

From the Pulpit of Keith Miller
Meadowbrooke Church
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Unto Us: The Priest is Given

Luke 5:27-32

Early this week, GALLUP reported that, ‘Americans’ latest assessment of their mental health is worse than it has been at any point in the last two decades. Contributing to the decline is not only the pandemic, but the recent election and race relations in our country. Jobs have been lost, businesses continue to struggle to survive, and the future remains uncertain. A year ago, things seemed to be going well for our country, but our confidence and security have, like a rug, been pulled from beneath our feet. Now we are left feeling vulnerable with the sobering and daily reminder of how easily we can go from bad to worse.

In light of the possibility of a CDC approved vaccine, the Gospel Coalition posted an article by Christopher Ash that warns of three dangers that most are not even considering. There is more talk about the physical harm that a COVID-19 vaccine can do than the spiritual harm that it can cause. I have even said half-jokingly that a year from now we might be dealing with a zombieish apocalypse (show 30 sec. video). Christopher Ash’s article is the first I have read that warns of the dangers of putting our hope in the vaccine as our savior. Ash begins by first stating that it is his deep hope for an effective vaccine, that we get it soon, and that it is made available to the world. He believes that a successful vaccine will offer, “...some relief for the many enduring mental-health problems due to lockdowns and COVID restrictions, a way of escape for those suffering the hidden miseries of domestic abuse, the chance of restored education for millions of schoolchildren and college students, and a better prospect of jobs for so many whose work hopes have been blighted.”

Although Ash hopes for a successful vaccine, he also is reminded of the dangers a successful vaccine poses and warns of three dangers. The three warnings are:

1. We may not let God’s kindness lead us to repentance, for pandemics like COVID-19 warn us that there is a judgment to come (see Romans 2:4).
2. A successful vaccine may feed our pride so that we neglect to thank God, and instead boast in our ability over God’s sovereignty.
3. A successful vaccine may give us a false sense of security for the future. Because there is widespread sentiment that we can happily return to normal because of the illusion that safety will be restored because of a vaccine. Ash rightly warns: “We may be safe from one virus (unless it mutates), but God still holds the power to execute his judgment against sinful humanity. So, let’s not get our hopes out of proportion. If a successful vaccine is rolled out, it will be because of the mercy of God. But let’s not think we will then be exempt from his judgment.”

Suffering has a way of reminding us of who we really are. We do not like feeling vulnerable or frail. We certainly do as much as we can to escape death, and when death does finally victimize us, we do all that we can to hide it with makeup and embalming fluid. However, suffering is a kindness that God uses to lead us to himself.

Levi Was a Sinner

Tax collectors were one of the least respected professions in Israel for the simple fact that they collected taxes imposed upon the Hebrews by the Roman Empire who occupied the land of Israel. A Jewish tax collector was hated even more and placed in the same category of sinners as, “robbers, extortioners, and adulterers” (Luke 18:11).

There were two different kinds of tax collectors. There were the kind that collected property tax, poll tax, and income tax; these tax collectors could not skim a whole lot from the top of what they collected. The other kind who collected tax on anything that could be transported on road; among these tax collectors existed chief tax collectors who hired people to work for them and those who simply manned a tax booth. Chief tax collectors were seldom seen face to face, but tax collectors like Levi had to always deal with people face-to-face.

Tax collectors bought tax franchises from the Roman Empire for the purpose of extorting the Jewish people. The way a tax collector made his living was through the commission he received by adding a certain percentage of whatever an individual owed Rome. Jewish tax collectors were despised not only because they were viewed as traitors who assisted the occupying enemy, but also because they made their living off whatever little a family had left after Rome got its cut.

Levi knew exactly what he was, for he was reminded of it every single day. He was reminded of who he was every time he walked by the temple or a synagogue because he was barred from worship and the word of God by the people he betrayed. He was reminded of who he was by the way his neighbors looked at him with hate and anger. Levi, as a tax collector, was despised more than the Roman soldiers and believed to be further from God than prostitutes and pagans.

No one in the Jewish community would have anything to do with Levi, this is why the only friends he had and the only company he kept was with “tax collectors and sinners.” These are kinds of people Jesus came to save, so He walked up to Levi (Matthew) and said, “Follow me.” Jesus didn’t ask the tax collector to think about following him, pray about following him, or even to consider following him. Jesus’s “follow me” was an imperative; it was a command. We are told that Jesus, “**went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him ‘Follow me.’**”

So, what did Levi do? According to verse 28, he left everything and “**followed him.**” By leaving everything, Levi left everything behind never to return to his life as a tax collector again. The significance of this is that the disciples who were fishermen could return to their trade anytime they wanted, but when Levi walked away, he understood that he could never return to his life as a tax collector again. Why did Levi leave? He understood that his need for a savior was greater than anything else in his life.

Listen, Jesus' appeal to all: "**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden...**" is the appeal to find rest only and exclusively in him as the only person who is able to give us what this world cannot (see Matt. 11:28). When Jesus approached the tax collector, Levi was in a place where he understood exactly who he was, so when Jesus saw Levi, he carefully and deliberately looked at him and told him to follow him, it made complete and total sense to leave everything behind to follow him. If you ever looked someone in the eyes and promised them to always love that person in sickness and in health or witnessed someone make that promise, then you can appreciate Jesus' statement to Levi.

Jesus was Levi's Righteousness

The irony with Levi's story is that although he left everything behind, everything did not include the "**large company of tax collectors and others...**" that he invited to a party he threw so that the only friends he had could meet the only Person who had the power to transform his life. The only people that had a problem with Matthew's part were those who thought that they had all that they needed without any help or aid from Jesus. The Pharisees who believed their religious piety was enough for God to smile upon them complained to Jesus' disciples: "**Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners**" (v. 30)? In his book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*, Tony Compolo observes,

...anybody who reads the New Testament will discover a Jesus who loved to party with whores and with all kinds of left-out people. The publicans and "sinners" loved Him because He partied with them. The Lepers of society found in Him someone who would eat and drink with them. And while the solemnly pious could not relate to what He was about, those lonely people who usually didn't get invited to parties took to Him with excitement.¹

The reason why Jesus attended parties that included "whores and the left-out people" was not to affirm their life choices, but to offer a better way. Jesus answered the Pharisees and anyone else who thought they were too good to be near such people like Levi: "**Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance**" (vv. 31-32). Of all the religious people, the Pharisees most likely had the Psalms memorized and certainly sang them while in synagogue; one such Psalm they had read and sang is Psalm 14 that reminds us of who we are: "**The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one**" (Psalm 14:2-3).

Do you know what the difference was between Levi and the Pharisees? Levi was reminded every day he got up in the morning to go to work and every night he went to bed by the way he was shamed by everyone around him that Psalm 14 was about him and that he needed a righteousness that he could never generate on his own.

Do you know what else reminded him of what Levi was not? His name. Levi was named by his parents after the third son of Jacob who became the father of the tribe known as Levi; it is even possible that he was part of the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Levi is the only tribe that God said was permitted to serve as priests. There is a whole book in the Old Testament that describes how

¹ Tony Compolo. *The Kingdom of God is a Party* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1990), p. 9.

² Hughes, R. K. (1998). [*Luke: that you may know the truth*](#) (p. 185). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

one is to approach God that is named after that tribe, which is called: Leviticus. Deuteronomy 10:8-9 describes the special role that the tribe of Levi would have throughout Israel's history: **“At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord to stand before the Lord to minister to him and to bless in his name, to this day. Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers. The Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God said to him”** (Deuteronomy 10:8–9).

Here is the crazy thing about Jesus' encounter with Levi: there is a priestly line that is superior to the Levites, that priestly line is the order of Melchizedek who showed up out of nowhere after Abraham rescued his nephew Lot, we are told in Genesis 14 that, **“Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!’ And Abram gave him a tenth of everything”** (vv. 18-20).

We are told in the Bible that Jesus is, by birth, a part of the order of Melchizedek, in that his priestly line is not only superior to Levi's, but Jesus is qualified to serve as high priest who is more superior to any other high priest who came before him or after him (see Hebrews 4:14-5:10; 7:1-8:13). In fact, the Bible states of Jesus' role as a High Priest:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14–16.)

So, track with me here! Picture the scene. Jesus, the High Priest of a priestly order greater than that of the Tribe of Levi, walks up to a tax collector who is viewed by experts of the Law of God as a chief of sinners, and tells him (with all the love, grace, and holy authority) to leave everything to follow him. Here is the crazy thing about this whole encounter with Jesus: The tax collector who left his identity as a tax collector behind and threw a party to boot and invited him along with his tax collecting and whoring friends to attend would never again be known as Levi, but Matthew the Christ-follower!

How did the former tax collector go from being named after the tribe of Levi to being named Matthew? We are never told specifically, but in light of Jesus' track record of renaming men like Peter who was formerly known as Simon, and Paul who was formerly known as Saul; most scholars and theologians believe that Jesus renamed Levi and gave him the name Matthew. Do you know what Matthew means? Matthew means: “Gift of God.” Levi who was viewed by his peers all his life as a curse, was called by Jesus to follow him and now he is forever known not as a curse, but as the “Gift of God.” One of the gifts we have as a result of Matthew following Jesus is that we have the Gospel of Matthew in our Bible. J. C. Ryle once wrote of what Matthew experienced; this is what he said:

It is a far more important event than being married, or coming of age, or being made a nobleman, or receiving a great fortune. It is the birth of an immortal soul! It is the rescue of a sinner from hell! It is a passage from death to life! It is being made a king and priest

forevermore! It is being provided for, both in time and eternity! It is adoption into the noblest and richest of all families, the family of God!²

Conclusion

John Bunyan, the famous Pastor who gave us *Pilgrim's Progress* among many other books, described in his book, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, described the day he finally understood the gospel and what it meant for him:

One day as I was passing into the field, this sentence fell upon my soul: 'Thy righteousness is in heaven.' And with the eyes of my soul I saw Jesus at the Father's right hand. 'There,' I said, 'is my righteousness!' So that wherever I was or whatever I was doing, God could not say to me, 'Where is your righteousness?' For it is always right before him.

I saw that it is not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness IS Christ. Now my chains fell off indeed. My temptations fled away, and I lived sweetly at peace with God.

Now I could look from myself to him and could reckon that all my character was like the coins a rich man carries in his pocket when all his gold is safe in a trunk at home. Oh I saw that my gold was indeed in a trunk at home, in Christ my Lord. Now Christ was all: my righteousness, sanctification, redemption.

My question for you this morning is simply this: What is your name? I am not talking about your birth name or what is on your license. I am not talking about what others think about you either. I am talking about the name that really matters. Are you a curse, or have you received the gift of God? Is your righteousness wrapped up in what you do and how you behave, or is it found solely in Jesus Christ?

I want an end to this pandemic as much as anyone else, but if that end leads us away from a necessary repentance, if it feeds our pride, or it gives us a false sense of security in the future that does not include God, then we will be in more danger than any disease or threat of death may pose.

² Hughes, R. K. (1998). [*Luke: that you may know the truth*](#) (p. 185). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.