

## Luke 5:17 – 32

<sup>5:17</sup> One day he was teaching; and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem; and the power of the Lord was present for him to perform healing. <sup>18</sup> And some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed; and they were trying to bring him in and to set him down in front of him. <sup>19</sup> But not finding any way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, into the middle of the crowd, in front of Jesus. <sup>20</sup> Seeing their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' <sup>21</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, 'Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?' <sup>22</sup> But Jesus, aware of their reasonings, answered and said to them, 'Why are you reasoning in your hearts? <sup>23</sup> Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?' <sup>24</sup> But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,'—he said to the paralytic—'I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home.' <sup>25</sup> Immediately he got up before them, and picked up what he had been lying on, and went home glorifying God. <sup>26</sup> They were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, 'We have seen remarkable things today.' <sup>27</sup> After that he went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' <sup>28</sup> And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow him. <sup>29</sup> And Levi gave a big reception for him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them. <sup>30</sup> The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?' <sup>31</sup> And Jesus answered and said to them, 'It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>32</sup> I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.'

### Historical and Cultural Background:

- The Pharisees were a right-wing political and religious group in Israel focusing on Jewish nationalism and religious piety. They believed that Jerusalem and the Temple had become corrupt because the Jewish leadership in the capital collaborated with Rome. Many also supported militant, revolutionary groups of Jews who were trying to retake the capital and oust the Romans. The Pharisees focused on trying to stay religiously pure by following the Jewish Mosaic Law.
- Levi the tax collector: Worked for the Roman Empire by collecting taxes from the Jews for the Romans. The Pharisees despised Levi. Often when you're a beleaguered minority in a majority culture that is not your own, you feel spiteful towards people who are 'sell-outs.' They seem like 'betrayers' of your people or your cause because they pimp their own community.
- 'Son of Man' (5:24) is a title of the Messiah from Daniel 7:13 – 14. Jesus seems to have preferred this title for himself.
- Eating together was a sign of friendship and equal social standing. The Pharisees only ate with each other.

## Questions

1. Introduction: What is the impact on us of guilt and shame?
2. Last time, we looked at the two men who fell at Jesus' feet: Simon Peter and the leper. This time, we'll look at two men who rose at Jesus' call: the paralyzed man and Levi the tax collector.
3. Angle: Focus on the paralytic and his friends
  - a. Describe the scene: a chaotic house, etc.
  - b. What might the paralyzed man's life have been like?
  - c. What is blocking them from Jesus? The crowd. (Sometimes other people, or even other Christians, make Jesus hard to get to at first. But Jesus wants to be discovered, and sometimes we have to go around those barriers to get to him.)
  - d. How does Jesus see their faith in v.20?
  - e. Why does Jesus not immediately heal the man?
  - f. What might the paralytic and his four friends have felt at that point? (Confusion) Was that what they came for? (No.)
  - g. What might the scribes and Pharisees have been feeling when Jesus says he can forgive sin? (Confusion)
  - h. Which *is* harder, after all? To heal physically, or forgive spiritually? The idea here is that Jesus uses one to authenticate the other. If what Jesus says will happen in the visible realm happens, it follows that what he says will happen in the invisible realm also happens.
  - i. What's it like for the paralytic to be 'unstuck'? How are the paralytic and his friends feeling? Joyous, astonished, fearful (in the sense of reverent)
4. Angle: Focus on the scribes and Pharisees
  - a. Why might the Pharisees and teachers of the law come from all around to Jesus?
  - b. How are the Pharisees and the scribes feeling about the miracle? Perhaps angry, more confused. Why are they so surprised at Jesus?
  - c. Where did a Jewish person in that day have to go to be forgiven? The Temple, where God's presence was. The priests would have proclaimed it after you offered a sacrifice.
  - d. What was Jesus saying by forgiving sins? That God is present in him as evidenced by forgiveness of sins, that he is God.
  - e. If someone hurt you, of course *you* can forgive that person's action if you chose to, but how would you feel if *I* forgave that person before you did?
    - i. That's bizarre, isn't it? How is forgiveness of sin a power issue? The Pharisees believed that God should not forgive the tax collector since he was a traitor, pimping his own community.
    - ii. Note: The Pharisees wanted to control forgiveness because they wanted to control God, and they wanted to play God. How is that a problem?
    - iii. What does it mean for Jesus to take that power onto himself?
  - f. Illus: Once, when my son was an infant, my wife put him on the bed and turned to fold clothes. When she wasn't looking, he rolled off the bed and fell to the floor. I was really upset with my wife, even though technically, she hadn't done anything wrong to me personally; she had done something wrong to our son. When I forgave her, I had a small insight into why God forgives us even though we sin against each other: He is personally invested as a heavenly Father in each one of us. An offense against a person isn't just an offense against that person. It's an offense against God. The fact that God in the person of Jesus forgives those sins means that we have to align ourselves with Jesus' forgiveness.
  - g. That's not the only way Jesus displays divine authority. Notice – How did Jesus know what the scribes were thinking? And how could he see into the friends' faith? He can see the unseen, the heart.
  - h. So how many claims to God's authority is Jesus making? Three: Abilities to forgive sin, to know the heart, and to bring new life by his word. *Jesus is not just a 'good moral teacher'! He claimed to be much more than that!!*
  - i. Application: Who is it difficult for you to forgive, if anyone? Is there anyone Jesus has forgiven that you have not? How do you feel about Jesus' taking authority in this way?
5. Angle: Focus on Levi the tax collector:
  - a. Who 'got up' in v.25? The paralytic. Who 'got up' in v.28? Levi the tax collector.

- b. How is Levi like the paralytic? He was stuck. He seemed tied to his post because his sins of collaborating with the Roman oppressor (which were real) alienated him from the rest of the Jewish community. But then he immediately got up when Jesus called him.
  - c. Why are there so many tax collectors in attendance at Levi's reception? What draws them?
  - d. Briefly recall the three episodes in Lk.5:1 – 26, the calling of Simon Peter, the healing of the leper, and the healing of the paralytic. What did Simon Peter say about himself in 5:8? 'I am a sinful man.' What did Jesus say in response? 'You will fish for people.' What is Jesus doing now? Fishing for people who are aware of their sin. How is Jesus teaching Simon and the other disciples? By showing them how other people lead their friends to Jesus. The friends of the paralytic brought the paralytic to Jesus. Levi brought his friends to Jesus.
  - e. Why do the Pharisees not like this scene? Why is eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners such a big deal? How is eating together an intimate matter? So when Jesus ate with people, what was he symbolically communicating? (When did that symbolic action become a reality? After the resurrection, after the Spirit's coming, where all believers ingested (internalized) Jesus by the Spirit and shared table fellowship with each other. So here, Jesus is foreshadowing the real healing of sinners.)
  - f. Perhaps there is some of their attitude in us today. Who is not welcome to eat at your table? Who is not likely to be your dinner guest? Who would be hard for you to celebrate, if they turned towards Jesus, because it's a lot easier for you to be critical of them?
  - g. What does the physician metaphor imply about Jesus? That he's here to heal. Jesus' miracles of healing the leper and the paralytic symbolically communicate something deeper about sin, that sin makes us really unclean, and really paralyzed.
6. Possible applications:
- a. What new information do we learn about Jesus here? He prioritizes forgiveness of sinners. Miracles are physical pictures of forgiveness, but not the forgiveness itself. Jesus is building a community of forgiven sinners around himself. Jesus requires that people acknowledge their sin (separation from God that leads to unhealthy attitudes and lifestyles), that they are sick with a spiritual disease.
  - b. How has 'sin' appeared in chapter 5 so far? Simon Peter confesses his sin, the leper is a symbol of how Jesus heals sin, the paralytic is a symbol of how Jesus heals sin and Jesus also talks about forgiving sin, and with Levi, sin has social consequences; Jesus says he's here to heal sin. Sin is a disease that corrupts human nature, which was originally created by God as good. Do you believe you need Jesus' forgiveness for sin?
  - c. What kind of faith is Jesus calling us to? Faith in him, in his divine authority, in his being God, in his ability to know and forgive and restore us, in his ability to redefine who we are.
  - d. Both the leper and the paralytic probably had to push through other people to get to Jesus. What are the crowds of your life? Other desires, other people, distractions. Don't let other things 'crowd' you out from receiving healing from Jesus for real needs.
  - e. How does this passage make you feel? Give you hope? Or challenge you?
  - f. Read and discuss Anne Lamott's conversion, p.49 – 50 from her book *Traveling Mercies* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1999). How is the character of Jesus shown in Luke 5:17 – 32 the same as the way Anne Lamott experiences it?

"I didn't go to the flea market the week of my abortion. I stayed home, smoked dope and got drunk, and tried to write a little, and went for slow walks along the salt marsh with Pammy. On the seventh night, though, very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill, I discovered that I was bleeding heavily. It did not stop over the next hour. I was going through a pad every fifteen minutes, and I thought I should call a doctor or Pammy, but I was so disgusted that I had gotten so drunk one week after an abortion that I just couldn't wake someone up and ask for help. I kept on changing Kotex, and I got very sober very quickly. Several hours later, the blood stopped flowing, and I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had left over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

“And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, “I would rather die.”

“I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn’t help because that’s not what I was seeing him with.

“Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

“This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

“And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn’t stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me.

“I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God’s own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, “F--- it: I quit.” I took a long deep breath and said out loud, “All right. You can come in.”

“So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.”