

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors at North Shore Alliance Church. In just a moment I'm going to continue our teaching series through Luke, but first I want to take a few moments to share how our vision is leading us into a new ministry opportunity.

When it comes to the good news concerning Jesus, I believe with all of my heart that proclamation must always be accompanied by incarnation. We need to both proclaim the good news and demonstrate the good news. If we proclaim that God is good but never showcase His goodness, our message becomes suspect.

Over the past few years, God has opened new opportunities to minister to marginalized people on the North Shore. Most Wednesday afternoons, 70-100 people gather in our foyer for worship, teaching, and prayer—some are new immigrants, some experience mental illness, and most are experiencing the crippling effects of poverty. We are excited about this community gathering and for what God has been doing—people are making first time decisions to follow Jesus, to be baptized, and become disciples.

Over the past few years, this Wednesday ministry has grown both in terms of numbers and in terms of addressing various needs. But every week, one of the biggest needs remains the same—the need for safe and affordable housing. The need is massive, and as I said last week, in the face of massive need, the tendency is to be paralyzed and to do nothing.

Leaders from our Wednesday ministry, along with our Board, and Pastoral Staff have heard God's invitation to take a small step in addressing the needs of people in our community. And so, we have

made a decision to launch a community house, in partnership with Lazarus House Society. We are actively looking to rent a house, somewhere in the Lonsdale Corridor, that will provide safe, affordable, housing and Christian community, for some of the most vulnerable people in our church community.

One of the most significant aspects of this endeavour has been finding a part-time house manager and one of our long time members, John Sawyer, will be stepping into this role. John is a trained counsellor and has extensive experience when it comes to working with people with significant needs. John's salary will be funded through our new North Shore Alliance Mission Fund—as you continue to give to this fund, you are supporting our local and global mission work.

Would you pray for us in the days ahead? Specifically, would you pray that the Holy Spirit would lead us to the right house? Our desire would be to find a place before Christmas, but we are trusting the Lord for the “when”. If you have ideas about a house to rent, or might like to volunteer in this ministry you can contact Dave Sattler, John Sawyer, or Dave Greer.

Now for the sermon... would everyone please turn in your Bibles, paper or electronic, to Luke 5:27-6:11; if you are using the blue Bible from the seat rack, our text is on page 836.

Last week Pastor Dave preached a message entitled “*Expect the Unexpected*,” and I want to continue with this same theme. As I read the text for us, I want you to pay particular attention to what Jesus is

doing, and to how people are responding. Specifically, notice the reaction of the religious leaders.

27 After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. 29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” 31 Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

33 They said to him, “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.” 34 Jesus answered, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? 35 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.”

36 He told them this parable: “No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. 37 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. 38 No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. 39 And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’”

6 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands

and eat the kernels. 2 Some of the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” 3 Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” 5 Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

6 On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. 7 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. 8 But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shrivelled hand, “Get up and stand in front of everyone.” So he got up and stood there. 9 Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” 10 He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was completely restored. 11 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.

The text I’ve just read has three different scenes—a party, a grain field, and a synagogue. In each scene, the religious authorities were present; they had already decided that Jesus was dangerous, and so they kept a close eye on Him.

In each of the three scenes, the question that is asked offers the interpretive clue. In scene 1 and scene 2, the authorities ask Jesus questions, but it’s clear they’re not looking for information, they’re making accusations. And it seems to me that there is a question

behind their question. In effect, what they are really asking is, “*Jesus, what do you think you’re doing and who do you think you are?*” In scene 3, Jesus doesn’t wait to be questioned, He questions them, and His question exposes the hardness of their hearts.

When I began my study this week, I fully intended to preach through each of these three scenes, but as the week progressed, the Spirit continued to narrow my focus until I was left with only scene 1. I commend the other scenes to you, but this morning I am only going to explore the first. Let’s turn our attention to Scene 1—A Questionable Party.

1. Scene 1—A Questionable Party (Luke 5:27-39)

illus: by show of hands, how many of you have ever attended a questionable party? Don’t be shy, I’m not writing down names—I’m just memorizing faces. I’ve been to a few questionable parties in my life, and if it makes you feel any better, we know that Jesus attended at least one questionable party Himself.

The question is, *what makes a party questionable?* Is it the guest list? The activities? The behaviour? What’s the criteria, and who gets to decide the criteria? We’ll get back to these questions in a moment, but let’s begin where Luke does.

The party in question was thrown by a questionable man—Levi was a tax collector. In the Greco-Roman world, tax collecting was a potentially lucrative career choice, but it was avoided by most respectable citizens because the social implications were too negative.

In the ancient world, tax collectors had a license to steal. Levi was Jewish but he collected tax for Rome. He had a quota to meet, but if he could extort extra money it went straight into his own pocket—as you can imagine, this led to rampant abuse. Tax collectors were despised as dishonest, thieving, traitors.

As Jesus walked down the street, He saw Levi sitting at his tax booth and He went over. We aren’t given many details about the interaction, in fact, Luke only records two words; Jesus said, “*Follow Me,*” and Levi got up, left everything, and followed. Is it just me or does this seem like a strange social encounter? What would you do if a complete stranger walked up to you on the street and said, “*Follow me*”? I don’t imagine any of you would follow—it’s more likely that you would call the police!

In the church we have a tendency to emphasize the divinity of Christ and de-emphasize His humanity—this comes through in how we read Gospel stories. We tend to construct images of Jesus that have more in common with Hollywood blockbusters than with flesh and blood history. Take this encounter with Levi for example—why would He follow a complete stranger? Was Jesus the original Jedi knight? Did Jesus walk up to Levi and use “the force” on him? *You will follow me.*

I have a hard time believing that’s what happened, and I hope you do too. Imagine Jesus walking down a crowded street, distracted by the collision of sounds, sights, and smells. And then the Holy Spirit directs Jesus’ attention to the tax collector booth—there’s a man sitting there, and Jesus has a sense that He’s supposed to go over and talk to him.

Jesus goes over and asks the man his name—it's Levi. As soon as Jesus hears his name, He remembers this man's namesake; Levi was one of the sons of Abraham. In that moment, the Holy Spirit reminds Jesus that when all of Israel was running wild in sin, it was the tribe of Levi that rallied to God and remained faithful to Him. It was for this reason that God set the Levites apart to serve as priests in His temple—it was the Levites who were set apart to serve God and to mediate God's blessing to all of Israel.¹

Perhaps Jesus looked at the tax collector in front of Him and said something like, "*You say your name is Levi? You sure are a long way from the family business?*" Levi looks down, his eyes fill with tears, he is ashamed of who he has become. We've all felt this kind of shame before, haven't we? *I'm not the person I want to be.*

Shame is something that affects our thoughts, emotions, and our bodies. A person who feels shame, almost instinctively, puts their head down and averts their eyes. In the place of shame, we avert our eyes because we cannot bear to another look at us with eyes of judgment and condemnation. But with our head down and our eyes turned away, we cannot see Jesus—and so we must take a great risk, we must look up or we will not see whether it is judgement or mercy that fills His eyes.

Psalm 3:3 says, "*But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.*" All that Luke tells us is that Jesus spoke to Levi saying, "*Follow Me,*" but in the end, isn't that enough?

Levi—the dishonest, thieving, traitor—wasn't chosen because of his stellar track record—he was clearly not best friend material. Levi was chosen because Jesus is rich in mercy and generous in love.

We're told that Levi got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. Later on, Levi threw a big party, presumably to celebrate his big promotion—Jesus wanted him, Jesus believed in him, Jesus loved him; that's certainly worth celebrating.

The guest list was mostly predictable; since tax collectors don't have a lot of friends, the room was mostly made up of other tax collectors. The surprise wasn't who was on the list, the surprise—at least to the authorities—was that Jesus accepted the invitation. Questionable guests, at a questionable party, would no doubt engage in questionable activities—it would be better to refuse the invitation.

The authorities demand an answer from Jesus, "*Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?*" As far as they were concerned, Jesus was guilty by association. In the ancient world, to sit at a common table and share a common meal symbolized a shared life—eating together spoke of friendship, acceptance, and unity.² Pharisees avoided "questionable" people in order to avoid the suggestion that they endorsed their questionable lifestyle.

Jesus and the Pharisees divided over this issue and at the heart of the matter was a very different understanding of holiness.

¹ C.f. Exodus 32:25-29; for a sense of the context read Ex. 32:1-35.

² Joel. B. Green, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke*, 246.

When you hear the word “holiness,” what comes to mind? In our day, the word holy is used most often in a two-part swear word, or, to depict a person as being “holier than thou”—rigid, proud, and judgemental. This characterization has very little in common with the way Jesus understood holiness.

Think about it for a moment, a tax collector—the very definition of a no-good thief—threw a party for a room full of tax collectors, and Jesus—the very definition of holiness—was invited to be the guest of honour. Here’s the question: would a group of thieves invite a rigid, proud, and judgemental person to be their guest of honour?

Yes, the Bible describes holiness in terms of purity—the absence of sin—but holiness is also be described as the presence of glory. If I were to ask the average person, “*do you want to be holy?*,” many would take a pass, but if I were to ask, “*do you want to experience love, joy, and peace?*,” hands would go up around the room.

Holiness is more than the absence of sin, it’s the presence of life, fullness, and glory. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us that where the **Holy** Spirit is at work, we experience qualities like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. These same qualities were at work in Jesus, and this is why Levi and others were drawn to Him.

When people gathered around Jesus, they were in the presence of love and joy. When people gathered around Jesus, they were in the presence of patience and kindness. When we gather around Jesus, we are in the presence goodness and faithfulness. Holiness is the absence of sin, and, the presence of life, fullness, and glory.

The Pharisees thought of holiness as being a fragile thing; in their thinking, when holy and unholy meet, the holy is defiled. In Jesus we see something very different—when the Holy One touches the unholy, the unholy are made clean.

Can you imagine Jesus being at Levi’s party? I can’t imagine Him sitting in the corner with a hand covering eyes to pure to look upon sin. However, I can imagine Jesus feeling very much at home with the food, laughter, and people—these people were the reason He came from heaven to earth.

The Pharisees asked, “*Why do you eat with these sinners? Surely you don’t approve of them?*” And Jesus replied, “*A doctor can only do their work among the sick—sometimes you need to go where the patients are. Besides, I’m not here for those who think God is lucky to have them; I’ve come for those who know they need God’s forgiveness.*”

Jesus’ interaction with Levi and his friends is but one of many—*everyone* is invited and *anyone* can follow. And it’s this scandalous invitation that the Pharisees cannot stomach.

In John 3:16, Jesus said, “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” In Luke 9:23, Jesus said, “*If **anyone** would come after me, they must take up their cross daily and follow me.*”

At the heart of Jesus’ invitation are these two words—**everyone** and **anyone**. Jesus’ invitation extends to **everyone** who chooses to believe, and **anyone** who chooses to follow. Two different words

with one meaning. Jesus always meets us where we are, invites us to follow, and gives us a chance to be something more. Levi took that chance and followed Jesus; *will you?*

This morning I want to offer three brief points of application—one to those who are not following Jesus, one to those who are, and one to the church at large.

a) The Pharisees made a number of crucial mistakes but one bigger than the rest. They were puffed up with pride, thinking that God approved of them because they were good and righteous, and God disapproved of others—like tax collectors—because they weren't as righteous. What they failed to see was that before a holy God, no one is righteous, not even one.³

To borrow Jesus' analogy, we're all sick—we all need a doctor. No one comes to God by virtue of their own goodness; all of us fall short of God's perfection. The invitation to believe in Jesus, to follow Jesus, is an invitation to receive the forgiveness He won for us when He died on the cross. Jesus died as humanity's representative, bearing in His body all that separates us from God—our sin, our shame, and our pain. His self-offering on the cross was the perfect sacrifice.

The fact that I'm a Christian doesn't make me better than anyone else in the eyes of God. Being a Christian simply means that I've recognized that I am sick—I need God's forgiveness—and that Jesus provides the cure. If you want to receive His forgiveness today, let me encourage you to follow along with the prayer that I'm going to

pray. You don't need to say anything out loud, but in the quietness of your heart, you can simply agree with the words I offer to God. **Pray.**

b) Now a brief word to those who have been following Jesus for a long time. Perhaps you can relate to how Levi must have felt when he first met Jesus. Levi was member of God's family but he had drifted so far that he was practically an outsider in every way. He probably felt guilty about it, likely for a long time, but his life wasn't changing and maybe he had given up the hope of transformation.

We all know what shame feels like—head downcast and eyes averted. Perhaps you've even stopped praying because you can't bear to think that He is looking at you with eyes of disappointment or judgement. This morning, I want to invite you to return to the Lord and allow Him to lift your head—my friends, look up and see Jesus! He is for us, not against us! We are saved by grace and we continue by grace. Jesus still meets us where we are, invites us to follow, and gives us a chance to be something more.

c) And now a word to the church. Jesus regularly risked His reputation to reach people—*will we?* Jesus was willing to go to where people were, and the church must follow His lead. And just as it did for Jesus, it might get messy. Meeting people where they are at might open you to the criticism of others—you might be accused of associating with the wrong kind of people, turning a blind eye to sin, or endorsing behaviour that dishonours God; you might be declared guilty by association.

³ Romans 3:10.

Jesus faced the same accusations but it didn't stop His mission. Will it stop ours? Jesus risked His reputation by reaching out to people without social status—the way that He interacted with tax collectors, physical invalids, lepers, and even women and children made Him the object of scorn and accusation. Who are the social outcasts of our day? Who have we written off or ignored?

We don't have to move out on mission—we can choose to play it safe, keep to ourselves, and hope that our holiness won't be tarnished. We can sit by and say nothing. And maybe saying nothing is the lesser of two evils—better to say nothing than to point a finger at the world—accusing, judging, condemning—and yet doing nothing to help.

As we've said many times before, our church is like an airport; an airport isn't a destination, it's a launching pad from which we are sent out. NSA is like an *airport* in that we gather together and send people out on mission. Love for God and love for neighbour goes hand in hand. Now is not the time for self-protection and fear; now is the time to act, to speak, to move out on mission.

Conclusion: Scene 1 concludes with the Pharisees accusing Jesus of gluttony—why do other disciples fast while Jesus and His disciples eat and drink at parties? The implication is that fasting is certainly a lot more godly than attending a party. The irony, of course, is that this group of Pharisees are trying to tell Jesus—God-in-the-flesh—how to be more godly.

Jesus takes it all in stride and responds with a parable that cuts right to the heart of the matter. Jesus is breaking with tradition; He has come to do something new, and He invites people to give up what they know, what they may be comfortable with, in order to embrace the new thing He is doing.

Jesus said, *“Look, nobody tears up a new garment to make a patch for an old garment. If he did, the new patch would shrink and rip the old, and the old garment would be worse off than before. 37 And nobody takes freshly squeezed juice and puts it into old, stiff wineskins. If he did, the fresh wine would make the old skins burst open, and both the wine and the wineskins would be ruined. 38 New demands new—new wine for new wineskins. 39 Anyway, those who've never tasted the new wine won't know what they're missing; they'll always say, “The old wine is good enough for me!”⁴*

Some of us are so comfortable with what we know, there is very little room for Jesus in our life. We don't mind Jesus doing a little “home improvement” but we don't want a serious renovation. Therein lies the problem.

Jesus came to put into effect God's new world. Jesus brought a new age of forgiveness, expanding the old boundaries to include “outsiders.” We are free to reject this new world, and Jesus, for that matter. We can listen to what He says, embrace Him, and follow in His way, or, we can ignore Him and continue with business as usual. Our choice today is every bit as real as their choice was then. How will you respond to Jesus? **Pray.**

⁴ Luke 5:36-39, *The Voice Translation*.

The Lord's Supper

In the ancient world, to sit at a common table and share a common meal symbolized a shared life—eating together spoke of friendship, acceptance, and unity. Is it any wonder that Jesus established a meal that has been observed by disciples for nearly 2000 years.

We come to this table to share this meal of bread and drink, and by doing, so we engage in an act of friendship, acceptance and unity with Jesus, and one another.

At this meal we commune with the Lord Jesus Himself. Jesus is the Holy One who makes us clean, who calls us His beloved, who showers His kindness, goodness, and faithfulness upon. As I said earlier, holiness is about much more than the absence of sin, we come to the One who offers life, fullness, and glory.

And we come to this table with brothers and sisters. This table isn't big enough for swelled heads and ego—if you think God is lucky to have you then you've missed something crucial; no one is righteous, not even one. At this table unholy people seek the forgiveness of a holy God, and here we are reminded that because of Jesus we can find mercy and grace. We come to His table hungry and thirsty for His forgiveness, goodness, and love. If this is your heart's desire, then come and join us at this table.

Instructions

Benediction