Follow Me

Luke 5:27-32

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

—Luke 5:27

Good morning. This is our final message of the conference. Interestingly, we will close with a story of a tax collector, just as we opened with one. In the opening message, Jesus stated what he was doing, “Seeking and saving the lost.” And this was followed by two good examples. Now, in this passage Jesus is questioned as to why he did it. Why was he doing it? He came to heal the sick. His remedy for the sick was to call them to repentance. For Levi, this began with the words, “Follow me.”

“Follow me.” Those words are very common place now. There are many things that are constantly asking us to follow. Did you notice? It seems that anything I do on my phone is asking me to follow it: people, musicians, developers, photographers, comedians, etc. It is kind of diluting the words “follow me.” When Jesus said, “Follow me,” he meant more than just pressing that follow button and getting his updates, which we’ll see from this passage. You know, what you follow really shapes you up to be who you are, because we are getting something from those we follow.

In the history of Apple Inc., there is a famous story of how Steve Jobs recruited the president of Pepsi, John Scully, to be the CEO of Apple. At that time, Jobs said to Scully, “Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life or do you want to come with me and change the world?” It sounded like a great offer. “Change the world!” But later, Scully fired Jobs. Then Jobs said, “What can I say? I hired the wrong guy.”

What about sinners who follow Jesus? We saw that Zaccaheus followed wealth. The woman in John 8 followed her sexual desires. Nicodemus followed his achievements as a Jewish man. Yet, they all found themselves before Jesus in need of help. They were sick. And he was there to help them.

Let’s look at today’s passage where Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to follow him, to see what Jesus had in mind in calling sinners to repentance and to follow him. I pray that we can get a glimpse of what Jesus did and what it his calling means for sinners, including us. Let’s look at 1) Jesus’ calling to Levi, 2) Levi’s response, and 3) Jesus’ explanation.

1. Jesus’ says, “Follow me”

Look at verse 27 again.

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

This verse begins with words “After this.” Jesus had been healing so many sick people and so many crowds of people had come out to him. In one of the villages in that area, Jesus healed a leper. He reached out, touched the man, and said, “Be clean!” And immediately he was healed. Leprosy is contagious, but Jesus touched the leper. But Jesus didn’t get infected. He healed that man. It says about Jesus, “Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses” (5:15), and it says that “the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick” (5:17). Now, on that day Jesus had taught a large crowd of people and he had healed a man who had been paralyzed. It was the headline of the day. There was no room in the house Jesus was teaching. Four men brought their paralyzed friend, made a hole in the room, and lowered him right before Jesus. Jesus said, “I tell you, get you, take your mat and go home” (24), and immediately the man got up, took his mat, and went home praising God.

But what about Levi? While this was going on, he had not been among those crowds. In this passage, Jesus finds him sitting at his tax booth. Because his booth was out, it was tax season, just like how we finished tax season last week. I found out that it is very difficult for a tax person to leave their workplace during tax season, even if they want to. They works 12+ hours a day, including weekends. They don’t see their family much. That’s what comes with the work.

There were many golden opportunities to see Jesus. Even a paralyzed man who cannot move somehow found his way to right in the presence of Jesus, right before him. But Levi remained sitting at his booth that day.

Now, it says that, “After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth.” We can imagine how he came out of the house where he was teaching. He had gotten through the crowds. There he saw a tax collector. For whatever reason, Levi didn’t go out to Jesus. But it says that Jesus went out to Levi. Again, what did he see? It says, he saw a tax collector. They must have been easy to identify so that you knew where you could pay your taxes. Anyway, you had to pay your taxes. You can’t avoid it, just like it is for us. Tax collectors are easy to spot during tax season. Have you seen the liberty tax people on the streets?

What I’m emphasizing is that Jesus saw “a tax collector.” In Zacchaeus's story, it describes him first as a man named Zacchaeus. And then it says that he’s a chief tax collector. It tells us first he's a man and his name is Zacchaeus. He was a person before just being labeled as a tax collector or sinner. But it says here that Jesus saw first a "tax collector.” That’s what the passage wants us to know. It shows that he knew exactly what kind of man Levi was. He knew what Levi was doing and had done. Yet he was specifically looking for that kind of person.

Jesus saw a tax collector and went to him. How did people see tax collectors? We saw in Zacchaeus’s story, they are labeled here as “sinners.” When people looked at a tax collector, they saw ”a sinner." They classified all people called tax collectors to be greedy, as cheater and as betrayers. They didn't like sinners. They were prejudiced and kept out this whole group of people. But, really, who likes cheaters and greedy people? Not me. They are not pleasant to be around. In fact, you might say, "Thank God I am not a sinner like that guy!"

How often does your heart go out to a cheater and a greedy person? Now, if you see a paralytic, you might feel bad for his condition. What can be done for such people people? When you see sick people, you wish you could heal them and make them better.

But would you feel like that towards a tax collector? Actually, I like tax season. I have low income and no assets and three kids, so I get a refund. But when I see those liberty tax people, I feel bad. Why did I have to pay someone to get my refund? I didn’t want to file on my own. Anyway, how you feel towards a sick person, a paralyzed person, a cancer patient, is not the same way you would feel towards a tax collector.

What is it like to part of this group of people categorized and labeled as sinners? Yet, how might you feel if people knew all of your sins? Do you think people would treat you the same? (I don't mean in the church, but outside of the fellowship of believing people. We confess our sins often and pray for each other and forgive each other.) Did you share any sins in your testimony last night? What if you were classified as a sinner and unwanted and kept at a distance, like tax collectors?

But it says that Jesus went out and saw a tax collector. He saw the tax collector differently than what others expected. For it says that Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” His words should have been, “Repent!" Instead, it was “Follow me.” Aren't you surprised?

What did Jesus mean by saying, “Follow me”?

He was calling this tax collector to be his disciple. He knew Levi was a tax collector. But now he said be my disciple. Jesus’ words meant be with me, learn from me, do what I am doing, and become like me. Being a disciple of anything results in being like the teacher. The same is true of a disciple of Jesus. Jesus’ purpose is that his disciples would become like him so that you would recognize Jesus in his disciple. You would know that here is Jesus, in speech and in action and in heart. No longer would others see just a tax collector when they looked at Levi, but they would see Jesus.

It also meant commitment. It meant leaving what he was currently following and then going after Jesus. It showed Levi's need. He had to leave those things and follow Jesus. He was not following the right thing. Levi was following money and success. He was a tax collector. Now he was called to follow Jesus.

We see that Jesus was so gracious to him. The words “follow me” meant firstly, I do not condemn you or judge you. I want you to be with you. Jesus didn't blame him for sitting there. Jesus didn't condemn him or demand from him. Jesus also didn’t feel sorry for him as a victim of prejudice from others. He treated him as someone worthy to follow him. So he called him, “Follow me.” He treated Levi as someone who was wanted and valued. Levi’s value was not in his wealth or his occupation or reputation, but he would discover it in Jesus.

The words “follow me,” here are not a suggestion. It was an imperative: Follow me. It’s used in the same way he commanded the leper to “be clean!” and for the paralytic to “get up, take your mat and go home.” The power of God was there for Levi. No more excuses or sitting there. By the power of God in this word, get up and follow Jesus. His word has the power of God to get up.

There are people like Levi who who may feel distanced because of their sin: so they are not good enough, have a shady profile, or not look the church type. The result is staying at the tax booth, so to speak. What label do you or others have? Is it like tax collector? Jesus is humble and gracious. Jesus called the tax collector to follow him. It was a miracle.

 2. Levi’s response

Look again at verse 28.

and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

First, it says that he “got up.” Jesus was staying still. Levi had to get up to go with him. It shows the power of God working in Levi. It tells us that there is the power of God when we respond to Jesus’ words. His response also showed that he knew who Jesus was and what those words follow me meant. He didn't ask, who are you? Or why should I follow you? Instead he got up and left everything and followed Jesus.

Then it says that he “left everything.” To Levi, his booth and collections may be included. But the word “everything” shows that he was leaving that way of life behind. It was everything to him, but everything about that life he was leaving. He showed that he had been following the way of tax collecting and wealth. But now he left it all to follow Jesus.

When Levi heard the words, “Follow me,” he was moved, inspired, and followed Jesus. Something great was sparked inside of him at that moment. Levi saw more value in that moment Jesus called him. He went after what was of greater value. Christian tradition says that Levi is also called Matthew who wrote the gospel of Matthew in the New Testament. And Matthew’s gospel alone recorded Jesus’ parable of the hidden treasure.

Matthew 13:44 says,

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”

Levi got that teaching. Surely, it describes exactly what happened in his life. He found a hidden treasure, or in this case, it found him, and in joy he sold all he had to get it.

Next, it says that Levi “held a great banquet for Jesus at his house.” Here we see that Levi was obviously wealthy. He could afford a “great” banquet—and, it says that it was at his house. I don’t think Levi was married or had kids. If you want to have a great banquet you need money and a big house to accommodate all of the people. I used to invite people to my house for eating. I had a lot of fun, but I think people thought it was too cramped. Now, when we have fellowship meetings, no one suggests to go to my house. They only want to go to James’ or Moses’ houses because they’re big. And my daughter complained to me, saying, “Daddy, how come you don’t use your grill and invite people to our house anymore?” I was embarrassed and said, “You’re right, honey.”

But Levi showed that he found good use for his money. He gladly spent it now on Jesus. He was really so happy. He just wanted to do something for Jesus. It says that he had a great banquet “for Jesus.” When someone is so kind to you, don’t you want to want to do something for them. How much more when Jesus Christ was gracious to Levi? It’s such a big statement that he had this banquet for Jesus, that he did something for Jesus now.

Could you do something for Jesus? What do you do for Jesus like this? Levi did what he could with what he had. He gladly used his money to have a great banquet and invited a crowd of sinners like himself to spend time with Jesus. Jesus accepted it. He enjoyed the banquet with all of them. Jesus was also celebrating. He didn’t teach or give commands at this time (none written here). But we are to know that they were enjoying a good time with him. Jesus was so happy to be with them and accepted what Levi did for him.

 3. Jesus’ explanation of calling a tex collector and sinners.

Look at verse 30.

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?”

There were some who were not happy with this scene, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They complained and asked Jesus’ disciples, “Why do you do this? Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?” They blamed Jesus and his disciples for not doing what was right. Their question assumes that righteous people eat with righteous people and sinners with sinners. It should not mixed.

They thought they had a valid question. Why did Jesus eat and drink with sinners?

Weren’t these people really tax collectors and sinners?

Isn’t a sinner a sinner?

Was Jesus ignoring their sin?

If Jesus let his disciples eat and drink with sinners, their bad influence might spread and spread and spread, right?

In a sense, their question sounds very reasonable. Can “sinners” be welcomed into our fellowship so freely? Is it okay? Would you demand that people at least repent or change first?

This is why their question is very striking because it’s hard even for good people to accept each other. How about Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God. He is God in flesh who was among his people. And these were real sinners. How can God, who is holy and does not have any sin join in such a fellowship, being joyful and close with sinners? How can he treat them like friends like this? He has real reason to be prejudiced, but he wasn’t. Instead, Jesus lowered and humbled himself so much for the sake of sinners. He went to their place without judgment or demanding. We can only see that it is God’s grace to sinners that Jesus came here and called them. The Pharisees and teachers of the law did not have any compassion or understanding for sinners. They only condemned. Maybe they were jealous that Jesus and his disciples didn’t come to eat with him. But they had not invited Jesus at all.

Let’s look at Jesus’ response in verses 31-32.

[31] Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. [32] I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Actually, Jesus did see them as sinners, just as the Pharisees and teachers of the law did. In fact, it was for the very reason that they were sinners that he was eating and drinking with them. But Jesus came as a doctor for the sick. He saw sinners as sick people whom he would heal.

Jesus showed that he was very sensitive and knowledgeable to the fact that these people were sinners. Jesus included Levi together with the sick people that he had been healing, just like the leper and the paralytic and the diseased. Jesus didn’t condemn or demand. He treated them as sick people.

A good doctor is one who understands the disease, the symptoms, and the patient. When he does, then he can properly care for his patients and heal them.

Do you like going to the doctor? I don’t, and I usually try to stay away as much as possible. After a few bad experiences, I worry that I will get stuck with a huge bill for services not needed.

Last October, I dislocated shoulder. I knew I had dislocated my shoulder, but I went to the doctor just to make sure that there wasn’t any tearing or other damage. When the doctor came into the room he asked me, “What’s wrong?” I said, “I dislocated my shoulder.” Then he asked me to lift my arm up as high as possible. After seeing that it wasn’t possible to lift it at all, he said, “You’ve dislocated your shoulder. Do you want a sling to hold your arm?” It took all of two minutes and that was it. And I had to pay a copay to see him.

A wrong diagnosis can be deadly. Here’s a picture of a real prescription label given to a patient. This might kill you.

But Jesus is a good doctor. And he showed the importance of viewing sick people as sick people, so they can be treated properly. The doctor takes care of the sick at that very point in the way that they need. Sick people don’t need a lawyer or judge. Criminals need to be judged. Sick people need to be cared for and treated. If someone has the flu, we let them take the day off. We let them sleep all day. We get proper medicine for them and care for them.

Jesus knew full well that they were sinners. Jesus knows who you are and who I am. He knew Levi was a tax collector. It was for the very reason that they were sinners that Jesus called them.

What was Jesus’ treatment? Jesus said that he calls sinners to “repentance.” What he was doing with sinners was not ignoring their sin, but calling them to repentance. It was his method of doing it. But the Pharisees didn’t understand his method. Of course, there are many methods to call others to repentance. The Pharisees had their way. Maybe you’ve seen the sandwich board method and finger pointing. At least this sandwich board guy can accept you if you repent. But the Pharisees just shut you out.

Jesus hadn’t explicitly said repentance till now. Interestingly, he didn’t say it to Zacchaeus, but he got the message. He gave half of his wealth away and offered to pay back up to four times what he cheated others. Jesus didn’t say it to the woman caught in adultery, but he did say to her, “Now go and leave your life of sin.” Jesus didn’t say it to Nicodemus, although he talked about coming into the light and exposing his deeds. And Jesus didn’t say it to Levi, but he did say to him, “Follow me.” To these tax collectors and sinners, Jesus ate and drink with them.

When Jesus said that he came to call “sinners to repentance,” he meant that he was talking not just about Levi, but to all “sinners.” It is for all sinners! He is calling sinners to repentance. It is the prescription for the sickness of sin. Repent, turn from your sin, and follow Jesus.

Repentance may not be a welcomed word (or action). You may not like to hear that you have to "change" course of what you are doing. Sometimes, the doctor’s orders are not what we want. But when we listen to the doctor, we can be healed and get better.

To get get care, a sick person needs to acknowledge that they are sick. Also, a patient should listen to the doctor to get well. They have to follow doctor’s orders. Doctors don’t force patients to take their medicine or follow their orders. Have you seen a doctor stuff medicine down a person’s throat? No way. One family member recently declined medical treatment and died. We couldn’t do anything for her. Jesus doesn’t force. So we should answer his call.

There are a lot of remedies out there for sin sickness apart from Jesus and repentance. But, like many drugs, they just take the pain away temporarily or mask the symptoms. The remedy from the Jesus, the doctor and healer for sinners, is Jesus’ call to repentance. Repentance is not just feeling guilty or sorry for what you’ve done or confessing your sins, but it is changing and turning. Today’s passage shows that it is listening to Jesus’ words and following.

Levi was sitting at his booth. He could have made many excuses to not go to Jesus, such as having bills to take care of it or being looked down on by others and prejudice. But Jesus went to him. Jesus gave him power by his word and his grace of calling. It was Jesus’ demonstration that he has come for all of us and calls all of us with the same grace and power of his word to get up. There is no longer reason to keep sitting and following sin.

At that time we hear his voice, that is the time to follow through. It means that you shouldn’t make an excuse. Don’t blame your situation or others. Don’t think you’re not good enough. And don’t avoid it by remaining seated where you are. Jesus knows you as a sinner, just as he knew Levi the tax collector. He knows all of your sins, including all of your hidden ones. Yet, he is merciful and calls you, the sinner, to repentance and to follow him that you may be healed.

If you want to be healed, then answer Jesus’ call to repent and to follow him. Listen to his word.

Jesus’ way is gentle, humble, kind, understanding and compassionate. He takes care of us so that we can be healed. Therefore, we ought to answer his call at that time he speaks to us. His call is the moment we are set free, if we take him at his word and get up, leave and follow.

You are all sitting down right now. Just like Levi was. So, let’s try something. Let’s all say, “Follow me,” and then let’s get up. Let’s see what happens.

Ready, go, “Follow me” [gets up]. Are you holding anything? Or did you leave everything behind? How was it? Are you ready for a banquet? Yes? Okay, let’s go have lunch! Just kidding! I’m sorry but I don’t have the authority to dismiss you for lunch. My point is that just hearing about listening and getting up, is very different from actually doing it. We have heard many words of Jesus at this conference. We should we do? Just keep it in our heads while sitting on our butts? We can’t just keep these words in our heads or just keep thinking about them. But the power of God for healing comes when we listen to Jesus’ words and follow them.

That is good for us! Jesus is gracious, humble and compassionate. He knows us and came to heal us. Our sickness is not a physical sickness, but one of sin. He is a good doctor who helps sinners as much as they need. He is understanding and insightful to the sinner’s condition as a sick person. A sinner has nothing to fear in following Jesus. He will not be condemned, but healed.

The healing comes from Jesus himself. It is not through activities or whatever. But Jesus himself healing your sickness of sin.

It was also through this passage that Jesus called me to follow him. Jesus’ words that he came to heal the sick spoke the truth to me and deeply moved me. At that time I was seventeen years old. I had graduated high school but I didn’t know what I was doing or where I was going. I still felt lonely and unwanted. I still had a lot of anger and hatred towards my father for abandoning our family after my parents’ divorce. Once, someone said to me, “Is your family poor? You look like it.” Who I was, was never enough. I began to hate others and myself. I also desired to do bad things like those I hated. It made me feel sick inside. I wondered what was the meaning of my life.

But in hearing Jesus’ words in this passage, I found that we are sick. Jesus’ words spoke truth deep into my heart. Jesus came to heal us. That is why he came and died. I was comforted. Also, Jesus said, “Follow me.” He told me what I need to do to be healed. So I followed.

I started college the following day. To my great surprise, I started to talk to people to invite them to a Bible study. I didn’t know what I was doing. No one told me to do this, but I felt compelled to do so. I didn’t know what to say to people except, “You are sick!” Some people were very angry. But others responded and we had Bible studies together.

I give thanks to God for Jesus who came to heal me and who called me to him and to a new life. Jesus is more than a doctor, he is a humble friend and powerful Savior. He has been kind, understanding, and gentle with me. He healed me of hatred first and restored relationships with others. He treated me like a healed person and gave me work to do. I learned from his kindness to keep following his word. If I did anything right, it was when I followed Jesus, listening to his word. That’s what I have learned: followed Jesus’ word, listen as soon as I hear it. When he says, “Get up,” then, I should get up. When he says, “Go there,” then, I should go there.

Jesus is still calling sinners to repentance. He is still the doctor for the sick. He says, “Follow me.” Listen to his voice, repent and follow. As we do this, there is healing in Jesus for all of our sins. We can’t physically follow Jesus, walking here and there with him. But we follow him by following his words, by listening to him, just as Levi got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. When you hear Jesus’ words, follow it.

Let’s read verses 27-28 once again to conclude.

[27] 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, [28] and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.