

April 20, 2008
 John 2:1-11 / Luke 5:27-32
 Jesus and the Need to Befriend "Sinners"

The beauty of this particular passage is that there's probably no better passage in the whole Bible to give you a truer look into the heart of Jesus with regard to sinners, than this one.

In the previous passages we got to see Jesus power and authority over sickness, evil, nature, leprosy and paralysis. But today we get to peer into His heart and see what it was that drove Him to do the things He did, and mingle with the people He chose to mingle with, or go to the places He went — places (as the sign out front suggests) that Christian's or godly people shouldn't ever go — that is, unless your love for those people and your desire to see them experience the grace of God, and possibly be saved, drives you to those places despite the criticism you will get for going there!

And I do need to point out that that is what it ultimately boils down to — Do you love sinners like Jesus did? / Do you yearn to see sinners experience the grace of God that you yourself have come to know, and relish?

Do you have a heart for people who reject the things you've accepted, do the things you feel are wrong, and even make fun of the things you consider the most important and have made the foundation of your life? / Does their rejection of your values and priorities make you want to write them off, and avoid them, and stay away from the places they go, or reach out to them in love?

(Me – Abuse of this text in my pre-conversion days, not as a reason to reach out to "sinners" but as an excuse to sin)

The question each one of us needs to ask, is this: Do we simply reach out to and love the people who already share our values and are just like us (like the Pharisees in this passage) or do we venture out beyond our comfort zones in order to bring others into contact with the Jesus they may never come to know unless we do?

In that sense, we could say today's passage will serve two functions: **1st)** It will serve to help us get to know the heart of Jesus better, and **2nd)** It will serve as a diagnostic check-up for the condition of our own hearts!

So, having stated that, let's consider what the passage has to tell us! And **FIRST**, to avoid any confusion you may have simply from reading the text, let me explain something about the word "sinners" in verse 30, which is in "quotes" in the NIV translation before us. Those quotes do not appear in the original manuscripts. In fact, in the Greek manuscripts there is no punctuation, quotes, periods, commas, parenthesis, etc. The use of such things in our English Version are discerned from the grammar and the context by the translators. And in this case the translators of the NIV felt that quotation marks should be placed around the word "sinners."

Why? For two possible reasons: **1st**) Because they felt that even the Pharisees (who are the ones asking the question) would have known that everyone is a sinner! And thus by inserting the quotation marks, it was their attempt to suggest that the Pharisees were not just talking about sinners in general (which is what we all are), but as the Living Bible translates it, "notorious sinners."

Thus, their question is NOT "Why do you eat with sinners?" but rather "Why do you eat with people who have a reputation for being really bad sinners!" "Notorious sinners" as the Living Bible puts it, like tax collectors, and prostitutes, and corrupt politicians, and thieves, and drunks, and womanizers — maybe even drug users and sellers — people everybody knows to be immoral or even criminal in their behaviors? (It may have been at this party that Jesus met Mary Magdalene.)

That's what they're asking. You're a religious person, Jesus. You're a man of God. You're supposed to be holy and righteous and "avoid even the appearance of evil." Why, then, do you associate with people like THAT? Why do you go to their parties, and mingle with them on their own turf — going to places that everyone knows "good," upright, religious, devout Christian people shouldn't go!

Yet **2^{ndly}**) it's also possible that the quotes shouldn't be added. It is entirely possible that the Pharisees, being the "holier than thou type people" (which the Bible does portray them as), did indeed simply mean Jesus shouldn't hang around with sinners — sinners being unbelievers.

And though it hopefully seems a bit incomprehensible to us, there are Christians who still don't hang around with anyone but Christians! People who view themselves as a bit more righteous, virtuous and noble than everyone else.

For such people, it's not simply that Christians shouldn't hang around with "notorious" type sinners, it's that they shouldn't hang around with sinners period — sinners being defined as:

Anyone who doesn't already believe in Jesus, hold to their values, agree with their beliefs, live up to the standards of morality, or separate themselves from the world. Anyone who's not a "good" person like them." (The word "good" there, also being in quotes, since Jesus says no one is really good save God alone.)

According to the Bible's definition, "sinners," are "anyone who misses the mark," or as Paul puts it, "*anyone who falls short of the glory of God*" (that is, anyone who falls short of being what God intended us as humans to be, or does not, in their life, reflect at all times, and in all places, the radiance of God's holy image and glory) — and that includes everyone except Jesus Christ Himself.

Which brings us to the **SECOND** point I need to clarify — why the Pharisees, and even I myself, keep referring to "tax collectors" as "notorious" type sinners! Thus, for those who do not know, let me give you a little historical background. The Roman Empire, in their quest for world domination, had conquered Israel, and from that time forward, Rome had occupied Israel with troops, just like Hitler did in Poland and France during WWII. And as the conquering nation, Rome exacted heavy taxes from the Jews.

But the collection of those taxes was not done by Romans! What Rome did was to seek out nationals — Jews who would be willing to collect taxes from their own people on Rome's behalf. Sort of like Hitler's Nazi's hiring French and Polish collaborators to collect taxes from their own countrymen to finance the war machine of the Third Reich!

In that regard William Barclay says this: *"The taxation system lent itself to abuse. The Roman custom was to farm out the (collection of) taxes. (Rome) assessed a district at a certain figure, and then they sold the right to collect taxes within it to the highest bidder. So long as the buyer handed over the assessed figure at the end of the year, he was entitled to retain whatever else he could extract from the people — and since there were no news-papers, (radio's or TV's) or ways of making public announcements which would reach everyone, the common people had no real idea of what they had to pay. There was the poll tax which men from 14-65, and women from 12-65, had to pay simply for the privilege of existing. The ground tax on crops...the income tax...a tax on roads, harbors and markets... a tax on one's cart, each wheel on it, and the animal that pulled it... a sales tax, import tax and export tax... A tax-collector could even stop a man on the road, unpack his bundles, and charge him whatever he wanted. If a man could not pay, the*

tax-collector would offer to lend him money at an exorbitant rate of interest... Robbers, murderers and tax-collectors were classed together."

It's no wonder, then, that tax-collectors weren't even allowed to enter a synagogue! That they were some of the most hated and despised people in all Israel. People regarded as traitors — or worse than traitors — men who sold their soul for a buck and collaborated with the enemy of their own nation for the sake of getting rich — extorting, swindling and robbing from their own people!

I mean most every person in Israel considered tax-collectors to be the scum of the earth, idiots, and jerks — the same exact type of people that actually got beaten, disappeared, or strung up in France after WWII ended.

Yet you know what? Unlike everyone else, Jesus was able to look beyond all that, and instead of judging and avoiding Levi for his "notorious sinfulness," He approached him, and to the amazement of everyone chose to call him to be one of His disciples (the one who would eventually, as far as tradition tells us, write the Gospel of Matthew which was the other name he went by)!

That's what I want you to see about Jesus attitude toward sinners. He looks at Levi — this despised, hated, good for nothing tax-collector whom no good person would ever have anything to do with — and rather than seeing him like everyone else, or seeing what he WAS, He saw through what he was to what he COULD BE when the grace of God touched and transformed his heart.

As the chorus line from one of my favorite songs states: *"The justice of God saw what I had done, but mercy saw me through the Son — Not what I am, but what I could be, that's how Jesus saw me."* That had to be what Jesus did in Levi's case.

In fact, that is what Jesus did (or does) with all of us — He looked beyond the way we were (or still are), to the way we could and will be, once He touches our lives by the grace of His transforming love, and offers to us the gift of His acceptance and adoption into the family of God — or the fellowship of the forgiven.

You see, it's here that we find the primary difference between Jesus and the Pharisees — The Pharisees kept you at an arms distance until you proved, by repentance and moral reformation, that you had straightened out your act and were worthy to accepted.

Their love and friendship and acceptance was something you had to *EARN* by changing your ways, adopting their beliefs, measuring up to their standards, and then continuing to toe the line once you had earned their friendship and acceptance — because as with all earned favor, conditional love or provisional acceptance, you can lose it at the drop of a pin by simply messing up once even after you supposedly have it!

Not so with Jesus. With Jesus you don't have to measure up to any standard before He will befriended and embrace you. The familiar song is right. It could have been written about Levi:

"Just as I am and waiting not to cleanse my soul of one dark blot, to Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

"Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind—sight, riches healing of the mind, Yea all I need in thee to find—O Lamb of God, I come, I come."

"Just as I am Thou wilt receive, Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse relieve, because Thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God I come, I come."

Given the nature of man under sin, it's a good thing God doesn't wait for us to "cleanse our souls of one dark blot" — because we couldn't do it! When sinners, whose hands are dirty, try to cleanse the dark blot in their soul, all they do is smudge it all over the place and make the blot larger and more noticeable!

You see, what Luke describes here in the physical sense of Jesus going to Levi's tax booth — going to where Levi is (the very place where he carries out his sin) and extending to him His love and acceptance, and calling him personally (by name) to come and follow Him — before He ever cleans up His act morally, or repents for being a traitor, or pays back all the people he's swindled is exactly what He still does today in the spiritual sense by the power and influences of the Holy Spirit.

And it is true — Levi does eventually do all those things, but the key is this: He doesn't do them to gain Jesus acceptance, he does them because Jesus accepts him before he did any of them! Jesus comes to sinners still caught up in their sin. He goes to the very places where they carry out their sin — to their tax booths — to the bar rooms, and brothels, and adult video stores where they hang out.

Yes, my friends, Jesus goes into places that would cause most religious people to shudder! In fact, that's exactly what it does do! It gets the Pharisees all riled up because they would never be caught within a mile of such places or such sinners!

That's the whole reason for the Pharisees criticize Jesus — he's eating and drinking at a big party with tax-collectors (plural—not just Levi) and other “notorious” sinners! The bad kind of people. The worst of the bad! The type of sinners “religious people” (like the Pharisees) said you weren't even supposed to go near!

You see, although the NIV translates it “a great banquet” (in my opinion to sanitize it a bit), the word literally means a big party where there was a large crowd, and lots of other tax-collectors — lot's of food and surely lot's of wine served as well — a party thrown by Levi for the purpose of introducing Jesus to all his friends (which surely included a slew of shady characters, and the who's who of the Judean Underworld)! At least the Pharisees thought so!

A party most of us would probably never think of going near — because we've adopted the perspective of the Pharisees rather than the perspective of Jesus. The Pharisees who judged sinners and taught people to avoid sinners, rather than reach out to them and love them and invite them to come and partake of the grace God offers even them — before they ever clean up their act!

That brings us to our **THIRD** point, and the primary difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. They withheld their love and acceptance of “notorious sinners” until that person changed. They said, “Change and if you do we'll befriend you.” Jesus, on the other hand, loved and befriended people before they ever made any effort to change, leaving whatever change was necessary to come in due time. Because He knew what we should know: That true heart change comes by giving love freely, not withholding it or dolling it out conditionally.

Withholding love may get people to act like they've changed or get them to try and restrain their outward behaviors, but it won't change the heart or the affections or their sinful desires. It will merely cause them to try and mask those things when they're around you.

In fact, THAT (I believe) accounts for so many defections from the faith — people who try to live a Christian life only to give up. Why? Because many of them were simply trying to earn someone's conditional acceptance — the acceptance of a parent, or a grandparent, or a girlfriend, or someone they looked up to. They try their hardest to do so, and thereby earn the respect and love of that particular person or group, but after only months or a few years of trying, they realize they can't.

And it's not because they don't try! It's because they get exhausted from trying to live a life one can only live, or even want to live, if they know they already are loved and embraced and accepted and secure in that person's friendship!

And it's the same with God. Some people don't drop out because they're trying to earn the love and acceptance of PEOPLE, they drop out because they're trying to earn the love and acceptance of GOD — which can lead to uncertainty, disillusionment, depression, or sheer exhaustion — because they're trying to earn that which is only given freely!

God's love and forgiveness and acceptance is **FREE!** You can't earn it, or purchase it, or even come close to making yourself worthy of it! In fact, to even try is to insult God, disbelieve the Gospel, profane His love and deny His grace!

In fact, love that's doled out only when one's performance meets up to a certain standard, and withdrawn the instant it dips below that standard / "Love" that says in our words, attitudes, actions or affections: ***"Do what's right you get loved. Do what's wrong and you get cast out or abandoned. Repent and you get taken back in. Mess up and you get thrown back out,"*** isn't really love — it's coercion or manipulation — and it doesn't usually take long for most people to realize it!

That's the reason the Pharisees get so irate at Jesus: He's giving out for free what they taught one must earn by the quality of their religious performance.

And **LAST**, if you've heard nothing else I've said, at least hear this: We don't become godly so that God will love us! That's mercenary! That's "Pharisaism" at its best! It's to totally misunderstand the Gospel and misrepresent the Christian faith altogether! God's love to us in Jesus doesn't come IF we'll change, it comes to us freely to help us change! It's knowing that I'm already loved and accepted in Christ and secure in that love — It's the conviction that it won't be snatched from me the moment I mess up — that brings about any change that ever takes place in my life.

You see, I can picture Levi, the hated traitor and tax-collector / the person no one liked and everyone despised / the person everyone secretly wanted to lynch, finding himself stunned and taken back that Jesus would come to *HIM*, and pursue *HIM*, and want *HIM*, and call *HIM* and accept *HIM*, and bring *HIM* into His inner circle of disciples.

It must have boggled his mind! In fact, he was so elated and overjoyed that Christ befriended him of all people — that he throws a big party and invites all his partying buddies (the only people who'd probably have anything to do with him — other immoral social outcasts just like him — prostitutes and swindlers and low life's who were his friends merely because he enough money to throw a good party)!

Yet does Jesus view it as an immoral gathering He should avoid? NO! He views it as an opportunity to reach other people who are in the same exact place in their life as Levi — caught up in sin / and trying to fill the inner sense of emptiness with booze and women. People trying to find meaning in the bottle or love in the one night stands. People caught in the destructive cycle of their own dysfunction, and not having the slightest clue as to how they could ever break free from it.

That (I believe) is how Jesus viewed these “notorious sinners” — not as the vile, hopeless evil people the Pharisees saw them as, but as people who could be different if they could merely experience the love of God and the acceptance that is ours in Jesus.

Thank God, huh? Thank God that His love isn't like the conditional love of religious Pharisees, because if it were, He never would have come near most of us — in fact, He never would have come near any of us! Not one.

He never would have pursued us into those dark places where we carried out our sin, or made us conscious of His presence, convicting us of our sin, and calling us to come out of those places. He never would have walked over to our tax-booth (the place where we carried out our sin) and called us to leave that life behind.

Yes, my friends, thank God Jesus wasn't a Pharisee. And let us seek not to be either!