

Jesus Invites Outsiders!

◆◆ Greg Albrecht ◆◆

After this he went out and saw a man named Levi at his work, collecting taxes. Jesus said, “Come along with me.” And he did — walked away from everything and went with him. Levi gave a large dinner at his home for Jesus. Everybody was there, tax men and other disreputable characters as guests at the dinner.

The Pharisees and their religious scholars came to his disciples greatly offended. “What is he doing eating and drinking with crooks and ‘sinners?’”

Jesus heard about it and spoke up. “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders — an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.”

—Luke 5:27-32 (MSG)

In his Gospel, Luke shines a spotlight on marginalized outsiders. As an outsider himself, the only Gentile author whose words are preserved in the New Testament, Luke tells stories of Jesus reaching out to the ostracized — children, women, day laborers, the impoverished, the diseased and the oppressed. Luke tells us of outsiders coming out of the shadows to be with Jesus, to talk with him and to have him physically and spiritually touch and heal them. They loved to “hang out” with Jesus and he with them.

“Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders —an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.”

—Luke 5:31-32 (MSG)

The story of Levi is the story of a political and religious outcast who was regarded as the lowest of the low in polite society. It is the story of a fat cat who had robbed people of money in order to

become rich ... someone who had sunk so low that all categories of society (apart from his own partners in crime, his fellow tax collectors) despised him.

Jews who were tax collectors were so despised that they were not allowed into the synagogues to worship. They were seen as hopelessly and irredeemably corrupt sleazeballs and scum bags.

Until Jesus invited Levi (another name for Matthew, who authored the Gospel of Matthew) to follow him, the majority of his disciples were blue-collar workingmen and redneck fishermen, without a great deal of education. Religious authorities would have regarded Jesus’ disciples as completely inadequate, lacking qualifications to be religious professionals — but when Jesus invited Levi to be his disciple, they were greatly offended and scandalized.

The other disciples were viewed as people who knew nothing about religion — ignorant and lacking formal training. But Levi? In the estimation of the religious community, when Jesus called Levi, Jesus sunk to an even lower level. They believed Levi to be a deplorable.

In his introduction to the Gospel of Luke (in *The Message Bible*), Eugene Peterson writes,

Most of us, most of the time, feel left out — misfits. We don’t belong. Others seem so confident, so sure of themselves, “insiders” who know the ropes, old hands in a club from which we are excluded. One of the ways we have of responding to this is to form our own club or join one that will have us. Here is at least one place where we are “in” and the others “out.”

... The terrible price we pay for keeping all those other people out so that we can savor the sweetness of being insiders is a reduction of reality, a shrinkage of life. Nowhere is this price more terrible than when it is

paid in the cause of religion... But with God there are no outsiders.

When he saw Levi (aka Matthew) engaged in his disreputable profession and invited him to become one of his followers Jesus had already established a pattern of reaching out to the poor, the disenfranchised, the alienated and the abandoned. To the religious establishment, Jesus seemed like a poor itinerant peasant from some backwater place called Nazareth. Jesus had no religious credentials — and of course, the religious establishment could only give credibility to someone they had taught and indoctrinated.

Instead of arguing finer points of theology, doctrine and dogma, Jesus was spending time — lots of time — touching, comforting and healing the sick, diseased and terminally ill. Jesus didn't look like what religion expected of a rabbi and teacher. Instead of sweet-talking and lobbying the rich and well-off, Jesus was giving time and attention to the neglected and despised cast-offs.

TAXES & THE DEPLORABLES WHO COLLECTED THEM

During Jesus' life, the Jews in Palestine were subjected to oppressive taxes — there was a water tax, a city tax, a tax on food such as meat and salt, a road tax and a house/property tax. Customs and frontier taxes on shipping were so exorbitant that sometimes the final price of an item, when it arrived at its destination for sale, was over 100 times its original cost.

There were at least *two types of tax collectors* who were subjected

to the hatred of those who were subjected to this brutal burden of taxation:

The first type was the *simple tax collector* who collected taxes for Rome directly. Rome did not care if tax collectors extorted more money than Rome demanded — in fact, this extra “commission” or to use more exacting terms — “skimming” or “gouging” — was the way tax collectors made their money — in many cases their fortunes.

Tax farmers were investment speculators who purchased the rights to collect taxes in a specific geographical region for Rome. This method allowed Rome to get its money for taxes upfront, in one large, single payment.

Rome received one payment for all the taxes in a given region from the *tax farmer* who with that one up-front payment to Rome purchased the right to extract taxes from all the residents in that area. Tax farmers



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But with God there are no outsiders.

Because tax collectors themselves were Jewish, they were viewed as traitors because they worked directly for the Roman oppressors — they were seen as greedy citizens who ripped off their own countrymen.

A second type of tax collector were “employers” of the *simple tax collectors* who worked for them. Some men who were already wealthy increased their wealth by purchasing the rights to collect taxes for Rome. Those engaged in this lucrative profession were called *tax farmers*.

purchased the right to become somewhat like a tax collection agency, collaborating with the Romans. The reward for the *tax farmer* was his unchecked power to extract more taxes than the Romans demanded, as payment for his work.

All society, religious and irreligious, educated and illiterate, rich and poor, joined ranks to condemn *tax collectors and farmers* as the lowest of the low because they worked for a foreign government collecting taxes from their own people,

participating in a cruel and corrupt system. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors to their own country, and in terms of religion, they were seen as corrupt and unclean.

LOOK WHO CAME TO DINNER!

Matthew — aka Levi — threw a huge banquet for Jesus. As a tax collector we can assume Levi had the funds to ensure this was a lavish and extravagant affair. The Pharisees believed Jesus was enjoying a banquet that Levi could afford because Levi had ripped off the little people.

The Pharisees could only see Jesus' attendance as reprehensible because it seemed to condone bad people doing bad things.

The self-righteous Pharisees, who could not abide the fact that Jesus wasted so much of his time with the dregs of society, were now absolutely scandalized as Jesus attended this dinner party paid for with what they assumed were ill-gotten gains.

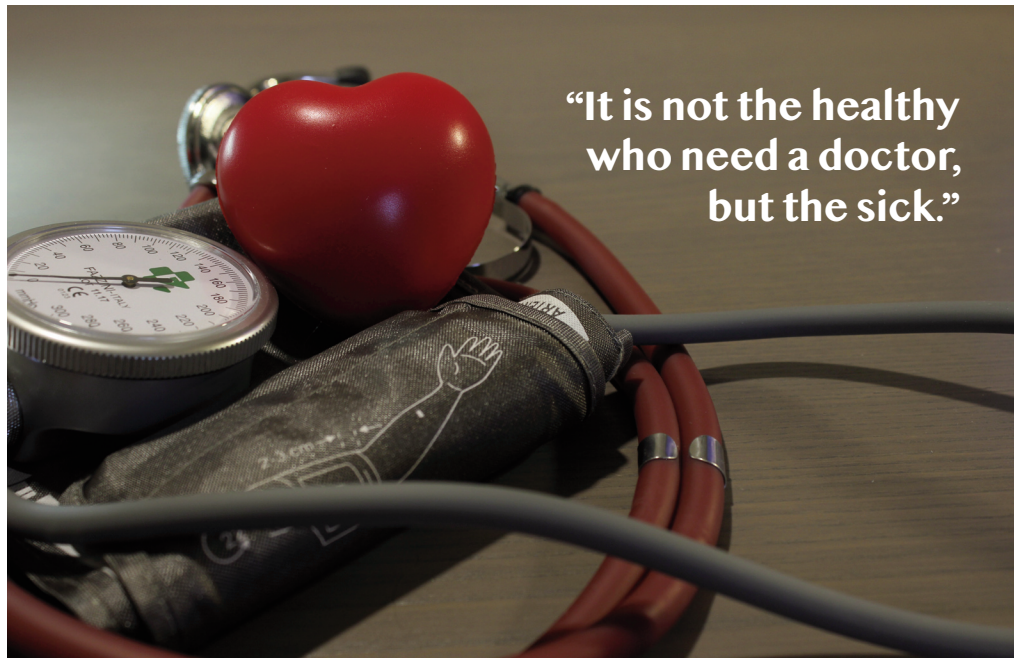
The Pharisees and their religious scholars came to his disciples greatly offended. "What is he doing eating and drinking with crooks and 'sinners'?" Jesus heard about it and spoke up, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I'm here inviting outsiders, not insiders—an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out." —Luke 5:30-32 (MSG).

Jesus speaks of sinners as in need of a doctor. Sinners are sick, and they know they are sick. He speaks of those who are healthy in an ironic sense — those who think they are healthy but indeed are just as sick as those

who realize their illness and accept their need for healing.

The Pharisees — the religious professionals of Jesus' day — did not mind Jesus telling sinners that they needed to repent. What offended them was that Jesus seemed to accept people before they had jumped through all the necessary religious hoops.

But that's the way God's grace works.



“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”

The Pharisees believed people were sick because they did not obey religious laws. But the problem with this law-based religion is that pointing people to the law as a cure for sickness only compounds their sickness. The law does not heal.

If a person is commanded to stop doing wrong things and start doing right things, as defined by law, the problems are not solved. The law does not produce healing and redemption. The law cannot create what it commands.

God's grace accepts us before we do anything to deserve his

love. No amount of spiritual works we can produce can purchase God's love.

Christ-less religion, on the other hand, is just the opposite. Christ-less religion says that “outsiders” cannot come inside — no one can be accepted by God, says Christ-less religion — unless and until they have earned that right. In order to become an insider, according to Christ-less

religion, people must join its club and please and appease the god it claims to represent. God begs to differ.

When Christ-less religion says that God must be pleased and appeased, it really means its own rules and regulations, which religion, in all its humility, says are exactly the same as God's rules and regulations.

These people to whom Jesus ministered knew they were sick and in need of a doctor — they knew that they were in a bad way — they knew they were sinners. They knew that their life had not been one big long

Sunday school of milk and cookies and nice religious stories. They knew heartache and pain.

“COME INSIDE—YOU’RE NOT AN OUTSIDER IN MY KINGDOM”

And Jesus said to this motley crew of his disciples, including the disreputable and deplorable Levi, the former tax collector — “I love you. I accept you. I have a place for you. You can be one of my followers. You can come rest in my grace. And as you well know, my grace is not being given to you because you have earned and deserved it.”

Jesus’ invitation and assurance to all outsiders, including you and me is this: “I have accepted you and embraced you, and now I am going to change you — now I am going to transform you from the kind of life you have lived — which has caused you so much misery, heartache and pain — and now I am going to live my life in you, and you will be

transformed from what you were to the child of God I will make of you.”

God’s love does not magically cause all of our pains to dissolve in a puff of smoke — for he calls us to pick up our cross and follow him. But one of the mysteries of God’s love is that in Christ God shares our journey, he shares our heartache and our pain with us, and in that way loves us with the greatest love of all.

Levi, the tax collector, knew he was a despised and hated person — he probably had only a few friends, likely other tax collectors who made their wealth at the expense of the poor and needy.

Levi was surely filled with guilt, shame and self-loathing — he knew he was not a good person. Jesus said to Levi — “I want you to follow me.”

Jesus didn’t say that because he agreed with ripping people off — that’s self-evident from all the others in Jesus’ life to whom he ministered — the little people —

the least, the last and the lost.

Jesus said that to Levi to tell him — “I can tell you where love is — I can show you — love is Me, Levi — and you will find it in and with me. Come and follow me.”

Levi stopped ripping people off — but he didn’t stop being a sleazy crook so that he could prove to God that he was worthy of God’s love — transformed and changed, inside and out. He received God’s love and then God started to rebuild and refashion Levi’s life. When he received the gifts of God and followed Jesus Levi — just like you and me — became the workmanship — the handiwork of God.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
—Ephesians 2:8-10 □

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