

# Luke 5:27-32

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Chapter 5, we're picking things up there again. It's page 861 in the Black Church Bibles. It was quite astir recently, you may have noticed it, when one time wild man, Russell Brand, announced that he'd become a Christian. Here was this rude comedian, addict, womanizer, evangelist for new age stuff at one point, and here he was telling us he'd become a Christian.

He even had a celebrity Christian friend baptize him in the River Thames. What could be more legit than that? Eyebrows were raised. Most people seemed to think it was a stunt, both within and without the church, some other ulterior motive. Perhaps it was just for the cliques. Perhaps people, it was a way of keeping his relevance, or maybe it was knowing that his past was about to catch up with him, and a way of portraying himself as a changed man. Either way, people weren't too convinced. I heard one person say, I mean, just look at him. He's slimy. He's sleazy. He's a wrong one.

This Christian thing's a cover. End quote. Now, I'm not commenting on the legitimacy or otherwise of the current criminal charges against him, but Russell Brand is definitely something of a cultural pariah.

The same could be said in some quarters of Tommy Robinson. Tommy Robinson has also been rumored recently to have become a Christian. And the thing that is underneath the skepticism that people express about this is the instinct that God simply wouldn't be interested in these kinds of people.

They aren't the type of people that God goes for. How could he? Look at their track record. Look at the way they get on. Now, you may or you may not have a view on Russell Brand or Tommy Robinson, but you do have a category of people who, if you're dead honest with yourself, you think they're not cut out to be Christians. It might just be a tiny secret corner of your heart, or it may just be because of prejudice.

[ 2 : 1 5 ] But as I say, if you're honest with yourself, there are people that you think fit that category. They're not God's kind of people. But this evening, we need to see that that kind of attitude is completely wrongheaded. And we need to allow the encounter that we're looking at this evening here in Luke chapter 5 to blow that kind of thinking completely apart. The man who meets Jesus this evening in the section that was read for us is a cultural pariah. He's someone that society broadly would not be able to stand. How do we know this? Two words. They're there in verse 27. Two words. He's a tax collector. Now, that tells us all we need to know about this man. As it relates to what he would have been thought of, how he would have been regarded in the wider society, that tells us all we need to know.

One commentator says this, quote, Levi was a tax collector. In other words, he was a thieving sinner. In those days, the Romans subcontracted the collection of their imperial revenue. The person that won the contract for that then tried to levy as many taxes as he could.

Anything he collected over and above the amount he had bid was his to keep. Obviously, this system was open to corruption. With all the poll taxes, land taxes, income taxes, road taxes, and port taxes, they gathered. Most tax collectors were filthy rich. End quote.

These people could actually tax anything. They created something called a cart tax. And what that meant was that each wheel of the cart was taxed. They could stop somebody in the street. They could have them unpack the load from their cart. And they could charge them for the length of time that it was sitting on the road. In Jewish rabbinical teaching, tax collectors were deemed so bad that if one set foot in your house, everything and everyone inside that house was deemed to be impure. They were easily the most hated people in Jewish society. They were classed with the worst criminals, even considered on a par with unclean Gentiles. So Russell Brand may just join the queue.

Tax collectors were despised, rejected, outsiders to the things of God. They were the epitome of a sinner. And yet, when this man comes face to face with Jesus, he receives a welcome.

[ 4 : 38 ] Which means this, however far from God you may be, or you may feel that you are. I heard a lady talking recently about how the decisions that she'd made in her life had left her so broken that she felt ashamed to set foot in a church. She felt ashamed to come to God. Well, this passage tells us that however far you have fallen, and whatever other people might think of you, if you come to Jesus, you will receive a welcome.

Here again is the grace of God in action. That's what we've been seeing in Luke chapter 5 in these little exchanges that we've been looking at. The grace of God in action. And Luke wants us to stare at what's happening in this exchange this evening. And he wants us to see three things. The first is this. He wants us to see the scope of God's grace. The scope of grace. Verse 27.

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, follow me. Jesus has left the house where he healed and forgave the paralyzed man. And he sees Levi working at his booth. Now, the people were amazed. If you remember last time, it was a few weeks ago now. But last time, verse 26, people were amazed at what they had seen in the house.

What they had seen of the miracle and what they had seen of this statement of Jesus' ability to forgive someone's sins. They were amazed at that. Well, this was no less amazing. No one will have made a positive relational move towards this man for a very long time. But Jesus goes to him. And like the last time with the leper, he doesn't stay at a distance. Presumably, he could have called Levi in private. He knows how on kind of, how on PC it would have been for him to go to him. He could have gone in private, but he chose to do this in full view of others. The fact that other people can see this is deliberate. He wanted people, particularly these religious leaders, to see both that his calling of people is a personal calling. Luke gives us his name here. He tells us he's called Levi, I think, to make this point more obvious. He wants us to see that this is a personal calling, but also that anyone, anyone who hears his call is welcome. Just as he did with the leper, Jesus initiates with an ostracized and rejected member of society in order to save them. The calling of Levi here reveals to us the scope of God's grace. There isn't a liar, a cheat, a fraudster, a social pariah that Jesus will not receive if they come when he calls. And this means that the people that polite society doesn't accept are precisely the kind of people that we should expect to see coming to Jesus.

[ 7 : 46 ] See, verse 29, Jesus is actually happy around these kinds of people. Levi made him a great feast at his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. Jesus wasn't in the dark about these guys and what they did for a living. He knew that they were corrupt. He knew that they were manipulative exploiters. But that's precisely the point. It is because they are sinners that Jesus comes to them. Verse 31, it is for sinful people that he came to the earth.

If the world was full of righteous people, Jesus would not have had to come. And for those who think they are righteous and so aren't interested in what Jesus is here to offer, those who think that they don't need a physician, as Luke says here, as Jesus says here, well, he has no time for them. But for those who know that they are sick in their sin, Jesus opens wide his arms. Don't miss the significance of the meal, the information here about the meal. Verse 29, the ancient scholar Jeremiah tells us this, quote, in the East, even today, to invite a man to a meal was an honor. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood, and forgiveness. In short, sharing a table meant sharing life. Jesus is getting as close as he can here to these people. He enjoys their hospitality and he calls them to himself. He has come for people like this. I speak to plenty of people.

It seems strange to me, because the amount of time I go around saying that this isn't the case, but I speak to plenty of people who think that Jesus and Christianity isn't for them because they aren't that sort of person. That's the line. I'm not that sort of person. And what they mean by that is that they're not into religion. They're not into moral living. But Levi is here to show us that Jesus goes to and enjoys the company of people who aren't into religion. Levi wasn't on the lookout for Jesus. He was going about his immoral business. He was probably trying to cook up another way of ripping somebody off as he sat in his booth. And yet Jesus calls him to himself. If you're here this evening, and you're maybe just here because you're being polite to your Christian friend who invited you here and you're thinking to yourself, this church thing, it's not my thing, Jesus is calling you in exactly the same way. Just as he did with Levi, Jesus meets us where we are. He meets us in our tax booth, in our sin, in our expression of our rebellion against him that comes to us by nature, and

he calls us out of it. Have you heard his voice? Have you heard his voice?

Those who think that we have to get ourselves together in order to come to God that he might accept us have got everything turned around the wrong way. Don't I need to get myself cleaned up in order to come to God? No, no, and thrice no. He meets us where we are. And he does that because it's actually our only option. None of us could get ourselves cleaned up enough for a perfectly holy God. We're all helpless like the paralyzed man in verse 18. But the whole point of the Christian gospel is that Jesus comes to us and he calls us. Have you heard his voice?

If you have, have you responded by following him? We'll say more on that in a minute. Here's the thing, the first thing we need to see, the scope of grace. God's grace reaches to the uttermost.

[11:47] The scope is wide. But we read on. And there's an inevitability to what happens next because alongside the scope of God's grace, we see the offense of grace. The offense of grace. The more time I spend in Luke 5, the more I think this is actually the point of the chapter. The new era has dawned in Jesus. The new covenant, the promise of the prophets that the lame will walk and the blind will see that outsiders will be welcomed into his kingdom. These promises are coming to pass. The old religious order is finished. It's done. And the representatives of that order don't like what they see. Look at verse 30. Levi 29, Levi made him a great feast in his house and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them and the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples saying, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

Or, might he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Or something of that nature. The Pharisees grumble and complain. Now they do that because they know that to eat with sinners like this made people unclean. To do what Jesus is doing was to share in their sin. It was becoming spiritually impure. So it was something that a teacher and his disciples never did. The way that a Pharisee showed his devotion to God was to separate from these kinds of people. So you can see the offense. You can see why they were scandalized by Jesus' actions here. But all of that does is show that they've completely missed the point. They failed to see who he is. They failed to accept who it is that is in their midst. This was a meal in Jesus' honor, verse 29. Levi threw this meal, this great feast, because of the fact that Jesus had gone to him and called him. And because of that, Jesus is delighted to be there. In his mission of bringing God's salvation as he comes to call sinners to repentance, Jesus gets involved in the lives of people that society rejects.

He is embodying here the scope of the gospel as he brings in the kingdom and as he crosses cultural and societal boundaries. He scandalizes those who think in terms of good people and bad people.

Lots of people think that way in our world, don't they? There are good people and there are bad people. There are clean people and there are unclean people. You better be in the good people and the clean people category. And I'll define what that is. That's what we're told. Jesus scandalizes people like that. He is an offense to those who find their identity by creating those categories. Who define their identity by their way of life, even their religious way of life, at the expense of the growth of Christ's kingdom. When Jesus saves people like a Russell Brand or the homeless addict who ripped you off when he gave you a big sob story and you gave him some money and it turned out to be a big lie. When that happens, people's responses show how offensive Christ's grace really is.

[15:10] If when people our culture holds as outcasts, profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, because of the scope of his grace, we should expect it and we shouldn't be offended. When we think about it like this, there are a couple of implications. Jesus went to Levi to show that salvation is for actual sinners.

That is, the salvation that Jesus came to bring is for the kind of people who behave badly in life. So we mustn't put restrictions on who we think is allowed to become a Christian.

If you want a heart check on this, ask yourself how you would have felt if the person that you think is the most obnoxious person that you can think of profess faith in the Lord Jesus. That person that makes your skin crawl when you think of them, if they profess faith in Jesus Christ. What does your heart do at that point? If it doesn't want to say that would be the best thing imaginable, you need to repent. I'd tell you the name. There's one person I can think of in my head and I need to repent. I'm not going to tell you, but something about me thinks he would never, he doesn't deserve to come. None of us deserve to come.

That's the point. Second implication is this. If anyone feels unwelcome here among us at IPC because we have communicated in some way that they don't belong here because they don't

somehow measure up in terms of whatever arbitrary category we've introduced, we have failed. Now it is true that some people feel uncomfortable in churches despite our best efforts at welcoming them. That's not our fault, but there is no criteria to be here. If you're here and you're not a Christian, you're welcome.

Welcome, welcome, welcome. We're all beggars showing other beggars where to find food. But also if by getting around people that others don't approve of, people that are legitimately sinners, people that cultural gatekeepers call sinners, and we're drawing them into our church community, if by doing that some people are offended, we're simply doing what Jesus did.

[17:36] And the third implication is this. Having said that, that doesn't mean that we have an excuse to join people in their sin because we've got a way, you know, we go and hang out with sinners, we sin alongside them and we say, I'm just being like Jesus. No, we're not.

Jesus is enjoying the company of sinners, but he isn't himself sinning. We mustn't confuse that. The point is that the gospel is for everyone and we want to bring that good news with us wherever we go to the people who hear it as good news and who will respond the way Levi did.

So Jesus goes to sinful people. In doing so, he offends those who don't accept or grasp the scope of his grace.

There's one more detail in the story I want us to consider, and that is the effect that Jesus has on Levi. And here we see, thirdly, the transforming power of God's grace. Scope of God's grace, the offense of God's grace and the transforming power of God's grace. Go to 27 again. After this, he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth and he said to him, follow me. And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

Levi starts out in his tax booth. It's one day, just like any other, Jesus calls him to follow and he gets up and follows his new master. There is a decisive change. There is a total transformation. Here's Cyril of Alexandria.

[19:02] He says this, quote, Levi was a man greedy for dirty money, filled with an uncontrolled desire to possess, careless of justice in his eagerness to have what did not belong to him. Yet he was snatched from the workshop of sin itself and saved when there was no hope for him at the call of Christ, the Savior of us all, end quote. And like Simon Peter, Luke tells us that Levi left everything to follow Jesus. That, in a word, is what repentance looks like. I don't know what his booth looked like.

Can you imagine his booth? Did it have a shelf that he worked from? Kind of a seat that was high up and he would sit on it at his desk and perhaps he had a ledger to record his stuff and maybe some scales there for weighing gold, that kind of thing. I don't know. He left it all. He left it.

Walked away. We were watching, as a family, the most recent series of Clarkson's Farm. It's probably a bit, probably a bit too swearsy, to be honest, a bit arbitrary. That wasn't necessary, but there we are. Still funny in some ways. Anyway, he's trying to buy a pub in this series.

And one of those, you may have seen it, he walks into the kitchen of this old closed down pub and there's still a pot on the stove with the wooden spoon still in it. And he says, you know, what's going on here? Why is this still here? The pub had been closed for months, maybe years.

And he said, well, was it that they were working away and they weren't bankrupt and then they were bankrupt and they just walked off and left it? Was it that kind of thing? Well, here's Levi. He's at his birth. He's not following Jesus. He's going about his business, not following Jesus, not following Jesus, not following Jesus, following Jesus. Off he goes after his new master.

[21:09] And like Simon Peter, who didn't stop to worry about his nets or his family, Levi just walked away, leaving it all. Pages of his ledger blowing in the breeze. I don't know. You get the point.

That is what the grace of Christ looks like when it hits the human heart. And this is what Christian faith requires. In a few chapters time in Luke 14, Jesus will spell this out more clearly. Luke 14, 26. If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

Is there any way out of that? Is there any way around that? Can we get out from under that? He cannot be my disciple. If we will follow Jesus, we must leave it all. Everything.

It requires a complete reorientation of your life and your priorities. Previously, you lived for yourself, but now Christ is in charge and everything you possess is laid before him each day. I think what this looks like is you go each morning to the Lord in prayer and you hold your hands open and you say, all that I have is yours. My home, my wife, my children.

[ 22 : 41 ] My resources, my health, all of it is yours. I lay no claim to these things. I leave them at your feet for you to do what you wish with them. It may be that when you get back up off your knees and open your eyes, the Lord has given you some of those things back as he often does. If that's the case, you say thank you. But you need to be willing to offer them up to him. And if he takes them, again, you say thank you for the time that you had with them.

This is Levi's posture. Follow me and leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

We see the beginnings of that being worked out in his life. He now uses his wealth to bless and honor others and he wants to introduce his friends to Jesus. Indeed, as an aside, this one-time tax collector became Matthew, the gospel writer. Matthew chapter 9 verse 9, the same story names Matthew as the tax collector. And in the list of the 12 apostles in Matthew chapter 10, there is only one tax collector. So just as Simon was called from his fishing business to be Peter, the fisher of men, and the rock upon which Jesus builds his church, so Levi is called from his tax booth to be Matthew who would follow Jesus wherever he would go and he would write his gospel. Levi gives us here the picture of a life transformed by encountering Jesus. And that is the change that I actually want to hold out to us this evening. I want to say this is what the Christian life offers us. You see, society tells us that we are who we are and we're stuck. That's it. There's no hope. Just accept it. Jesus, on the other hand, says, follow me and he changes us. He is, verse 31, the physician who has come to bring the ultimate cure for the sickness that we all suffer from. The sickness of sin that cuts us off from the God of life. And the key, the key to this, the key to this transformation is the repentance of leaving your old life to follow Jesus. Turning from living with yourself in charge to living with the Lord Jesus in charge. That's the key. And the first step is admitting you have a problem. Verse 31, admitting that you are sick and need a physician. The Pharisees refused to see themselves in this way. They thought they were in good standing with God. They didn't need the physician, so they didn't need to repent.

If you think that you're basically good, you'll never repent. There's nothing there to repent of. If you're well behaved, you've got nothing on the list of bad things that you need to repent of. If you're not Russell Brand or someone like his ilk, you might say, well, there's nothing to repent of. But when we recognize that we're sick, we don't just accept that we do bad stuff. We're agreeing with Jesus' verdict that our hearts are sick. We're selfish. We're proud. We're self-righteous. Even the good things that we do are tainted. Tell me if you're honest with yourself that your kindness and your generosity isn't motivated a little bit by being well thought of by others rather than simply sincere love. Of course those things are. That's the human heart. But repentance transforms us. And repentance that transforms us starts with an acknowledgement that we have this problem before God and that we need His mercy and grace. It recognizes that apart from Him, we are completely helpless in ourselves. And then it acts on that knowledge and it leaves everything to go hard after Him. And look again at the good fruit of that decision in the life of Levi. Instead of being greedy, He's generous. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you'll see that in yourself. A heart that wants to grasp after things, hands that open and give. Instead of being exploitative, He cares for others. It's the same thing. Instead of wanting to use people for ourselves, we're kind, care about them, want them to flourish. Instead of being selfish,

Levi's focus turns outward. This is the life that we all actually want to live, isn't it? This is the life that we want. We want to be people who are generous and caring and we have our minds set on others rather than ourselves.

[ 27 : 28 ] Well, that is the life that follows the example of Christ that repentance unlocks and gives us the ability to pursue. Jesus works this life in all who follow Him. And He does it in all who follow Him, wherever you're from, whatever your background, whatever your track record up to this point might be, whatever state you're in now, whatever others might think of you, Jesus comes to you in your sin and He calls you to follow Him. And this evening, even in your seat, if you can hear His voice and answer His call, He will save you and set about transforming your life.

Let's pray.