Jesus Saves Sinners
Luke 5:27-32

None of us likes paying taxes. You don't complete your tax form with a spring in your step. That time of year doesn't come round and you think excellent, I can't wait, another opportunity to give some more of my money to the government to spend. And they'll do such a good job of it! But however much we may dislike or even resent paying taxes, what we feel towards the tax office doesn't come anywhere close to how people in Jesus' day thought about tax collectors. They were about as despised as it was possible for a Jew to be. The Jewish Talmud – the collection of the Rabbis' teachings - classed them as robbers, they were no better than thieves. In fact they were worse, because they were collaborators with the occupying Roman forces and if you have some knowledge about the way Nazi collaborators were treated in Europe at the end of the war you have some idea of how these collaborators were viewed.

You see, the Romans put the collection of taxes out to tender, and awarded the right to collect the taxes to the highest bidder. Then the tax collector and those who worked for him had a free hand to raise the required revenue for the Romans and the equally hated King Herod. On top of that they had to cover their costs and make a profit. And they could make a very good one. So here were fellow Jews, profiting at other's loss, getting rich by pushing others into poverty, squeezing the lives of their own, who were already struggling to survive, and doing it by collaborating with gentiles who were trampling all over their land. It's why one commentator called the tax collectors a 'byword for wickedness' (Ryle).

And Levi was one of them. And he's sat at his tax booth, taking money for Herod, taking money for the Romans, lining his pocket at others' expense, in the very act, when Jesus comes calling.

Jesus seeks out sinners
In v27 Luke says 'after this' –which is after the healing of the paralyzed man – 'he [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector named Levi.' So Jesus leaves the house where the paralyzed man was healed, the house which now has a great big bed-sized gaping hole in the roof, and as He's walking through the town He sees Levi at his tax table.

So the healing of the leper, and the healing of the paralytic and all the crowds who were flocking out to see Jesus has happened on Levi's door-step. So maybe he's heard about it all – because everyone else sure has, and maybe he's even gone out and heard Jesus for himself, but now he's back at his desk making money. And Jesus comes looking for him.

It isn't Levi who goes looking for Jesus. It's Jesus who comes looking for Levi, for the man who everyone else despised. Sometimes we can think it's us who are searching for God, you might think that it's you who are searching for meaning in life. But the message of the Gospel is that God loves you and the funny thing is, it's not Him who's lost and needs finding. It's us who are lost and in His love He comes looking for us, seeking us out, just as Jesus does for Levi. And Jesus told a parable to explain exactly that. He said there was a shepherd with 100 sheep. 99 of them were safe, but one got lost and went missing. And the shepherd goes looking for that sheep, and He searches for the sheep until he finds it. You see it's

not the shepherd who's lost, it's not the shepherd who's hiding, with the sheep desperately trying to find the missing shepherd. It's the sheep that's lost and the shepherd doesn't rest until he's rescued him. And Jesus is saying 'I am that shepherd.'

And just as in that parable we're supposed to imagine the lost sheep up to it's neck, about to drown in some swollen river, or hopelessly caught in some thicket of brambles it can't escape from; and just as with Levi we see a man who no one else wants to know, who's life is a mess; so for us, whilst externally we may be way more sophisticated and together, we are just as lost as the sheep was, and as alienated from God as Levi was, until Jesus comes and pulls us to safety, as the shepherd does for the sheep and as Jesus does for Levi.

And when you first become a Christian you might start off thinking 'I was searching for meaning, searching for God but then I found Jesus and I made a decision to accept him and follow him' and what you soon discover is that all along –despite the fact that you didn't deserve it anymore than Levi did, despite the fact that you were as lost as that sheep and as alienated as Levi, - it was God who was searching for you, it was Him who found you. He loves you before ever you loved him, and whatever impulse we feel to search for some higher meaning, or to seek the truth or to find God, is simply us responding to His calling our name.

And that seeking, searching love of God for sinners and rebels like us is what brought Jesus to Levi's tax booth that day. Jesus goes in search of sinners.

But having sought Levi out, Jesus doesn't coerce him, or twist his arm, he simply calls him to follow.

Jesus calls sinners to follow Him:
V27 'And [Jesus] said to him, "Follow Me." And Levi is faced with a choice. He's got his paperwork in front of him, his growing columns of profit, all the money he's making. It represents his income and security. There's the safety of the life he knows so well – even the safety of the sin he knows. And he's faced with this choice: does he leave all this, which is his life, and follow Jesus, or does he stay with what he knows.

To follow Jesus meant to leave all that, to turn his back on that, because he could not follow Jesus and keep doing what he was doing. Jesus was calling him to a new life, and that meant repentance – literally turning around his way of thinking, changing his whole world view, turning away from this life, and getting in step behind Jesus.

And I don't know how long he hesitated for, if at all, but Luke tells us in v28: And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. However great the gravitational pull of the money and the security, however great the pull of the life that he knew, Jesus grace and love, the fact that He would come looking for him, the fact that He would call him, this powerful pull of grace, was irresistible, and he got out of his chair and followed.

Now this call to leave and to follow Jesus comes to everyone of us. If you're not yet a Christian it's a call to a new life. Jesus seeks you out and calls you to follow him. Doesn't mean you have to leave your job like Levi did, even if you wish it did! But it is a call to turn from your old ways of thinking and living and in response to His grace and love fall in step behind Jesus.

But there's also a call to those of us who are already Christians. It's to live a life of repentance, of having our minds transformed into Christ's way of thinking, of seeing our work, our lives, our time, as He sees it. Of seeing sin the way Jesus sees it. Of growing more like Him in the practical, specific areas when He calls us to obedience. To follow Jesus is the call to radical obedience and Christ like attitude to money and family and attitudes of heart. It is a lifelong continual call to live and walk as Jesus did: to follow in his footsteps.

And hearing that call, Levi gets up and starts a lifetime of following Jesus. And having experienced that undeserved, unsought for grace and love and forgiveness of Christ, Levi wants others to experience it too.

A missionary to his own tribe
V29 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.

So Levi invites Jesus home with him and then gets as many of his former colleagues and business associates and neighbours, as many as would come, to come to a feast. This guy is happy. He's got something to celebrate. Now you meet some religious types sometimes and they look like they've been drinking vinegar. But Levi knows his sins have been forgiven. He knows Jesus has allowed him to start again, so what does he do? He throws a party. You never see vinegar faces around Jesus, do you? The vinegar faces are always the ones on the outside, pointing the finger at him. Salvation has come, so it's party time at Levi's and he fills his house with as many of his friends and colleagues as he can.

Why? Why not just have a little, private celebration? Because he wants all these other tax collectors to meet Jesus too. He knows what they're like. He knows they struggle with the same things he struggles with, he knows they have the same hopes and fears as he has, he knows their sins and their dodgy deals, and he knows they need Jesus. He wasn't trying to introduce them to religion and rules, he knew they needed the Pharisees like they needed a hole in the head, but Jesus was different. And Jesus had shown him grace that had changed his heart and he wanted them to know that too. He knows they are in just as much need of God's grace and love and mercy as he is, so he opens his house to them and throws a party so that they get to meet Jesus as well.

Church, Levi has become a missionary to his own tribe, the tribe of the tax-collectors. It's what we're all called to be. We're not all called to up sticks, and evangelise the unreached people groups across the other side of the world. But we are all called to be missionaries to those like ourselves – the unreached people on the other side of the street or the other side of the office: friends,

colleagues and neighbours. To take the opportunities God gives us to introduce them to God's love and grace in Jesus. And let's do that as a church before we get too old. I read a statistic this past week that said that "New churches tend to reach non-christians at a rate 5-7 times the rate of older churches" (Keller) – so let's reach them before we get to be an old church!

And if you want a clue how to do that, just take a look at how Jesus does it here. He eats with these guys, the very same guys who the Pharisees wouldn't give the time of day to. He reclines at table with them. He shares his life with them. And eating with someone in that sort of culture sent out a very strong message. These are his friends. Jesus doesn't hold those caught in sin at arms length. Church, the mission we're called to requires more than casual contact, and time and again in the gospels we see Jesus mixing and socializing with those who need God's grace, just like us. Just as he was prepared to become unclean to cleanse the leper, so he's prepared to mix with sinners that they might discover grace.

So as much as we love each other's company, don't forget those who don't yet know Jesus. As much as we like spending time with each other, don't forget those who don't yet know the mercy and grace and joy of God. Share your lives with them, open your homes, go skiing with them, have them for a meal. You're not trying to give them religion, you're not trying to serve them vinegar to drink. You've experienced grace and love, so share it around. Invite them like Levi did and treat them like Jesus would.

But that kind of attitude almost invariably brings down the wrath of the religious.

Don't be a Pharisee.
V30: And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners."

That word grumbling's a great word isn't it? It's almost onomatopoeic – it almost sounds like what it is: to grumble. And it's a fascinating use of words on Luke's part because it's the very same word that's used to describe what the Israelites did with Moses in the desert. Numbers 14:2 'And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "would that we had died in the land of Egypt!" God had rescued them, and saved them out from under the tyranny of Pharaoh, and they were on the threshold of entering the Promised Land, and here are the people grumbling about it. And the problem is that God hears that kind of grumbling and sees it for what it is: grumbling directed at Him: Number 14:26-27 'And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron saying, "How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumblings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me." You see the people of Israel were grumbling about what God was doing, they were grumbling about the way God was bringing about salvation to his people. They wanted it done differently. Sure it was aimed at Moses, but God sees where the grumbling is really directed.

And here are the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious elite, grumbling. Grumbling about what? About what God is doing and how he is bringing salvation to his people. Because tax collectors and sinners receiving grace didn't fit with the way they wanted things to be. Jesus wasn't doing it the way they wanted it done. It didn't fit their preconceived ideas of who deserved God's mercy. They didn't want tax collectors and sinners, they were outside the plan.

Now let's be clear, the Pharisees were right, weren't they. The tax collectors were bad: they were corrupt, they were motivated by gain at other's loss, they were thieves. This wasn't a case of mistaken identity. Jesus doesn't go up to them and say, 'Pharisees, you've got it wrong, they're not as bad as you think they are; just come and meet them, get to know them, and you'll see.' The whole point is these men, these tax collectors, and whatever other motley crew of sinners Levi had collected, *were* as bad as the Pharisees thought they were.

But what the Pharisees didn't understand was that we are all as bad as that, religious types included, and in grumbling against what God was doing they excluded themselves from the party of God's grace and his transforming power.

And I tell you that because it is so easy to adopt the kind of attitude of the Pharisees, that forgets that you are still in daily, desperate need of God's grace. Because now maybe your life isn't so messed up, God has been good to you and things are great and you're not stuck in sin and your marriage is ok, and porn isn't an issue with you and you don't struggle with same sex attraction, and money doesn't have a great hold on you, and you've got your doctrine sorted and you're not some kind of flake. And it's easy to forget that you are still as desperately in need of God's grace as ever you were and you can begin to look down on those who aren't as sorted as you. Don't go down that road.

And Jesus makes it crystal clear to the Pharisees, He's come to save sinners.

Saving sinners is what Jesus has come to do

V31-32 And Jesus answered them, "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."

He hasn't come simply to be a teacher of the already righteous. He hasn't come to form a social club for people who think they're sorted and keep them happy and entertained with bingo and little motivational pep talks. He's come to build a church that's a rescue mission. He's come for people who *know* they need mercy and grace, and for people who are so bust up they *don't yet know* they need mercy and grace. He's come for the tax collectors and the sinners, for the Levis and the Martin Slacks of this world.

But He hasn't come so that they can stay where they are. He doesn't seek them out just to leave them where he finds them. He has come to call them to repentance, to leave this old life just as Levi left his. He doesn't put his arm around Levi and say God loves you, in fact He loves you so much he's just going to leave you wallowing here in the mess. No! He calls Levi to follow, to repent, to

turn his back on this, to reboot his life on Christ, and He calls every one of us to do the same.

And Jesus' diagnosis of the human condition is 'hey you're sick!' We're all sick. But then he says 'and I'm the doctor. You need a cure and I am that cure. Your sickness leads to death – it's called sin, but I have eternal life to give you', because the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16).

So whilst someone (Robert Munger) has said that 'the church is the only fellowship in the world where the one requirement for membership is the unworthiness of the candidate' and that is so true, Jesus hasn't come to leave us there. In dying for us, he took the punishment, so that we might take his righteousness. In calling us to repentance he calls us to leave our sinful ways behind. In making us alive to him he gives us his holy Spirit to give us the power to say no to sin and over a lifetime be changed to become more like Jesus. As Matt Chandler says: it's okay not to be ok, but its not ok to stay there.

But the change that Jesus brings about is not by guilt or by religious law and the do's and don'ts of the Pharisees. It's by the grace of God, by the joy of forgiveness, and by the love of God poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

So Levi becomes a model for all of us: for those who aren't yet Christians, to hear Jesus' call and to respond with repentance and faith and following after Jesus. And for those who are Christians to respond with repentance and obediance where we need to, not because of law, but because of grace.