A Friend to Sinners

January 29 – Mark 2:13-17; Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 5:27-32

Today in Your Reading

Jesus found and called another disciple to follow Him. His name was Levi, and he was a tax collector (also called a publican) living in Capernaum. Of course, no one likes to pay taxes, so tax collectors were very unpopular. But it was more than that. Levi was also a Jew working for the Romans to collect taxes from other Jews; and the way that tax collectors made their living was by charging more than the required amount. Thus, tax collectors were dishonest "legalized" looters, often viewed as the scum of the earth.

But Jesus regularly sought out "the scum of the earth" to follow Him. He was demonstrating an important truth for the rest of His disciples. God loves all people, and salvation (forgiveness of sins) is for everyone, not just those who look like they are good people.

Because of Jesus, Levi's life was transformed. In fact, Levi was given a new name (perhaps by Jesus), Matthew, which means "gift of God." Matthew, of course, will eventually write one of the New Testament books about Jesus.

Matthew immediately invited Jesus and His disciples into his home and held a banquet in His honor (*Lk. 5:29*). But Jesus' disciples were not the only guests. Matthew also invited his friends, the other unpopular, crooked tax collectors in town. Jesus accepted the invitation.

Of course, attending dinner parties at the home of one of the most hated men in town did not look good to those watching Jesus, especially those who were looking to find faults. Thus, the religious leaders objected to this behavior. They believed that associating with such villains tarnished Jesus' reputation. They were not worthy of such attention or kindness. But Jesus pushed back on their piety by saying, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick" (*v.31*).

Jesus continued, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (*v.32*). In this remark is a stinging rebuke. No one is considered righteous in God's eyes (*Rom. 3:10*). The Pharisees were self-righteous. They were "too good" to interact with "sinners," and thus they were "well" and did not need a "physician."

Daily Reflection

Jesus challenged the Pharisees with *Hosea 6:6*, "I desire compassion and not sacrifice" (*Matt. 9:13*). He would say the same statement to us today. What does this mean?

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Jesus befriended sinners. As His followers, we should do the same. But what does that look like, especially in light of *1 Corinthians 15:33?* How can we honor both passages?

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We tend to isolate ourselves in a bubble of like-minded people. What are ways that you can befriend "the sick tax collectors" around you?

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Truth and Tradition

January 30 – Mark 2:18-22; Matthew 9:14-17; Luke 5:33-39

Today in Your Reading

The Jewish religious leaders were still trying to poke holes in Jesus' ministry methods. This time their complaints related to the topic of fasting. The Mosaic law only commanded one fast on the Day of Atonement. Other fasts were voluntary for such purposes as grieving, repentance, or intensifying prayer. The Pharisees had made fasting a routine custom to give the impression of a devout spirituality.

Instead of fasting, Jesus and His disciples were always feasting (i.e., at the house of Levi, *Lk. 5:29*). When pressed for an answer, Jesus explained that people don't fast at weddings, when the groom is present, because it is a joyous occasion. However, He said, "Days will come when the groom will be taken away. Then they will fast." The groom here is Jesus. He was predicting His death and ascension.

Jesus then offered further explanation through a parable (*v.36-39*). Parables are simple stories or illustrations to clarify deeper truths. The first parable related to clothing. No one would cut a piece off a new shirt to patch an old shirt. That would ruin the new shirt, and the patch would not match the old one.

Jesus' second parable related to wineskins, which are unfamiliar to us. In those days, people put wine in a sack or bag made with animal hide because it was flexible. When wine fermented, it built up pressure and stretched the wineskin. Old wineskins that have been stretched many times might break with new wine, thus ruining the skin and losing the wine.

What was the point of Jesus' teaching? He was the "new wine," bringing new teaching and a new covenant that would replace the old covenant and religious system of the Mosaic law. While His new wine was much better, the religious leaders (and many others) would reject it for the old, saying, "The old is good enough."

Daily Reflection

From the Pharisees' point of view, Jesus was upsetting their customs and traditions, what they had added to the law. They had always done it one way, and Jesus was teaching another. But rather than follow Jesus, they chose to adhere to their traditions. Are we guilty of this today, holding to religious traditions instead of adhering to biblical teaching? How have you seen this to be true?

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Is there anything wrong with having traditions, even religious traditions? When is it right to keep a tradition? When is it right to change one? *Colossians 2:8* might be helpful here.

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We must not be guilty of holding on to that which is "good enough" when the Lord has something better. We must not adhere to the traditions of men and neglect the truths of God.

The Bigger Picture

January 31 – John 5:1-47

Today in Your Reading

Jesus healed a lame man which angered the religious leaders and led to a great discourse regarding Jesus' identity. The healing took place in Jerusalem at the pool of Bethesda, where a man had been lying there for 38 years, since before Jesus was born. After Jesus healed him, he picked up his mat to walk, and there began the dispute with the Pharisees, for carrying a mat on the Sabbath was forbidden (*v.10*).

The cold, lifeless legalism of the religious leaders is appalling. They cared nothing about the wellbeing of the man who was healed, only that he was breaking the rules of the Sabbath (*v.16*). While God commanded Israel to refrain from work on the Sabbath, the Jews had added their own rules and rituals to the point that adherence to the law was well beyond God's original intent. Thus, Jesus, who was God in the flesh, pointed out their hypocrisy.

However, the topic of the rest of the chapter was not the Sabbath but Jesus' identity. When Jesus called God His Father (*v.17, 18*), the religious leaders were enraged and sought to kill Him. Claiming to be equal to God was outright blasphemy. But Jesus did not shy away from their accusations, rather He provided witnesses to support His claims.

According to the Old Testament law, for something to be true, there must be witnesses, which is why Jesus said, "If I testify of Myself, My testimony is not true" (*v.31*). However, Jesus pointed to His witnesses — John the Baptist, His miracles, His Father, and the Scriptures.

Because Jesus is who He says He is (God in the flesh), He can give life, both physically and spiritually (*v.21*). Of course, Jesus healed the man lying by the pool, but He can do much more than that. He will raise people from the dead (*v.25-29*). Likewise, Jesus has the power to give eternal life, to those who "hear His word and believe in the One who sent Him" (*v.24*).

Furthermore, because Jesus is who He says He is, He has been given authority over our final judgment (*v.22, 27*). There will be a day when all people will be resurrected from the dead, some to eternal life and some to hell. The judge on that day will be Jesus, and those who are His followers will not "come into judgment but will pass out of death into life" (*v.24*).

Daily Reflection

As always, John's gospel is rich with deep symbolism and deeper truths. There is a subtle point Jesus was making about the Mosaic law. While the law was good and served its purpose, the law was not an end itself, rather the law was meant to point us to Jesus. The law did not save anyone, rather it exposed man's sinful nature and need for a Savior to forgive his sins.

How were these truths subtly mentioned in the miracle? Did you catch how many porticoes were around the pool? There were five (*v.2*), an understated fact representing the five books of Moses (called the Torah). Lying around the pool was "a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered" (*v.3*), a good description of man's spiritual state in light of the perfect law of God. This description was also fitting for the religious leaders. Though they were "experts" of the law, it had blinded them to the Messiah.

In other words, these people were helpless. The man Jesus healed said, "I have no one to put me into the pool," meaning he could not save himself. Everyone believed there was something special about the waters, and they were anticipating the moment of healing, of salvation. Then, Jesus entered the scene and asked, "Do you wish to get well?" Moses was an important piece to the puzzle, but his piece helped to complete the bigger picture of Christ, the One who heals our physical and spiritual sickness.

A Personal Sacrifice

February 1 – Mark 2:23-3:6; Matt. 12:1-21; Luke 6:1-11

Today in Your Reading

Jesus and the Pharisees (experts in the law of Moses) disputed over the purpose of the Sabbath. In our reading yesterday, Jesus healed a lame man by the pool on the Sabbath. Today, Jesus not only healed people on the Sabbath, but He and His disciples picked and ate grain from a wheatfield (because they were hungry), all of which the Pharisees believed was illegal.

To be clear, Jesus did not break any laws. God commanded Jewish farmers to leave the corners of their fields unharvested for those in need (*Lev. 19:9, 10*). Also, Jews were allowed to pick grain by hand on the Sabbath (*Deut. 23:25*). The truth is that the Pharisees added their own nitpicky rules on top of God's law, many of which were burdensome and contradicted the original intent and meaning of the Sabbath.

God included adherence to the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments (*Ex. 20:8-11*). Jews were not to work on the seventh day of the week (Sabbath) since God rested from His work at creation. However, the Sabbath rest was taken to the extreme by the religious leaders. God never intended for acts of worship, kindness, or necessity to be forbidden on this day. Sabbath was meant to be a day of freedom, but the Pharisees made it a day of oppression.

Of the Ten Commandments, nine are repeated in the New Testament as instructions for Christians to obey. The only commandment Christians are not expected to follow is keeping the Sabbath (*Col. 2:16*). The day that Christians elevate and celebrate is Sunday, the first day of the week and the day on which Jesus was resurrected (*Jn. 20:1*).

The Sabbath rest was a symbol of what the Messiah would accomplish — our eternal rest. In other words, Jesus did not replace the Sabbath, rather He fulfilled it (*Col. 2:16, 17*). He is our eternal Sabbath rest (*Heb. 4:9, 10*).

Daily Reflection

Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (*Mk. 2:27*). He made the Sabbath to be a benefit to mankind, not a burden. The One who made the Sabbath gets to define its purpose and use. That's why Jesus said, "The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath" (*Matt. 12:8*). But the Pharisees had redefined Sabbath and used it to control people.

The Pharisees esteemed their policies more highly than they esteemed people. Forcing people to adhere to their excessive rules was more important than meeting their needs or changing their lives. Thus, Jesus confronted these legalists with God's Word, "I desire compassion," He said, "and not sacrifice" (*Hos. 6:6*). That's why David was allowed to eat the bread in the tabernacle, which was consecrated to God (*1 Sam. 21:4-6*).

Jesus valued people. They are not sheep to be corralled but souls to be cared for and comforted. Do we lay unnecessary burdens on those around us today, caring more about our policies and procedures than people? We often sacrifice people on the altar of our routine and rituals rather than sacrifice ourselves to meet the genuine needs of people. Which is it for you?

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When it comes to dealing with people, someone will be sacrificed, either you or them. Don't sacrifice others to meet your demands. Sacrifice yourself to care for the needs of others.

Chosen

February 2 – Mark 3:7-19; Luke 6:12-16

Today in Your Reading

Despite His disputes with the Pharisees, Jesus was very popular and drew large crowds. When He withdrew to the Sea of Galilee, the people pressed Him so much that He had a boat ready to give Him some space. Later, Jesus retreated to a mountain where He could be alone.

Jesus' teaching and miracles were accomplishing their purpose, to draw attention to the Messiah, the Son of God. He was doing all that He could to help people, but the work was overwhelming. Then, a pivotal moment in the New Testament occurred. Jesus chose twelve of His disciples to be His Apostles (*Lk. 6:13*).

While the words *disciple* and *apostle* are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings. A disciple is a follower, a student, or a learner. The word *apostle* means "one who is sent" and refers to a messenger, envoy, representative, or ambassador. Jesus was an apostle sent by God the Father (*Heb. 3:1*), and Jesus chose twelve apostles to send out in His name, to work on His behalf. Their commission included being with Him (training), going out to preach, and having authority (*Mk. 3:14, 15*).

The number twelve, of course, is significant as it relates to the twelve tribes of Israel (*Lk. 22:29, 30; Rev. 21:12-14*). Even after Judas betrayed Jesus and killed himself, he was replaced to keep the number of apostles at twelve (*Acts 1*).

The Apostles would spend three years with Jesus, watching and learning. Then, they would witness His death and resurrection and carry on the ministry after Jesus' ascension. Thus, the twelve laid the foundation of the Church, with Jesus, of course, being the Cornerstone (*Eph. 2:20*). They were ordinary men whom God used to do extraordinary things. They had no special power, rather they were empowered by Christ and His Spirit to do the work of ministry.

Daily Reflection

What I love about this list of men is that they were from all walks of life. Among them were fishermen, a tax collector, and a zealot (political revolutionary). They were just common men who had their own setbacks, struggles, and shortcomings, yet they had a common purpose, to be the hands and feet of Jesus, to carry on His ministry in the world, as best they could, to the glory of God.

In what ways are we different than the Apostles? In what ways are we similar?

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We are also called, chosen, and sent. While we are not formal Apostles like the twelve, we are disciples, messengers, and ambassadors (*2 Cor. 5:20*). In a general sense, the Lord has commissioned us to "go and make disciples." He has empowered us with His Spirit to share the good news of Jesus with those who will listen, to do the work of ministry.

Are you fulfilling your mission as one of His chosen followers? Are you living a "sent" life, accomplishing His gospel purposes? If not, why not? There are so many "cold" Christians that we're often called "the frozen chosen." Is that you? What would you call someone picked for a task who doesn't fulfill their purpose?

Attitude B

February 3 – Matt. 5:1-12; Luke 6:17-26

Today in Your Reading

Jesus began one of His most famous sermons, what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. He called and commissioned twelve of His disciples to be Apostles. Now, He began their training. While *Matthew 5* and *Luke 6* are similar, there are some differences, which indicate that this sermon may have been given at separate times.

The section we read today is often called "the Beatitudes." A beatitude is a blessing, which is why the statements in *Matthew 5* begin with the word *blessed.* A blessing is a gift, a benefit, or an advantage. The opposite of a blessing is a woe, an exclamation of grief, distress, or affliction, which is why, in *Luke 6*, Jesus countered four blessings with four woes.

Another way to define a beatitude is to break it into two words – *be* and *attitude*. Our attitude is the way that we view or behave towards something, either positively or negatively. Our attitude refers to our mannerisms, behavior, or disposition. While attitudes are internal, they are often expressed externally in our body language. In the Beatitudes, Jesus taught His followers what their attitudes should be.

For example, in *Matthew 5*, Jesus said that we should be poor in spirit (*v.3*), meaning meek, humble, or contrite. We should mourn (*v.4*), referring to grief or penitence over sin. We should be gentle (*v.5*), and hungry or thirsty for righteousness (*v.6*). We should be merciful (*v.7*), pure in heart (*v.8*), and peacemakers (*v.9*). Finally, Jesus taught that we are blessed when we are persecuted for His sake (*v.10-12*).

In contrast, in *Luke 6*, Jesus pronounced woes on those who are rich, who are well-fed, who laugh, and on those of whom men speak well. While these things are not sinful or wrong, they reflect the errant attitudes of the world, seeking after wealth, gluttony, pleasure, and fame.

Daily Reflection

Review the Beatitudes. Then, write down the worldly opposite of each.

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With which of the Beatitudes do you struggle most? Why is that?

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Review the four woes of the world. With which of these do you struggle the most? Explain why.

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While a book could be written on each of the Beatitudes, the bottom line is obvious. Followers of Christ should have different views, attitudes, and pursuits than the unsaved world. While it is our natural, sinful default to have Attitude A, the Lord calls us to be better, to have Attitude B.

Tasteless and Veiled

February 4 – Matt. 5:13-16

Today in Your Reading

While we only covered four verses, they might be the most well-known verses from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Most (if not all) Christians are familiar with the famous "salt and light" passage. Thus, it is worthy of its own devotion.

First, Jesus called His followers "the salt of the earth" (*v.13*). This comparison is lost on us today, as salt is not used in the same way in our culture. But the people who heard it understood its meaning. In fact, Jesus did not have to explain what He meant. Its application was implied. While salt has many purposes, in the context of the following verses (related to light), Jesus was referring to the fact that salt is a preservative against the world's decay.

However, notice that Jesus' comments were not focused on the application of the salt analogy, but rather He was more concerned about salt that loses its saltiness or becomes tasteless. "How can it be made salty again? It is good for nothing but to be thrown out for men to trample in the streets" (*v.13*).

The same applies to Jesus' second comparison. He referred to His followers as "the light of the world" (*v.14*). Again, Jesus did not explain what He meant. His point was implied. We live in a dark world, and as His representatives we are to shine brightly and draw attention to Him (*v.16*).

However, most of His comments regarding the shining of our light related to hiding it. "A city on a hill cannot be hidden" (*v.14*). Also, no one lights a lamp and puts a veil over it (*v.15*). Finally, "let your light shine *in such a way*" that others may see it (*v.16*).

In short, Jesus expects His followers to be distinct from this dark and dying world. If we lose our saltiness or hide our light, then we are not fulfilling our purpose as His ambassadors.

Daily Reflection

Jesus is the One who makes us "salty" and gives us light. It is not of our own doing. However, His remarks indicate that we can become tasteless, and we can hide our light. He is not insinuating that we can lose our salvation, but we can diminish our Christian witness and influence. We can veil our lamp and keep it from shining.

Just because we have the Light doesn't mean that we let others see it. Christ is the light in us, but we determine how brightly it shines.

How can our salt become tasteless over time? What are some ways that we veil our light?

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How can you keep your "saltiness" and ensure that your light is seen by "all in the house"?

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Have you become saltless salt or a veiled light? Or are you impacting this world for Christ?