



Let me first say that I am thankful this morning for the many positive comments I have received from many of you regarding our current study of the Gospel of Luke. I sincerely appreciate your feedback, and I am delighted to hear that Luke's account of the life of our Lord is impacting your lives and the life of our church. I concur, for I am extremely, profoundly grateful for the privilege God has given me to study this beautiful Gospel. Let me also say that it is my great delight to prepare these messages, because each week provides another edifying and purifying opportunity to encounter our living Lord through this powerful and delightful book of the Bible.

- An introduction about cutting against the grain
- Set the context, and explain that Levi is Matthew.
- Read Luke 5:27-32
- Pray

Jesus answered them, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* Amen. There you go. I guess that is it today. Let us pray... I could almost dismiss us on the simple pronouncement of this verse... but I don't think the restaurants are open just yet, so I guess I will figure out a way to keep you all here a bit longer. In sincerity, though, that verse, all by itself, comes to us with a gloriously simple yet intensely important message. What, then, shall we say in response to it? I mean, some passages and some verses are considerably complicated, and they require a significant explanation and exegesis in order to arrive at consistently biblical conclusions. However, with most of Scripture we find that, although it is usually shallow enough for a child to wade in, it is, at the same time, deep enough to drown the Titanic. And such is the case with this verse. While it is a straight forward expression of Christ's purpose, it packs a powerful punch that, rightly considered, can revolutionize any activity into true Gospel ministry.

In fact, verse 32 might just be the niftiest nutshell in all of Scripture. That is, it may more succinctly summarize the mission of Christ—and thereby our mission as

His followers as well—better than any other verse in all of Scripture. Jesus says, “*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*” Think about it. In this one simple sentence we see the very inspiration for the incarnation. In these 12 words we discover why Jesus had to come and live the sinless life that we cannot. These 21 short syllables define the chief purpose behind Christ’s life, His death, and His resurrection. This one sentence explains why Jesus ascended and informs us why He eternally intercedes on behalf of those who sincerely believe in Him. Indeed, the entire exalted plan of salvation is summarized in this one profoundly simple truth: Jesus Christ came to call sinners to repentance, and He came to save any sinners who truly repent.

Even as hard as some pastors and theologians try, there is really no way to avoid this subject, nor should there be. As we continue our journey through the gospel of Luke, know this: This subject is going to surface again, and again, and again. And as well it should, because in its message lies the very heart of true Gospel ministry—Jesus Christ came to call sinners to repentance and to save those who repent through faith in Him. That, my dear friends, is the message of the Gospel. It is the message of life. It is the voice of hope. It is the ultimate cure for all that ails mankind. Lord, forbid that we would ever cease to proclaim it. Forbid that we would ever water it down. Forbid that we would ever diminish in our passion for its eternally sublime truth. Let us ever and always preach the absolute centrality of repentance and faith in salvation through Christ.

Christ’s simple yet potent call to repentance, however, cuts against the grain of our culture. It requires us to define all men and women as sinners. It means that we can no longer justify our own behavior by our own casual standards, but that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we must measure our every word and deed against the holy standard of God’s Word. Repentance requires us allow the Holy Spirit to convict us of our sin. It means that we can no longer attempt to drown out the call of our consciences with entertainment, or with alcohol, or worse. It means that we must listen to the Spirit at work within us as He generates repentance within our hearts.

Christ’s call to repentance cuts against our culture because it requires us to communicate the reality of sin and its consequences to a self-righteous, self-justifying world. It means that we must acknowledge the total depravity of our common human condition. It demands that we preach salvation through the forgiveness that comes only through Jesus Christ. From the church’s first ever sermon, given by Peter in Acts 2, until today, repentance always has been and will always remain at the very heart of true preaching. In [Acts 2:38-39](#), Peter preached,

*“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

We preach a message of repentance in the name of Jesus Christ, and we preach it to sinners. If we do not diligently do that, then we forfeit our calling and we cease to be a church of the Lord Jesus Christ, for Jesus came to call sinners to repentance. There can be no question that Christ’s call to repentance cuts against the grain of our culture. Let us, then, continue, by God’s grace, to cut against the grain for His great glory.

Christ’s simple yet potent call to repentance also cuts against the grain of our pride. Why? Because in this powerfully pithy verse Jesus is telling us that His church is not for the so-called “righteous” people. It is for sinners. As John MacArthur has said, “The church is not for people who think they're righteous, it's for people who know they're not.” Let me ask you, are you attempting to stand on your own righteousness today, or are you growing day-by-day in a deeper understanding of the abysmal spiritual depravity from which you have been redeemed by Christ? One of these two is almost certainly happening in your heart, because, by the power of the Spirit at work within us, one sure sign that we are increasingly grasping the great truths of Scripture is an escalating realization of personal sinfulness. In other words, a sure indication that we are growing in our love for Christ is a greater understanding of how wretched we really are, and the more mature we are as a congregation, the more we will be a congregation that recognizes our sinfulness before God.

But that is not what people want to hear, is it? No, Christ’s call to repentance clearly cuts against our pride. I especially witness our inherent hatred toward the idea of repentance whenever I travel around our community, knocking on doors and asking people what they think about heaven and how a person gets there. Do you know what I hear over and over and over again? Most of the people I encounter who do not know Christ as their personal Savior tell me that they believe that they will go to heaven because they are “good people.”

But in verse 32, Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms that He did not come for people who think like that. He didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. In other words, He didn't come for those who refuse to see their sinful condition. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who

not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need any forgiveness.” You see, the vital truth that Jesus is declaring in this passage is that there never will be salvation, nor will there be forgiveness of sin, nor will there be the glorious gift of eternal life for anybody who thinks he is righteous.

This is why, especially in the Gospel of Luke, we see Jesus directing His ministry toward the poor, the blind, the diseased and distressed, and oppressed. He focused His service on people who were willing to examine their true spiritual condition honestly. This is why we so often read about Jesus’ tremendous attraction to social outcasts. This is why He is always ministering to people with deformities, diseases, and paralysis. This is why he hung out with the hated foreigners, the reviled tax collectors, and those commonly regarded by the fancy people of the day as “sinners.” These people were lowly individuals and social outcasts, and because of that, they didn’t harbor exalted illusions about themselves. They were much quicker to examine their own hearts honestly than those moving among the religious elite, buying the lie that they were right with God. And so we will continue to see as we go through Luke, Jesus spends His time with the outcasts. He even gained the nickname “the friend of tax gatherers and sinners.”

Thus, we must—in the ministry of this church and in the very attitude of our everyday lives—never be demeaning to anyone. Rather, we must reach out to everyone, no matter how lowly they may be in the eyes of society. We must always recall that any of us who has been saved has been saved only by the grace of God, and not by anything we have done. Thus, we never have any cause to look down on anyone else for any reason whatsoever. Just remember, as John Bradford said upon seeing a criminal going to execution for his crimes, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

However, I mention this terrible pride of ours because it fiercely fights against the desperately needed and blessed repentance to which Christ calls us. And when I say “we” here, I am not referring only to lost people. Of course, the most important type of repentance is the initial recognition that we have sinned against God that leads us to saving faith in Christ, because, without repentance, no one will be saved because repentance is a necessary component of genuine, saving faith. However, that is certainly not the only type of repentance of which the Bible speaks.

Those of us in Christ must recognize that our spiritual growth cannot happen apart from repentance. As we discussed at length in our former sermon series on sanctification, true Christian living that pleases God is about constantly putting off

the old self, being made new in our minds, and putting on the new self that is being recreated in Christ's likeness. That is the very essence of repentance. In Luke 9:23, Jesus makes this point to His disciples by saying, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*"

Christ's call to repentance surely cuts against the grain of our pride. It tells us that there is only one way in which we may come to Christ, and that is through a repentant heart. Only when we understand our true condition will we be healed by Christ. Listen to the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector from Luke 18:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

There can be no question that Christ's call to repentance cuts against the grain of our pride. Let us, then, continue, by God's grace, to cut against the grain for His great glory.

The final point I wish to make this morning is to observe the manner in which Christ's call to repentance cuts against our expectations. In order to illustrate the power of this point, we need to look back at Luke's prologue to this Gospel at the very beginning of chapter one. If you will look there with me, we will see Luke describing how He set out to write this wonderful book of Scripture. Beginning in verse one, he writes:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Of course, there are many points we could make from this prologue, but for our purposes today, I want to focus on the middle of verse three, in which Luke writes, “*It seemed good also to me to write an orderly account...*” From the fact that Luke was a physician, from the very scholarly style of the Greek in which this Gospel is written, and from several other evidences as well, we know that Luke was a man of great intelligence. And in this prologue, we see him applying that intelligence to write what he calls “an orderly account.” The question, then, is what does he mean by that? Well, from our previous discussion of chapter four, we know that he does not mean a perfectly ordered chronological account. Rather, as we study this Gospel together, it will become clear that His purpose is to order his Gospel for theological and teaching purposes. Thus, I mention all of this in the hope of making this one point very clear: This passage does not follow the previous passage randomly or by accident.

Rather, I believe that Luke has followed the account about the healing of the paralytic with this passage very intentionally. As I am sure you will recall, the previous passage (verses 17-26 about the paralytic lowered through the roof) is given to us for the primary purpose of revealing to us Christ’s power to forgive sins. That central message naturally poses a question—a question which Matthew, Mark, and Luke all understand will be raised by it—and the question is this: “Whose sins does Jesus forgive?” Luke knows that those who read about this paralytic, especially readers in his own day, would be asking this question, wondering if this paralytic was really the type of person that Jesus will forgive. And so the next account, which is our text for today, is placed where it is in order to answer the question, “Just whose sins will Jesus forgive?” In other words, “How far will He go? How far down will He reach to rescue sinners?”

The answer to this fascinating comes to us in verse 27: Jesus will reach so far down that He even saved a tax collector. Now, as you hear that, it may not strike you as particularly significant. Of course, even today, becoming an IRS agent is no way to gain popularity. However, even as much as we may have an unfavorable opinion toward IRS agents, they do not have anywhere near the stigma today that they did in the time of Jesus. And if we hope to understand the real power of Luke’s Gospel at this point, it will help us greatly to take a brief look at the tax collectors of Jesus’ day. Once we do, I think we will surely come to a better understanding as to why the Pharisees were so shocked and troubled that Jesus would eat with them, and we should be better able to see just how profoundly Christ’s call to repentance cuts against our expectations.

Put bluntly, in the opinion of first century Jews, tax gatherers were the very scum of humanity. They were the worst of all the dregs of Israel. They were the lowest of the low... the traitors of all traitors. Thus, as we ask the question, "How low can the Lord's forgiveness reach and who will He save?" The answer resounds: the very worst of all. In fact, as we can see from Luke's Gospel, it was inconceivable to most of the scribes and Pharisees that the Messiah would even associate with tax gatherers, let alone save one and make him an apostle. That was utterly unthinkable.

Here's how their tax system worked. Rome, obviously, ruled the world and Israel was an occupied country. The Roman occupation involved a Roman military presence, pagan kings like Herod Antipas, and taxation. The Israelites were required to pay these taxes to individual tax collectors who, in turn, paid them to Herod Antipas, who, in turn, paid them to Rome. Herod Antipas handled this tax scenario by selling tax franchises to the highest bidder, and obtaining such a tax franchise could be an extremely lucrative business for immoral, unscrupulous people. This was so because the Roman government would establish a certain amount that must be paid by the tax gatherer at the end of the year. Anything beyond that, the tax gatherer could keep.

Therefore, the very best crooks—those who didn't think twice about lying, or cheating, or stealing, or abusing, and by all means possible ripping people off—would quickly get in line to snatch up these tax franchises from Herod Antipas. Moreover, tax gatherers certainly did not take their Jewish heritage very seriously, since doing so instantly made them the worst type of Jewish traitor. Not only were they terrible scoundrels who abused their own people, and not only did they extort money from their own countrymen, but, worst yet, they sent that money along to hated Gentiles. Unthinkable.

Tax gatherers were the worst of crooks and the worst of traitors. They would do all they could to collect as much as they could and become wealthy. If an Israelite couldn't pay his taxes, the tax collectors would become loan agents who loaned money at 50% interest or more. And if their countrymen couldn't pay, they would send their thugs to break your legs. It was not much different from the mafia. They could stop people at any time, search their goods, and tax whatever they bought at the market. They could do it all at random, and enforce their unfair taxation with thugs who would harm the people who didn't pay.

Matthew ran that kind of operation. The Jews who did this were obviously despised, and Matthew was one of them. He cheated, extorted, probably took

bribes, and abused the poor, and he did it all under the authority of Gentiles. The Jews, who believed God was the only One worthy of tribute, wholeheartedly resented and despised all of this. And somewhere along the line, Matthew got involved in this mess. At some point, he decided to forfeit his birthright, sell his Jewish heritage, barter his reputation, trade in any inkling of social standing, dishonor his family and friends, and forever associate himself with criminals, thugs, and other reviled people by purchasing a tax franchise. To the Jews in general, and surely to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, tax gatherers were utterly unforgivable.

Thus, in response to the question, “Just whose sins can Jesus forgive?” the answer resounds from these verses: Absolutely anyone at all.

The essential point is this: Jesus will forgive anyone at all who will recognize their need for Him and turn to Him in true repentance and faith. The response reverberates: Jesus Christ will forgive anyone who sees his or her sin-sick condition and comes to Him for healing. In our text we see the most vile and reviled of sinners miraculously transformed into an Apostle, a disciple and companion of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the author of the first Gospel. Matthew was the worst of sinners, yet, through the forgiveness of Jesus, he was given the privilege of inaugurating the New Testament. How remarkable, yet how appropriate! How incredibly, marvelously, and sublimely unexpected! Indeed, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost,” no matter how lost.

And that is the message to you today: No matter what you have done, Jesus stands ready and willing to receive your repentance, forgive your every sin—no matter how awful—and grant you everlasting life through faith in Him. Not only that, but regardless of your relationship with Him—whether you are hearing of His love for the very first time or you have been his faithful disciple for decades—know this: Right now, Jesus Christ is calling you to repentance.

Will you respond to Him today? Will you cut against the grain of our culture? Are you prepared to cut against the grain of your pride? Are you willing to cut against the grain of your expectations? If you are, then will you confess your sin today? Are you ready turn away from yourself and deny whatever is separating you from God? Will you acknowledge that you are sick and turn to Him who alone holds the cure? Can we all together declare that we are ready and willing to cut against the grain today?

-- Pray

