

Friend of Sinners

Luke 5:27-32

In Luke chapter 5, there are 4 notable categories of people represented. There's the crowd, tax collectors, sinners and religious leaders. Jesus is also among them but of course He's in a category all by Himself.

The crowd, as we learned, was sometimes an obstacle to the primary mission of Jesus, namely to seek and save the lost. They often sought Jesus for the miracles that He performed, but not for the message that He preached. We can categorize the crowd as those who were curious about Jesus, but not committed to Jesus.

Then there were the scribes and Pharisees who were the **religious leaders** of that day. They were not hanging around because they were curious about Jesus. They were more like spies. Because of their envy and self-righteousness, they had contempt for Jesus and those He socialized with. We can categorize them as the separatists who didn't want anything to do with others who were not like them.

Thirdly, there were the **tax collectors**. The tax collectors were the people everyone loved to hate. They were despised because they extorted their people for selfish gain. What's more, because they collected taxes from their own people for their Roman oppressors, they were viewed as turncoats. Think of a Nazi informant during the Jewish Holocaust. That's how they would have viewed tax collectors in Jesus day. So, as they were known in those times, we can categorize them as traitors.

Fourthly, there were those who were referred to as **sinners**. In reality, they were all sinners. However, the term sinners is used here in a technical way to refer to ethnic Jews who had no interests in the traditions or teachings of religious leaders. Because they did not care to follow the ceremonial laws of cleanliness and hung out with Gentiles, they were considered unclean. We can categorize them as the non-religious.

Then there's **Jesus**. As we will see our text, He was seen as a friend of sinners, a friend of those who others loved to hate.

In light of these categories, where do you fit in? Do you line up with the **crowd** in Jesus' day who hung around Jesus because they were curious about Him, but were not committed to following Him?

Or perhaps you identify more with the **religious**. You come to church regularly and participate in Christian activities. But although you may be living somewhat of a moral lifestyle, you would admit that your life is not reflective of the heart of Jesus who was a friend of sinners. You live in a **Christian bubble**. You have little or nothing meaningful to do with the sinners around you who Jesus came to save.

Or perhaps you're here this morning, but because of your past or present circumstances you feel like an outcast—you don't feel like you fit in. And it could be that you feel that way because to some measure we the church have failed you—we've not done enough to reach out to you.

Or maybe you've believed the lie of the devil that because of things in your life that you are ashamed of, there is no place for you in the household of faith. If that's you, you need to know that we are all sinners and that Jesus came precisely to rescue sinners, like you and me, who recognize that we need to be rescued.

Where do you fit in? If you recognize that you are in the wrong place, I pray that the Lord would speak to you through His word. And that you will joyfully come to identify yourself as a forgiven sinner by God's amazing grace, and because of His grace, seek, like Jesus, to be a friend of sinners.

Main idea: Fruitful disciple-makers emulate Jesus who was a friend of sinners.

To unfold this theme, we are going to learn from the example of Jesus what it means to be a friend of sinners and why in His upside-down kingdom it is essential to fulfilling His redemptive purposes.

1. Jesus invited sinners

First, Jesus was a friend of sinners in that He invited sinners to be close to Him—to be near to Him—to follow Him.

Following the miraculous healing of the paralyzed man in a crowded house, Jesus, as He often did, withdrew from the crowd. Luke writes:

“After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, “Follow me.”²⁸ And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.” Luke 5:27-28

Now, as we learned last week, often the crowd that followed Jesus around were an obstacle to His primary rescue mission. Remember, many in the crowd were curious followers longing for a miracle more so than to hear His message.

But Jesus didn't let the felt needs of the crowd dictate how He ministered to them. Yes, out of compassion and mercy He healed the sick. But He sought to meet their greater need, namely the forgiveness of sins. He sought to give them what they needed, more so than what they wanted. And what they needed the most was not something from Jesus. What they needed most was Jesus Himself—to come to know Him through His teaching as savior and King.

So, after teaching the crowd, Jesus returned to the town where His eyes were drawn to a tax collector named Levi (aka Matthew).

You know, it's very possible that Levi was among the crowds who heard the teachings of Jesus. And perhaps he wanted to get closer to Jesus, but was unable to because of the curious crowd.

Or maybe he believed that the people in the crowd, like the religious leaders, didn't want anything to do with him, so he kept his distance. Whatever the case, Jesus, who left the crowd, came personally to Him, a man who others loved to hate.

And Jesus said to Him, *“Follow me.”* *“And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.”* Luke 5:28

What a worthy response to an extraordinary invitation? This man, who was despised by his own people, who was considered a traitor, in a moment, left his livelihood behind to follow Jesus. Why? Based on what he saw and heard, he believed that Jesus was who He said He was, the prophesied messiah, the Son of God.

Do you know, there are people you may have judged to have no interest in the things of God, who, if you gave them a gospel invitation, would respond favorably—would respond in ways that you would not have imagined?

If that’s true, why does the research show that most Christians today don’t invite others to come to Jesus? In fact, in one recent poll by Barna Group, although ninety percent of millennial Christian said, “The best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to come to know Jesus,” forty seven percent, also said, “It’s wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith.”

This glaring inconsistency demonstrates that professing Christians today are being disciplined more by a pluralistic, postmodern culture than by Jesus Christ.

But, as John Mark Comer suggested, giving in to this anti-Christian proselytizing “is based on self-defeating logic, because everyone is proselytizing. Everyone is preaching a “gospel.” The question is not, are you preaching the gospel? It’s, what gospel are you preaching?” The gospel of LGBTQ+ pride? Or democratic socialism”? Or American Nationalism? Or cold-water therapy or intermittent fasting or keto diet...Everyone is preaching a gospel. [Followers of Jesus are those who preach His gospel. Again, this is what all people do. They talk about what they love most—fashion, music, sports, a new TV series. We love Jesus, so we talk about Jesus.”

In light of this, I want to suggest to you that perhaps the reason many professing believers don't talk much to others about Jesus is because we don't talk to God much. What's more, we aren't making time for Him to talk to us. Consequently, we've allowed the world to shape us more than the love of Jesus. The more we know His love the more we will love Him and the more we love Him the more we will talk about Him.

Let me also suggest that another reason we don't talk about Jesus is that we tend to judge a book by its cover. We tend to focus on the exterior of a person, rather than on how the power of the gospel is able to transform any person from the inside out.

"Centuries ago a number of workmen were seen dragging a great marble block into the city of Florence, Italy. It had come from a famous marble quarry, and was intended to be made into a great statue of a great Old Testament prophet. But it contained imperfections, and when the great sculptor Donatello saw it, he refused it at once. So there it lay in the cathedral yard, a useless block. One day another sculptor caught sight of the flawed block. But as he examined it, there rose in his mind something of immense beauty, and he resolved to sculpt it. For two years the artist worked feverishly on the work of art. Finally, on January 25, 1504, the greatest artist of the day assembled to see what he had made of the rejected rock. Among them were Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci. As the veil dropped to the floor, the statue was met with a chorus of praise. It was a masterpiece! The succeeding centuries have confirmed the judgment. Michelangelo's *David* is one of the greatest works of art the world has ever known." Kent Hughes

Similarly, Jesus didn't focus on where Levi was in his life, but on who he could become. And today, Jesus, the architect of the universe, still sees sinners through His creative eyes. The bible says, "*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*" Ephesian 2:10

Beloved, as followers of Jesus, we too must see beyond the sinful flaws of people to the masterpiece that God can create in Christ. We

must see the grace potential in people. And when we do, we will, like Jesus, invite sinners to join us—we will welcome them as Jesus has welcomed us. We will not keep people, who are not like us, at arm's length. We will seek to bring them close so that we can share Jesus with them with grace filled words and actions.

2. Jesus invested in sinners

Secondly, Jesus was a friend of sinners in that He invested in sinners and paid a heavy price for doing so. Sometime after Jesus called Levi to follow Him, Levi hosted a great feast for Jesus in his house where many of his fellow tax collectors and others were also invited. Luke writes:

“And 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. ³⁰ And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”
Luke 5:29-30

Do you have any unsaved friends? Have you spent considerable time with anyone whose lifestyle may be offensive to you or considered scandalous? Have you ever been in a situation where it cost you to be a friend to someone who needs Jesus? If not, you haven't been a friend like Jesus.

Jesus didn't call Levi to follow Him so that He could be served by him. He called Levi, a man who was despised, so that He could serve Levi and invest in his life. And He did so in a way that cost Him His reputation before the religious separatist and eventually His very life. As one theologian put it: “Jesus got Himself crucified by the way He ate.” Robert Karris

Jesus was a guest at that great feast that Levi made, along with those who were the undesirables of His day. And while He was there, Jesus wasn't looking over His shoulder afraid of what others were thinking concerning the company He was keeping. He reclined at the table, while He dined and fellowship with them all.

Beloved, because of various types of bigotry, and other things like, identity politics, and self-righteousness, being a friend of sinners today will come with a price. And sadly, it's not just unbelievers who will cancel you because of your stance on certain issues, or who you associate with.

Professing Christians are often just as guilty of seeing people not as Christ sees them, but as being in a category that they don't want to be associated with. They will, for example, write you off depending on whether you are a democrat or a republican.

And because of how ugly we can be about political issues, we can become an obstacle to people who need to come to Jesus or we become selective about who we seek to share Christ with, which contradicts the very essence of the gospel.

It's sad but true that there are people in our world, who, like the religious separatist of Jesus' day, only want to be with their own kind—with their people, with their class, with their race, with their age group, with their political party. And what's even more tragic is that this mentality has crept into some churches.

How many of you know, this separatist mentality grieves the Holy Spirit? As Pastor Jim Cymbala often says: "When a church is not open to all people; it's not fully open to the [ministry] of the Holy Spirit." And I'm not talking about affirming or approving of the sinful lifestyles of people.

Christians are not to be conformed to the world. But not being conformed to the world does not mean being isolated from the world. "The Christian's life is not to be one of isolation, nor assimilation, but mission." Kent Hughes

And when we truly are on mission for Jesus we don't just talk about being open to all people; we demonstrate. I confess that I struggle coming out of the Christian bubble I'm in, even more since I became a full-time pastor. But if we are going to be on mission for Christ, we

must, like Christ, intentionally seek to build bridges to people who desperately need Jesus.

Some years ago, I was asked by a father in our church to visit his son in a State prison who was serving a forty years sentence. I agreed and they started the process of getting me on his visiting list.

Keep in mind that at the time I was a Police Officer. And also, by the providence of God, ten years prior to this visit, I was also involved in the initial investigation that led to his arrest. So, when dad told his son that he wanted him to put me on the visiting list, he was not excited about it, to say the least. But out of respect for his father, he agreed.

A month later, we were sitting at a table face to face in a prison visiting room breaking bread together. And while breaking bread together, he had an encounter with Jesus. He knew that even in his mess, Jesus was still pursuing him and wanted to rescued him. Well, he would go on to be radically transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that day in that prison visiting room we began a lasting friendship that continues to this day. And over the subsequent years, after that initial visit, others from this church family got on the visiting list and visited him until the day of his release. Bert, who has been a member of our church for the past 7 years, has been worshiping and serving the Lord with us ever since. Recently, he's gone back to prison, but not because he committed a crime. Bert is ministering the gospel, along with a prison ministry team, at Cook County jail.

Let me remind you that this grace transformation began at a table where two men, who were from seemingly opposite sides of the track, (a police officer and an inmate), shared a meal together.

In His book, *Practicing the Way*, John Mark Comer shared this powerful insight: "In the gospel of Luke alone, there are over fifty references to food. Lukan scholar Robert Karris wrote, "In Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal: I like this Jesus...The UK pastor Tim Chester wrote a great little book called *A meal with Jesus*, where he pointed out there's an iconic verbal formula that's used two times in Luke: First, Luke wrote, 'The

Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.’ That was what Jesus did—His **mission**. Then he wrote, ‘The Son of Man came eating and drinking.’ That was how Jesus did it—His **method**. Jesus lived in a culture where a lot of people were hostile toward him. How did He invite them into his kingdom? One meal at a time.

The practice of eating and drinking with people far from God is what the New Testament writers call ‘hospitality.’ The word is *philoxenia* in Greek, and it’s a compound word: *philo* means ‘love’ and *xenos* means “stranger, foreigner, or guest.” Meaning: Hospitality is the opposite of xenophobia. It’s the love of the stranger, not the hate or fear of the ‘other.’ It’s the act of welcoming the outsider in and, in doing so, turning guest into neighbors and neighbors into family in God. We can’t force a person to become a disciple of Jesus, nor would we want to. But we can offer them a space where such a change can occur, even if slowly over time. We can actively seek out the lonely, the uncool, the poor, the refugee—those with no family or no home—and welcome them into a community of love. The beauty of Jesus method is this: (1) It’s something you’re already doing. You already eat meals. All you have to do is repurpose a few of them to offer God’s great welcome. (2) Anyone can do this. You don’t need a seminary degree or expertise in apologetics; you don’t need a formal dining room or a kinfolk-worthy backyard with cool hanging lights. You just need a table. And it doesn’t even have to be yours.”

3. Jesus involved/included sinners

Finally, Jesus was a friend of sinners in that He involved and included sinners in His community—in His intimate circle of friends. We’ve seen clearly in our text and in previous messages that to be a friend of sinners we must get involved in the lives of people—we must get into their mess. Why? Because we serve a God who can turn our mess into a message of the power of His saving grace.

As we have seen, Jesus not only got involved—He not only met people where they were, He included them in His life and in His community. Do you know, Jesus was not the only one sitting at that table with the tax collectors and sinners? According to verse 30, His

disciples were there too. I want to suggest to you that it's possible to be willing to meet sinners where they are, but not be as willing to bring them to where we are—to bring them into our community.

As one commentator explained: "The meal Jesus shared at Levi's house itself was something of a foreshadowing and anticipation of the great Messianic banquet at the end of the age (Rev. 19:9), when persons from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation who have experienced this scandalous grace, including the unlikely and undesirable, will recline with King Jesus at a great banquet that will never end." (Christ Centered Exposition).

Beloved, Levi's table reflected the table of the Lord where all sinners are welcome to come to meet Jesus. And if we are going to be like Jesus, a friend of sinners, we must break out of our Christian bubbles, open up our homes, our tables, and our lives so that people can meet Jesus.

Does the thought of opening your life and home to people who are other, who are different, cause you to recoil, or to get excited about the possibilities? The religious people in Jesus' day grumbled when they saw Jesus feasting with tax collectors and sinners and it wasn't even their home.

Listen to how Jesus responded to the grumbling of the self-righteous: *"And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ³²I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."* Luke 5:31-32

Now Jesus wasn't implying that the religious leaders did not need to be healed from the terminal disease of sin. Jesus used a proverb that was familiar to these religious leaders to not only explain His mission, but to expose their self-righteous pride.

Before a Holy God, the religious were great sinners too. But because they measured themselves by comparing themselves with those they viewed as the scum of the earth, they could not see their need—they

could not see that they too were great sinners in need of the great grace of Jesus.

Jesus came to save sinners. All we need to do is receive His saving grace through repentance and faith—through turning from our self-rule and trusting Jesus as Savior and King.

Conclusion

What a friend we have in Jesus, but does Jesus have a friend in you? Can He count on you to be a friend to others as He has been a friend to you? Can He count on you to invite the needy into your space—to invest in their lives, and to include them in the community of faith so that they can know His love and sit at His table of grace?

O let us who know the grace of Jesus, the friend of sinners, relate to a lost world as Jesus did. Let us welcome others as Jesus welcomed us the glory of His name.

Discussion Guide

Read Luke 5:27-28.

- Why was the crowd sometimes an obstacle to Jesus' primary ministry?
- What was His primary ministry?
- What did Jesus see in Levi that compelled him to invite Him to follow Him?
- Why did He invite Levi to follow Him?
- What did Levi see in Jesus that made him willing to leave everything to follow him?

Read Luke 5:29-30.

- How did Jesus invest in His followers and to what end?
- What did it cost Jesus to invest in His disciples?
- What is hospitality and why is it a powerful method for bringing people to Jesus, especially strangers?

Read Luke 5:31-32.

- Why do we need to do more than meet people, who need Jesus, where they are, but also include them and involved them in the community of faith?
- What prevented the religious leaders from seeing their need for Jesus?
- How can we help people see their need to repent and trust in Jesus as Savior in Lord?
- What do you need to do to be a friend of Jesus as He has been a friend to you?