

# The Twelve | Enrolled in the School of Jesus (C)

## Matthew, the Tax Collector

Luke 5.26-39 (Matt 9.9-13; Mark 2.15-17)

January 31, 2021

*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."*

*<sup>33</sup> And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink." <sup>34</sup> And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? <sup>35</sup> "But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days." <sup>36</sup> And He was also telling them a parable: "No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. <sup>37</sup> "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. <sup>38</sup> "But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. <sup>39</sup> "And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'"*

We're looking at Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as we normally do between Christmas and Easter... And we're learning more about the main Character by focusing on how He, Jesus Christ, trained these twelve young men to carry on the work.

You've heard it said that the spiritual life is not a sprint - it's a marathon but it's just as important to say, "IT'S A RELAY". Christianity's Founder and those who follow Him are always thinking about the next generation. We want to successfully pass the baton, the faith and the mission to others (2 Tim 2.2).

Today, only two weeks into our study, we find Jesus and His twelve disciples facing opposition. It begins with suspicion and then whispering and pretty quickly turns to threats and plans for doing violence (Mark 2.6, 3.6).

And considering how the Way of Jesus might look in the modern world, we want to know – is this a normal part of being a believer in and a disciple of Jesus? Are we going to face a similar kind of opposition and from WHOM might we expect it to come and why?

I'm pretty sure the modern American Church THINKS our opposition will come from secular people because of our morality (and there's SOME truth to that) but for Jesus Christ and His closest students, opposition arose from a different sector. It came from scrupulously moral and spiritual people. The opposition from "worldly" people was minimal (in fact they were curious and attracted). The real threat was from – what we might call – churchgoers and clergymen!

So... as hard as it may be to fathom: why would traditional, religious, moral people find Jesus Christ so threatening? AND is any opposition facing the church in OUR time and place – are WE facing resistance because of Jesus or for some other reason?

Let's look at: **#1 – two controversies and one big idea**

**#2 – two unnoticed facts that could've stopped the controversy**

**#3 – how this all informs our discipleship today**

The two controversies are: 1) the company Jesus Christ kept (sometimes He ate with sinful, non-religious type people) and 2) a kind of lightheartedness or celebratory tone – He and His disciples seemed to be what no religious person SHOULD be i.e. happy. They ate and drank and seemed to enjoy it.

The five little illustrations Jesus uses to answer the issues all have one big idea in common and i.e. correspondence: things that correspond or match or belong together or fit. We could call it congruence or appropriateness.

He actually uses a word for this idea in verse 36: "and the piece from the new will not match (or be in harmony with) the old." (Greek = συμφωνεῖ [symphony])

Physicians MATCH with sick people – they go together. "As physicians fix/heal sick people so I have come to fix/heal sinners. I should be with sinners as a doctor should be with sick people".

"Just like you would never think it weird to see a doctor hanging around sick people, you should not think it weird that I hang around sinful people... It's a fit...a match...appropriate...a need corresponding to a solution.

"But why are You and Your disciples HAPPY about being around these sick people...these sinners?"

"Because I'm the One the world has been waiting for...I'm the Guest of Honor...and when the Guest of Honor shows up...it's time to be happy!"

When the Bridegroom arrives at the wedding...you don't get gloomy! You MAY get gloomy when he goes away on His honeymoon...but at the wedding reception, you party! You celebrate His presence! It's only FITTING! Appropriate... makes sense!

Illustration THREE (v.34): you don't use NEW UNSHRUNK FABRIC to patch a hole in an old garment...it doesn't match...it'll do damage... an incongruity.

Illustration FOUR (v.36): You put new wine – that's still fermenting and expanding – you put it in soft, flexible, wineskins that will expand with the fermentation process – that's what matches. You don't use old stretched out wineskins that are like raw-hide chew toys for a puppy...that would be a disaster...the expanding wine would break the brittle containers; inappropriate!

The last illustration (v. 39) gets to the motives behind their resistance to His ministry. It's common practice that people want to stick with what they like. Jesus uses the example of wine (esp. old wine). People who like their brand will be hesitant to try new wine. "It's not surprising to Me", says Jesus, "that you religious people aren't OPEN to Me...because you're sated...you're filled up and satisfied on your old wine..."

"People who are NOT used to drinking your old traditions – i.e. un-churched and nonreligious people are flocking to me because they don't know about your old-wine-religion. If you wonder why the religious people are NOT flocking to me it's because they're stuffed with comfortable religion. But these 'sinners' are spiritually parched!

Proverbs 27.7 says, *"A FULL man loathes honey, but to a famished man any bitter thing is sweet."*

You professional religious types are FULL. You've gorged yourselves on a system that makes you feel better than other people...now you have no room for the... honey that's offered to you. Like at a great restaurant when they say "Did you leave room for dessert?" And you say "Yuck!"

But these sinners and tax-gathers are famished because religion has been withheld from them...and they're jumping at the honey that you loathe!

The passage began with the people astounded at what Jesus Christ was doing and saying, "WE have seen remarkable (παράδοξα) things TODAY!" They had just seen that paralyzed man...so desperate to get help that he had his four friends lower him through the roof into the house where Jesus was teaching.

Jesus says, "I forgive you your sins!" and everyone thinks, 'Only the Person sinned against can forgive sins! Is this man claiming that sins committed have been committed against Him...IS HE CLAIMING TO BE GOD?"

And Jesus Christ says, "I'll let YOU be the judge! Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say to this paralyzed man, 'get up and walk'? But to show you that I can forgive sins...because all sins are committed against ME... because I AM God... 'Get up and walk!' And the man does! "We have seen remarkable things today!"

And then Jesus notices this traitor of the Jewish people...This toll-booth operator who works for the Romans...this man Levi who has this major cash cow and who can just make people pay up any time he needs or wants money...Jesus Christ approaches him to say, "Leave that goldmine and follow Me"

And the crowd thinks, "Yeah, right! To see a tax-collector walk away from the 'Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs'...to see a legalized thief give up his unlimited income stream and walk away is about as likely as seeing a paralyzed man get up and walk!"

And that's what happens! Levi walks away...he's famished and he is being offered forgiveness and new life...it's like honey...it's the sweetest thing...and Levi goes for it! And then...throws a party to say, "Hey! All my sinner friends...I just lost all my income and I'M SO OVERJOYED!...and I gained new life and sweetness...Come and meet this remarkable Person who forgives sins...who makes lame men walk and who noticed me today...and set me free!"

It's only fitting... If this is God Himself...who alone can forgive sin...who has proven it by healing that paralyzed man, it's only fitting that I would leave everything to follow Him: "He is no fool who gives what he can not keep to gain what he can not lose!" It fits! Who would pass this up? V.36 "no one" ...v. 37 "no one" ...v. 39, "no one!"

So that's the one big idea – fitting...a match...it simply makes perfect sense. Jesus Christ hangs around sinners because He came for sinners (it's only fitting!) and He and His disciples are happy because He is the Guest of honor and you celebrate when He's around (only fitting!).

Now: two overlooked facts. First, the religious people were concerned that sometimes Jesus ate with righteous people and...that's good! But sometimes He also ate with sinners ...and THAT is BAD!

What they didn't realize that Jesus Christ always and ONLY ate with sinners! Every meal Jesus Christ ever ate was a matter of the world's only truly righteous Man eating with deeply flawed fallen children of Adam and Eve...all great big...messed up... flawed sinners...SOME were church sinners and some (like Levi and his friends) were unchurched sinners.

Jesus Christ came to live the only truly obedient life that any human being had ever lived. He came to do that for sinners like you and me and like Levi and like those Pharisees and their scribes.

The religious people had convinced themselves that they were better behaved than others. Those others THEY called “sinners” and THEMSELVES they called “righteous”. But the overlooked fact was – they were all sinners some churched and some un-churched but all sinners in desperate need of grace.

Second overlooked fact is that throughout the Hebrew Bible there was a big emphasis on the clean and the unclean. Foods were regarded clean or unclean. Certain actions and people and contact WITH uncleanness would MAKE a person UNCLEAN.

And the whole system of the Pharisee’s religion was based on the fear of uncleanness infecting them through contact. Fear of touching a dead body...or a leper or a Gentile or a sinner - fear drove their whole belief system – fear of contamination.

But when this unique Person comes on the scene, the normal order of things is miraculously reversed. Jesus Christ carries the holiness contagion. He’s immune from becoming unclean. So when He comes into contact with the unclean, the unclean become holy... Rather than dead bodies making Him unclean, the dead come to life. Under the Law, contact with a leper would make ME unclean...but when HE touches a diseased person, HE makes the leper clean. The immoral become pure and desire purity. Cheaters and thieves like Levi and his friends want to celebrate their repentance and freely walk away from a stream of dishonest money.

NT scholar, Craig Blomberg says this is the ONE principle that governed Jesus Christ’s fearlessness in consorting with sinners like the Pharisees OR the tax-collectors...Blomberg calls it “Contagious Holiness.”

“We have seen remarkable things today.” He alone transmits purity. HE’S utterly unique among all people who ever lived. That’s why ONLY He could die for the sins of others and by His life, death and resurrection make unholy people like us...holy, forgiven and new. Had they recognized who He was, the God-Man, there would have been no controversy at all.

Now a few ways this informs our discipleship in the modern world:

**#1** – If you’re exploring Christianity, you have to get to the place where you see that Jesus Christ is claiming to be unique...one of a kind, the only righteous human being who ever lived. He is claiming to BE God in the flesh...You have to grapple with that because it’s the CENTRAL fact to this whole thing.

**#2** – Ask yourself, “Am I better than some people?” You may BE. I mean most of you are not abusers or embezzlers (stealing people’s retirement funds). The Apostle Paul said: “But I am what I am by the grace of God.” 1 Cor. 15.10

AND as we think of others, rather than these sharply defined categories (some sinners some righteous ...some interesting some boring) why not see everyone as a flawed person (yourself included) and everyone as headed for an eternal destiny. Some, by grace (NOT by deserving!) are going to be remade with transformed characters perfectly loving and holy... Others, will also live on for eternity but without the grace of God...Lewis said, "there are those who say TO God, 'Thy will be done' AND those TO whom GOD will say 'Thy will be done.'" Both types have an eternal destiny.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville wrote, "Heaven have mercy on us all - Presbyterians and Pagans alike - for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly in need of mending." So, be careful how you treat that man at the checkout at Publix...and your wife and...the bad guys (whoever you think "they" are!)

Here's C.S. Lewis again: "...remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people." (*The Weight of Glory*)

I love that today's episode begins with the words, "He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi." Jesus Christ notices people. And who do we think WE are: going through life NOT noticing people who bear the image of God and who all have destinies unimaginable. As disciples of the most important human being who ever lived who SAW people and wasted His time and attention on them, we should ask: He noticed – do I?

**#3** – We should eat with people and go to parties with people. Maybe we'll come out of this pandemic more aware of our need for physical human interaction (we could pray that way).

And maybe we'll notice people and not look down our noses. Maybe we'll see that the New Wine of the Gospel calls for new containers – new categories – even though change is awkward and uncomfortable. But through the Gospel we can see beyond the standard categories of either/or – either CONDEMN or CONDONE... and could venture out of the comfort zone and into that Third Way – to CONVERSE and CONNECT (thanks to Will and Gordon for suggesting those good words) to notice (without condemning or condoning) – just ready to listen and find what's praiseworthy in "the others."

If we knew what Levi knew – "This is a special Person who noticed me... In calling me to Follow Him He made me infinitely RICH...and infinitely secure. What have I to fear? Let me move toward other people, different people...maybe we'll find that the holiness of Jesus Christ IN ME is still contagious.