which of my friend's categories you're in, he says there's basically four kinds of people, right?

You get policemen in policeman's clothing, you get bandits in policeman's clothing, right? They're the guys who seem quite upstanding and then you realise they'll break every rule.

You get, where am I up to? Policemen in bandit's clothing. They look mischievous but actually they keep all the rules. And then you get bandits in bandit's clothing.

They're just, you know what they're like and they break every rule. Now, if you think like that, if you think fundamentally in life there are good people and there are bad people, there are rule keepers and there are rule breakers, you might start to think, well, when God sends a saviour into the world, he's going to vindicate the good and he's going to condemn the bad.

He'll congratulate all the policemen and he's going to nail all the bandits. He's going to condemn them. That's the mindset of the self-righteous religious person.

[26 : 40] So that Levi's party and Jesus being there is unacceptable. It's completely the wrong way around. What's he doing with the wrong people? But Jesus has a parable to explain.

Verse 31, Jesus answered them, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

If you're a plumber, you go to houses where people know that their boiler is broken. If you are a neurosurgeon, your waiting room is stacked with people who don't look at all well because they've got things wrong with them.

That's why they've gone to see the neurosurgeon. That's why he'll make time in his clinic for them or her clinic for them. And if there comes a man whose mission on earth is to heal people, of their spiritual sickness, where else would we expect to find him than at a dinner party full of people who understand that they are spiritually unwell?

And I'm sure Jesus is being ironic in verse 32 when he says, I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Who could honestly look at their lives and say, you know what, if you were

going to sum up my life in one word, I reckon the word you'd choose is righteous.

[28 : 05] On my own merit, I've never done anything wrong. Never. But if that's how you think, what use is a man who's come to heal you spiritually?

physically. But we know, don't we, if you've got symptoms in your life of a significant health problem, the worst thing you can do is do nothing. I mean, when I listen to the radio, often that is in the adverts, is kind of, if you've got these symptoms, go and get yourself checked out.

Because the real problem is when we have the symptoms, and we deny the diagnosis, and we refuse to go to the doctor, and we won't get treatment. And if you think you can put yourself in a separate category from sinners, from people who've not been who they ought to be, you've got no interest in a saviour come to forgive sins.

And for the spiritually humble, on the other hand, here they all are with Jesus, and his mission brings them great joy. An infectious joy, like the joy of Levi, who, let's notice, with great urgency, invited all the least religious people he knows, to come and meet the real Jesus.

And Jesus was glad to be there with them. So that's our fourth point, the fourth problem for religious people with Jesus, the vibe he encourages is just so enthusiastic.

[29 : 28] In verse 33, the religious leaders confront Jesus, and they say, John's disciples, that's John the Baptist, his disciples often fast and pray, sort of the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.

In other words, Jesus says, we've seen all the leftovers coming out of the kitchen of Levi's house from the party last night. If those people really are serious about putting things right with God, why are they not fasting?

Why are they not wearing sackcloth? Why have they not got ashes on their heads? But Jesus says that his presence brings great joy, the joy of a wedding feast when the bridegroom arrives.

It's the joy of knowing God, because when you come to know the living God, you find delight in him and how glorious he is. And it's the joy of experiencing the grace of God towards you, of discovering that Jesus would gladly call you his friend and forgive your sins.

And this joy marks the Christian life. So in 1 Peter chapter 1, the apostle Peter is writing to Christians Christians under fire, Christians undergoing a terrible trial.

[30 : 44] And even then he says, though you have not seen Jesus, you believe in him and you're filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. And we should expect that our lives are marked by that joy and our gatherings are marked by that joy.

And that joy will attract some people and it will repel other people. It will leave some people saying, there's something different here.

I want to know more. And other people will be cynical. One American writer tells of a time that his missionary friend came back from Africa and was talking to him about the village, the remote rural village he'd been working at, proclaiming the gospel.

And he showed him a photograph of all the villages lined up. And he said, in that photograph, 12 of those people have become Christians. Guess who they are?

And he said, it was no difficulty at all to guess. They were all wearing the same clothes, everyone in the village. But you could tell the 12 who received Christ because they were radiant.

[31 : 54] The writer Jonathan Edwards writes of becoming a Christian like this, the appearance of everything was altered. There seemed to be a calm, sweet cast or appearance of divine glory.

The sweetest joy that ever I felt was in the assurance of God's forgiving love in Christ. And Adoniram Judson, who took the news about Jesus around the world to Burma, wrote in his journal of becoming a Christian.

He said, I felt a joy in Christ such as I had never felt before. A calm, delightful conviction that my sins were blotted out and that I was accepted in the beloved.

The world with all its glory seemed to vanish and I was swallowed up in God. So folks, we've seen today what the religious leaders found problematic about Jesus.

But maybe for you and me, the thought that Jesus would say to us, I'm willing, be clean. And his word would mean that you are restored to God and God's people is no problem at all.

[33 : 05] And if you know you fall short of God's standards and God's moral beauty, then the thought that Jesus would be able to look you in the eye and say, friend, your sins are forgiven, is no problem either.

And if like Levi, you know that you are spiritually sick, then the company that Jesus keeps is not a problem because he calls you to join him and have a fresh start with God and he welcomes you to his family feast.

And for anyone for whom these things are not a problem, we can respond to him like the crowd did in verse 26. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God.

They were filled with awe and said, we've seen remarkable things today. Well, what a day it was.

And what we know now that they didn't know then, they couldn't yet see that day, was that when Jesus said to them, asked them to reflect, which is easier?

How easy is it to say your sins are forgiven? For Jesus, it was a very costly thing to say indeed.

That for him to say to us, your sins are forgiven and call us his friends would mean dying the death that we deserve to die.

[34 : 31] Blessings be upon him. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we praise you and we thank you for Jesus, the Son of Man, and that you sent him on the mission that you gave him to proclaim to us forgiveness of sins.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the great healer who can cure us and make us spiritually well, and that you would graciously call us to repent and follow you.

Holy Spirit, we ask that you will deeply impress on our hearts the remarkable things we've seen today. that by your work in us, we would praise God with our lives this week and spur each other on with words about our majestic Saviour.

Amen.