

“I Have Not Come to Call the Righteous” (Luke 5:27–39)

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The last time I got on a plane to travel somewhere, I didn't rent a car, which is what I would normally do. Because I wasn't there long and didn't need to drive much, I got a Lyft. That's L-Y-F-T. It's a ride service similar to Uber. Both are technically called transportation network companies. If you have a smart phone, you download the app, set up a source of payment, and then enter in where you want to go. You can see how much the ride will cost and how far away drivers are. In most cases you can get picked up within a few minutes. The app tells you who your driver is, what he or she is driving, and shows you on the map where the car is. It's quick and easy and quite amazing.

These companies that use technology to connect driver and rider are changing a whole industry. It used to be that if you wanted a ride, you had to call a cab. But now the whole taxi industry is threatened. Cab drivers in London have fought to remove Uber from their city.¹ In the States, companies like Uber and Lyft have caused the number of taxi rides to decrease rapidly.² Taxi companies were slow to embrace new technology, while the new services use technology to make it easy for customers to get rides.

This is what one writer said about this sea change in the transportation industry:

We empathize with the taxi drivers, but the scenes of older players getting itchy is a scene we have seen many times. Surely the horse cart owners wouldn't have liked it when cars started being used by all and sundry. Similarly, now we can see the same kind of contest taking place between traditional TV and the on-demand content industry led by the likes of Hulu, Amazon Prime, and Netflix.

Whenever the new kid on the block disrupts the way things are supposed to be, emotions seem to get the better of many of the old players. Instead of being upset with the new kid, these old players need to realize that the new kid could

¹Karla Adam and William Booth, “In London, Black Cabs Win a Battle against Uber. But Is the War Over?” *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-london-black-cabs-win-a-battle-against-uber-but-is-the-war-over/2017/10/17/8a2c1468-a395-11e7-b573-8ec86cdfed_story.html?utm_term=.7af13754953a

² An article published nearly two years in the *Los Angeles Times* states that the number of tax rides in that city had fallen 30 percent. Laura J. Nelson, “Uber and Lyft Have Devastated L.A.’s Taxi Industry, City Records Show,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-uber-lyft-taxis-la-20160413-story.html>

not have succeeded if they (the old players) had done their job right and met the needs of the customers in a better manner.³

New ways of doing things threaten those who are attached to the old ways. That's true with businesses, technology, politics, and just about everything else. It's even true with religion. And when new ways come along, those who are attached to the old ways can become angry and resent the new, even if it's better. Often that's because those who are attached to the old ways end up losing power.

When Jesus walked the earth two thousand years ago, he brought something new, something better. In some ways, his ministry was a continuation of what we see in the Old Testament. Like the prophets of old, he called people to repentance, to turn from doing what is wrong and to turn back to God. But in significant ways, he did something new. He actively reached out to outcasts, and he would eventually fulfill and even replace the elements of the Jewish religion, including the law, the temple, the system of animal sacrifices, ceremonial washings, and more. And when Jesus started to do this, some Jewish leaders, including one group called the Pharisees, were threatened. We'll read about this today as we continue to study the Gospel of Luke.

So, without further ado, let's first read Luke 5:27–32:

²⁷ 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.

²⁹ 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?"³¹ And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."³² I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."⁴

This event is one of several stories in this section of Luke that shows Jesus calling people to follow him and/or Jesus getting into disputes with the Pharisees. Last week, I said that the Pharisees were a group of Jewish lay leaders. They weren't priests and they didn't have political power. But they were experts in the Torah, the law given to Israel, and they tried to apply that

³ Syed Irfan Ajmal, "Ridesharing vs. Taxi—Watch This Exciting Duel of the Century Unfold," *Ridester*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.ridester.com/ridesharing-vs-taxi/amp/>

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

law to all areas of life. The word “Pharisee” comes from a Hebrew word that means “separated.” They believed that Jews needed to be separated from Gentiles and “sinners.”

But Jesus had no problem reaching out to those sinners. And on this occasion, he calls a tax collector named Levi. This same man is probably also known as Matthew, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples.

To understand this passage, you have to know something about tax collectors. Tax collectors had a bad reputation. There are two reasons for that: one, they helped the Roman Empire collect taxes. As you may know, during the time of Jesus, Palestine was under Roman rule. This meant that Jewish tax collectors were viewed as something like traitors. The second reason is tax collectors had a reputation for being dishonest, collecting more money than they should. When some tax collectors came to John the Baptist to be baptized, he told them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do” (Luke 3:12). So, tax collectors are often lumped together with “sinners.”

Levi was a tax collector who sat at a tax booth, collecting taxes from travelers as they passed through this city, which is likely Capernaum. Capernaum was the last village on the road from the region of Galilee, which was ruled by Herod Antipas, to the region of Gaulanitis, which was ruled by Herod Philip. For travelers leaving Galilee, this was the last chance to collect taxes. For those entering Galilee, it was the first chance to collect taxes. Either way, it was an ideal spot to collect more money.

What’s important to see is that Jesus intentionally chooses this man who would have been despised by many. He says, “Follow me,” and Levi follows. We can only imagine how authoritative Jesus must have been for Levi to get up at his word.

When Levi follows Jesus, it is a picture of repentance, which is a turning from one’s old ways of sinning and a turning to God. It is often called a change of mind, but it’s more than that. It’s a change of the whole orientation of a person’s life. It’s doing a 180-degree turn.

And in Luke’s Gospel, celebration follows repentance. So, we see that he has a feast at his house, and he invites Jesus as well as tax collectors and “others.” These were probably Levi’s associates and friends. This shows a couple of important things. One, when someone turns to Jesus, away from an old life, it doesn’t literally mean we must leave everything. Levi still had his house and his friends. And it’s not a turning away from fun and joy. Instead, it’s cause for celebration. Two, when someone starts to follow Jesus, that person should share Jesus with

others. Levi tried to connect his friends with Jesus. And he did this in a very effective way: around a table of food.

This is a wonderful thing. But the Pharisees didn't think it was so wonderful. So, sometime later, when the Pharisees and the scribes (who were experts in the law) find out about it, they grumble to Jesus' disciples. If you're familiar with the Bible, you know that "grumble" is a loaded word. It's what the Israelites did after God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Though God had removed them from oppression through a miraculous redemption, the people complained against Israel's leaders, Moses and Aaron (Exod. 15:24; 16:7–8; Num. 14:2, 26–35; 16:11; 17:5, 10). They often did this because they didn't trust that Moses and his brother were leading them in the right direction. Moses realized that the Israelites were ultimately grumbling against God. He said, "Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD" (Exod. 16:8). So, Luke is telling us that the Pharisees are on the wrong side. They are against God because they are doubting Jesus.

The Pharisees ask the disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" In their minds, this would make Jesus and his disciples unclean. They are thinking, "You shouldn't contaminate yourself by hanging around with those people." A couple of chapters later in Luke, Jesus will say something he attributes to the Pharisees. He says, "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:34). Not only is Jesus hanging around with these outcasts, but he's feasting with them. He's eating and drinking wine!

This confounds the Pharisees. They can't imagine that Jesus could hang around sinners and yet not sin himself. In his commentary on Luke, Darrell Bock writes, "Jesus associated with sinners *and* condemned all sin—their sin as well as the sins of others."⁵ Jesus certainly wasn't doing anything wrong by associating with sinners. It's not as if merely eating and drinking with them would make him unclean or sinful.

Perhaps the real reason why the Pharisees were grumbling was because Jesus threatened them. They couldn't refute his teachings or deny his miracles. So, they tried to slander him. In another commentary I've been reading, David Garland writes this:

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 497.

Pharisees did not have hereditary ties to positions of power as the priests and village elders did, and therefore their social status was unstable. Their standing in society derived from their knowledge of Jewish law and traditions. They constantly struggled to exert their influence in society and to recruit new members. Their rules built up social boundaries and kept members united to one another. The throngs of people drawn to Jesus by his authority and power and the good news of his message threatened their own power to affect persons. Their grumbling may be attributable to their fear that they were in danger of losing influence.⁶

The Pharisees were threatened, and they surely thought Jesus was wrong to spend any time with the so-called sinners. Jesus knows this and he responds by saying that only the sick need a doctor, and that he came not for the righteous, but to call sinners to repentance.

The problem with the Pharisees—and the problem with a lot of religious people today—is that they don't really view themselves as sick, or as sinners. They think they're okay, but it's those "other people," whoever they are, that are the bad ones. But the Bible is quite clear in saying that all human beings, with the exception of Jesus, are sinners. All of us have turned away from God. We have ignored him and rejected him. We have failed to love him the way we should. We have failed to love other people the way we should. This applies to each one of us.

Jesus came for the people who knew they were sick, who knew they were sinners. People who realize their need can turn to Jesus in faith for healing, to be reconciled to God. People who think they're fine, thank you very much, are people that Jesus can't help. Only those who realize their need can be helped by Jesus. In Jesus' day, the people who realized their spiritual bankruptcy were often the people who were despised, the people who had clearly made a mess of their lives.

As I said earlier, in a way, this is nothing new. People of faith have always realized that they need God. They need God because he is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He is the giver of every good gift. He is the one who fulfills the deepest longings of our souls. He is the one who gives us life after death—and true life even before we die. By calling people to turn back to God, Jesus wasn't doing anything new.

But Jesus was already threatening the old ways of Judaism, and in time he would do some things that would forever change how people relate to God. At this time, the Jews were

⁶ David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 251.

under the so-called “old covenant” that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, after they left Egypt. In his death, Jesus would inaugurate the new covenant, which promised true knowledge of God, forgiveness of sins, a transformed life, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–27). In the old covenant, the temple was the place where God met with his people. But Jesus would replace the temple. The “place” where we meet God isn’t a building. This building is not God’s house. No, God’s house is Jesus. In fact, the church is now God’s house, because it is the body of Christ on earth and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Jesus would put an end to the system of animal sacrifices, because his death on the cross is the only true sacrifice for sin. God is a perfect judge, and he must punish all evil. There are two ways he does this. He will condemn all evil people who do not turn to Jesus. But for those who turn to Jesus and trust him, their sin is punished at the cross. Jesus also put an end to all ceremonial washings, because his death makes us clean. And other things like circumcision and Sabbath observance were also set aside.

These old ways of relating to God couldn’t coexist with the new ways that Jesus and his apostles would establish. Jesus makes this clear in the next several verses. Let’s read Luke 5:33–39:

³³ And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” ³⁴ And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? ³⁵ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.” ³⁶ He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. ³⁷ And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. ³⁸ But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. ³⁹ And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’”

The “they” of verse 33 who speak to Jesus was probably a crowd, speaking sometime after the feast. Luke has compressed time in this passage, so it seems like everything is happening at once. A crowd is asking Jesus about why he does things differently from John the Baptist and the Pharisees. After all, their followers often fasted, not eating in order to focus on praying.

Fasting was a significant part of Judaism. On the annual Day of Atonement, the people were supposed to fast (Lev. 16:29). In the Old Testament, fasts were also held to remember the

destruction of Jerusalem (Zech. 7:3, 5; 8:19), to indicate repentance (1 Kgs. 21:27; Isa. 58:1–9; Joel 1:14; 2:15–27; Jon. 3:5–9), to mourn (Esth. 4:3), or to seek guidance from God (2 Chron. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; Jer. 36:9). The Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12), on Mondays and Thursdays. Fasting was a way of spending focused time with God.

But Jesus says that God is here. He calls himself the bridegroom. In the Old Testament, God is likened to the husband of Israel, his bride (Isa. 54:5–6; 62:4–5; Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 16; Hos. 2:14–23). The metaphor of marriage shows how God is the protector and provider of his people, and it shows that the relationship between God and his people should be exclusive. They shouldn't worship anyone else other than God. The fact that Jesus says this is not a time of fasting, and that he is the bridegroom, is a hint that he is God.

Jesus also hints that he won't always be on earth. He says that the bridegroom will be "taken away," which might be a reference to his death. There will be a time for fasting later, but now is not the time. Time spent with Jesus is a feast. Elsewhere in the Bible, various images of Jesus' return and the new creation he will establish depict a feast (Isa. 25:6–9; Rev. 19:6–9). We may fast now to spend time in focused prayer, or to seek guidance from God, or to mourn, but in eternity, there will be no need to fast. We will feast with Jesus.

Jesus made it clear that the old ways of the old covenant couldn't mix with the new ways of the new covenant by using a couple of analogies. The first was about clothing. You can't patch a hole in an old garment with a new piece of cloth. The new piece of cloth will later shrink and then be torn, and the whole thing will be ruined. And the new piece of cloth won't match the old, anyway. In a similar way, you don't put new wine in an old wineskin. When wine is made, it ferments, releasing some gas that would stretch the wineskin. Old wineskins were already stretched. They were hard and brittle. If you put new wine in those wineskins, they would burst. So, you put old wine in old wineskins and new wine in new wineskins. The basic point is that something new had arrived, and in order for anyone to be reconciled to God, they had to follow Jesus.

Verse 39, if taken alone, makes it seem like the old wine of the old covenant is better than the new. But that's not Jesus' point. His point has to do with human nature. People often prefer what they're accustomed to. They like the old. When something new comes along, they don't like it. They don't even want to try it, because they don't see anything wrong with the old. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," they think. But the old covenant couldn't make people right with God.

The law said, “If you obey, you will be my people” (Exod. 19:5–6). What the law did was reveal how sinful people are. We can’t obey perfectly. And even if we followed rules, we would do so for the wrong reasons. Christianity is very different from other religions. Other religions say, “Do this and you get to God/Paradise/Nirvana.” Christianity says, “You can’t do enough to get to God. All your actions are tainted with selfishness, pride, and greed. If we’re really honest, we would see that we often fail our own standards, let alone God’s standards.” But Christianity also teaches that God came down to rescue us, apart from the law. Salvation is a gift. It isn’t something earned. And it can only be received by faith, by knowing that we have a need, a problem that we can’t fix, and that Jesus provides the answer.

Now that we’ve gone through this passage, what does it teach us? How does it affect our lives?

I think there are two ways that it applies to us today. One has to do with relating to God. If we are going to have a right relationship with God, we have to realize that we are sick, and that Jesus is the only physician who can heal us. We have to realize that we are not righteous on our own, that we’re sinners, rebels against God. And we have to realize that only Jesus’ perfect life credited to us can make us righteous, and that only Jesus’ death on the cross can atone for our sins. The response to Jesus is the same today as it was almost two thousand years ago. We must trust him, repent, and follow him.

If you’re not sure where you stand with Jesus, if you’re on the fence about him, or if you think you’re a Christian but you’re not really turning away from sin and following Jesus, I would urge you to start today. And I would love to talk to you. We will either be with Jesus or we will be against Jesus. To be apathetic about Jesus is to be against him. Levi knew that Jesus was authoritative. He must have sensed that Jesus could give him what he truly needed. So, he left his old way of life and followed him. That’s true today, too. We can’t just dip a toe into Christianity. We have to dive in. Jesus isn’t just something we add to our lives. Jesus becomes our life. If we’re responding to him rightly, Jesus will reorder our lives. Our priorities will change. The way we spend our time, our money, and our energy will change. Our jobs may not change. Our location may not change. But our lives certainly will change.

And that applies to Christians. Repentance isn't just something we do at the start of our lives as Christians. We need to continue to turn back to Jesus. We are prone to wander, as the hymn says.⁷ We need to keep coming back to Jesus.

Real repentance is owning our guilt and our sin. It's not justifying ourselves. It's not blaming others. It's not being defensive or manipulative. Real repentance is saying, "I'm wrong and I need to change." Real repentance is admitting that we're sick and turning to the one who can heal us. Real repentance will lead to real change, to new ways of living.

Are there areas in your life where you need to repent? Have you been called to repentance by others? Have you truly repented? Perhaps you're not even aware of the changes you need to make. Be honest with yourself. Ask God to reveal your own sin. Ask him to show you where you need to repent and to give you the strength to change.

The second way this passage applies to us is in the life of this church. The Pharisees were lay leaders who grumbled at God's appointed leader. Fortunately, that never happens in churches today! Yes, I'm being sarcastic. People still grumble today, just as they did in the days of Moses and Jesus. Grumbling against God's leaders, when they are following God's word, is really grumbling against God himself. I know there have been grumbings in this church. I would ask the grumblers to repent.

People often grumble when changes are made. They preferred the old ways of doing things. Yet changes are often needed. Sometimes changes are needed because the old ways weren't God's ways. In other words, sometimes the old ways weren't biblical. In some cases, they were contrary to what Scripture says. That is often true of how the church was structured, or the ways that we did things. If our old ways are man-made traditions, we will have to change in order to conform more closely to the Bible. Sometimes the new ways of doing things are really the old ways laid out in Scripture. Man-made traditions and biblical commandments are often like old garments and new patches: they don't mix. They are often like old wineskins and new wine. The old traditions hinder the growth of what is biblical. The church is always in need of reformation, and that is true of this church. We will either gladly reform, eager to be more biblical in how we operate, or we will be fighting against God.

Sometimes, changes are made not to conform more to Scripture, but simply for the sake of reaching new generations. We can't and won't change the Bible or our basic doctrine. The

⁷ "Be Thou My Vision" contains these words: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love."

object of our worship—the one, true, living, triune God—doesn't change. But musical styles come and go. All our favorite hymns were once new, and favorite hymns of previous eras have been forgotten. Paint and fabric colors change as trends come and go. The same is true of clothing. Our meeting times, our programs, the way we try to reach out to our community—all these things may change. But the mission, purpose, and identity of the church don't.

I think the reason why people often grumble against such changes is because change is threatening. Sometimes, lay leaders feel that they are losing power and control. And it's often the case that people who have been in churches for decades think they own the place. They build their identity around a particular church and its old ways of operating. When changes are made, they may feel like they are losing a piece of themselves. But we shouldn't build our identity around a particular local church, or around particular traditions or programs. Our identity should be Jesus Christ. He doesn't change. Local churches will change. Programs will come and go. So will traditions. Musical styles change. The way we dress changes over time. So will the look of the building. These things don't matter so much. If we build our identity on the Rock, Jesus, we won't find other changes so threatening. If we set aside our pride, we might even enjoy those changes. We might find that the new wine is actually better than the old.

We should also ask this question of this church and of ourselves as individuals: Are we inviting other people to meet Jesus? Levi started following Jesus, and one of the first things he did was invite others meet him. He did that in a very personal way, by holding a feast. Are we inviting non-Christians into our lives and our homes to meet Jesus?

Let us turn to Jesus, the Great Physician, for healing. Let us keep turning back to him, time and again, whenever we slip and fall. Let us follow him. Let us follow our leaders as they follow Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). And let us not grumble when necessary changes are made. To quote the book of Ecclesiastes:

Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this (Eccl. 7:10).