

Over the last few Sundays, we have been preaching through a series entitled *A Christmas Invitation*. The Christmas season is often filled with events—family gatherings, band concerts, work parties, and the like; perhaps you’ve already received a number of invitations. As I begin my sermon this morning I want to ask you question: *have you ever been invited to a questionable party?*

I think you all know the kind of party that I’m talking about; it’s an event in which both the guest list and the activities might be on the questionable side. *By a 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.

As I begin this morning I want to read something from the book of Luke as a way of entering into the Christmas invitation that Jesus extends to the world. If you have your Bible with you this morning, paper or electronic, let me invite you to turn with me to Luke 5:27-32. If you are using the Blue Bible located in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 836.

“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.”

This encounter contains a question that reads more like an accusation: *Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?* These religious leaders accuse Jesus of spending time with the wrong kind of people; in their minds, tax collectors were not in the “questionable” category, they were sinners through and through.

Last Sunday, we explored the reality of our brokenness. I said that none of us are as strong, wise, or as complete as we want to be. We’ve all got gaps, holes, and cracks—those that we see, those that we are blind to, and those that we choose to ignore. I offered the following invitation: *If you are broken, then come to Jesus; He finds great delight in taking what is broken in order to reclaim, refurbish, and restore.*

It’s difficult for many of us to admit brokenness but I suspect it’s easier to admit brokenness than it is to admit sin; the one suggests weakness, while the other suggests blame. No one blames a diabetic for being unable to produce insulin—it’s a kind of physical brokenness—but we can and do blame those who are violent, those who steal, or those who drive under the influence.

These days, to speak of sin in general, or specifically of sinners, is considered to be arrogant, judgmental, hate-speech. Sin, sinners... these words might make us wince, but it’s worth noting that Jesus didn’t disagree with the assessment. In fact, the Bible describes sin in a variety of ways: as *rebellion, infidelity, and disloyalty to God; as getting dirty, as breaking*

God's law, and as *missing the mark of God's intended purpose*. The Bible presents sin as a multi-dimensional problem, a problem that is the root cause of all that is wrong with the world. The problem of sin runs so deep in humanity that we could never dig ourselves out, and so, God came near to rescue us—this is at the heart of the Christmas story.

I'll say more about this in a moment, but first, let's get back to Jesus' encounter with Levi. Keep in mind that because Jesus is both fully God and fully human, when we look at Him we discover what God is like. Specifically, we see how God relates to sinful people.

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

Levi was Jewish but he was employed by Rome to collect tax from his own people. He had a quota to meet, but whatever extra he could extort went straight into his own pocket. Tax collectors were despised as greedy, dishonest, and traitors to their own people.

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 we're told that Levi got up, left everything, and followed. It seems like a strange social encounter, doesn't it? If a complete stranger walked up to you on the street and said, "*Follow me*"?, you would be more likely to call the police than you would to follow.

Luke only records two words, but it's very likely that Levi already knew who Jesus was and that he had heard Him teach before. And while Luke only records Jesus' invitation, I suspect they had a conversation. Imagine Jesus walking down a crowded street and the Holy Spirit directing Jesus' attention to the tax booth; there's a man sitting there, and Jesus has a sense that He's supposed to go over and talk to him.

Jesus went over and asks the man his name—it's Levi. As soon as Jesus hears his name, He remembers this man's namesake; in Israel's history, Levi was one of the sons of Jacob. Jesus knew Israel's story. In the wilderness account, when most of Israel bowed down to worship the golden calf, it was the tribe of Levi that remained faithful to God. It was for this reason that God set the Levites apart to serve as priests in His temple.¹

Perhaps Jesus looked at Levi and said something like, "*Your name is Levi? You belong to a priestly line but you're not serving God's people, you're robbing them. Perhaps Levi looked away, ashamed of who he had become. We've all felt this kind of shame before, haven't we? I'm not the person I want to be.*

Shame often has a physiological effect. A person who feels shame, almost instinctively, puts their head down and avoids eye contact. When we feel shame, we avoid eye contact because we cannot bear to see disappointment or judgement on the face of another. Shame screams at us, "*Don't look up!*" But living this way does more than shield us from disapproving eyes, it cuts us off from the possibility of love, mercy, forgiveness. Shame causes us to turn away from others,

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

but this turning away shields us from Jesus too, and so we must all take a great risk—we must look up to see how Jesus will respond to us in our sin.

John 3:16-17 says, “*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. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.*” As I said earlier, when we look at Jesus, we see what God is like. The Lord is full of grace and compassion; He is predisposed to forgive us—this is why He came. Psalm 3:3 says, “*But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.*”

Luke’s description of the interaction between Jesus and Levi is brief—Jesus spoke to him saying, “*Follow Me*”—but in the end, isn’t that enough? Levi—the greedy, dishonest, traitor—wasn’t chosen because of his stellar track record; he was chosen because God 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 and that’s certainly worth celebrating.

The guest list for the party was predictable; tax collectors have more enemies than friends and so the room was mostly made up of other tax collectors. The guest list wasn’t surprising but what surprised the religious leaders was that Jesus accepted the invitation. Questionable guests, at a questionable party, who would no doubt engage in

questionable behaviour—the safe play was to refuse the invitation but Jesus gladly accepted.

The authorities demanded an answer from Him, “*Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?*” In their minds, Jesus was guilty by association. In the ancient world, to share a meal symbolized a shared life; eating together spoke of friendship, acceptance, and unity.² Pharisees avoided “questionable” people to avoid the suggestion that they endorsed a sinful lifestyle. At the heart of the matter, Jesus and the Pharisees divided over their understanding of holiness.

In our day, holiness is rarely associated with the person who is pure, innocent, or righteous, instead, it’s assumed that holiness has to do with a “holier than thou” person who is rigid, proud, and judgemental. This is how the Pharisees were characterized but it 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: *Why would a group of no-good-thieves invite a rigid, proud, judgemental person to be their guest of honour?* They wouldn’t.

While the Bible describes holiness in terms of purity, or the absence of sin, holiness is also described as 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,

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

goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. These qualities were on display in Jesus, and that's why Levi and others were drawn to Him.

When people gathered around Jesus, they were in the presence of love and joy. When they gathered around Jesus, they were in the presence of patience and kindness. When **we** gather around Jesus, **we** are in the presence gentleness 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 minds, 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 washed clean.

What do you think Jesus did at Levi's party? I can't imagine Him sitting in the corner, with a hand covering eyes, to pure to look upon sinners. Instead, 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, I'm paraphrasing now, "*A doctor can only do their work among the sick so I've decided to go where the patients are. Besides, I'm not here for those who think are healthy; I've come for those who know they need God's forgiveness.*"

This interaction between Jesus and Levi isn't the exception, it's the norm. **Everyone** is invited and **anyone** can follow. And it's this scandalous invitation that the Pharisees could not stomach.

Returning to John 3:16, we read, "*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. Sinful though we are, Jesus meets us where we are and invites us to follow. Levi took Him up on His offer; will we?

Before I move into application, I want to take you back to something the prophet Isaiah said, hundreds of years before Jesus was born. He spoke of a Suffering Servant, one that God would raise up to stand in for us. Reading now from Isaiah 53:3-6,

"3 He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. 4 Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

We are all familiar with the concept of a "substitute." A substitute teacher stands in for the regular teacher who is unable to attend class. A substitute player comes off the bench or sidelines, when another player has been injured.

The verses I've just read answers the following question: *why does God's servant suffer? Has He done something wrong?* The answer we're given is that this Servant suffers in our place; He is our substitute.

In His love, God the Son became flesh and blood so that He could stand in for us. **Jesus is our substitute**; He stands in our place, taking the burden of our sin upon Himself.

illus: The story is told of a remarkable event that took place on July 31, 1941. On that day, in the concentration camp we know as Auschwitz, the sirens went off, indicating that a prisoner had escaped. Whenever a prisoner escaped, those who remained were punished. The Commandant determined that 10 prisoners would be sentenced to a long, slow, death by way of starvation; it was his way of discouraging others from trying to escape.

The prisoners were all lined up and the Commandant and his assistant went through the ranks, randomly selecting the 10. As the Commandant pointed to one particular man, Francis Gajowniczek, he cried out, *"My poor wife and children!"* And a moment later, another man, stepped out of line, took off his cap, indicating that he wished to speak. The Commandant barked, *"What do you want?"*

And this man, Maximilian Kolbe, said, *"I am a Catholic priest; I want to die for this man. I am old and he has a wife and children"*. The Commandant accepted Maximilian's request, Francis was released, and the ten men were marched off to the starvation bunker. Now...normally those in the starvation bunker would tear one another

apart but not this time. Reports filtered back to the prisoners that while these 10 still had strength, Father Kolbe had them praying and singing hymns. Two weeks later, 4 of the men, including Father Kolbe, were still alive. And because the Commandant needed the bunker for others, the remaining 4 men were put to death by lethal injection.

40 years after this event, Francis and his wife, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren gathered in St. Peter's Square in Rome where Father Kolbe's death was put in proper perspective. *"This was a victory won over all the systems of contempt and hate in humanity—a victory like that won by the Lord Jesus Christ."*³

In John 10:17-18, Jesus said, *"The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."*

At the cross, Jesus was afflicted, pierced, crushed, and punished for our sin, for our rebellion against God, for the wrong things we have done. You might object on principle, saying, *"How can that be justice? How can the innocent suffer for the guilty?"* To put what happened on the cross in perspective, allow me to borrow a courtroom analogy. God is the offended party and the Judge, but after passing judgement, God takes off His judge's robe and chooses to serve the sentence on our behalf.

The good news, revealed through Jesus, is that we are loved by God, and that Jesus has made a way for us to receive forgiveness. No one is beyond God's reach, no one has crossed the point of no return, no

³ Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 20.

one is beyond God's love or mercy. *Everyone* is invited and *anyone* can follow.

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 our church at large.

a) First, to those who have not yet committed to following Jesus. The Pharisees made a number of crucial mistakes but one bigger than the rest. They thought that God approved of them because they were righteous, and, that God disapproved of others—like tax collectors—because they weren't. What they failed to see was that before a Holy God, no one is righteous, not even one.⁴

To borrow Jesus' analogy, we're all sick, we all need a doctor; this is why God became human—He came to where the patients are. No one comes to God by virtue of their own goodness; all of us fall short of God's standard. The invitation to follow Jesus is an invitation to receive the forgiveness He won for us on the cross. Jesus died as our substitute, bearing everything that separates us from God—our sin and our shame.

The fact that I'm a Christian doesn't make me better than anyone else, it simply means that I've recognized my need before God, and, that Jesus meets this need. His forgiveness is available to us today—everyone is invited, anyone can follow.

b) Second, a brief word to those who are already following Jesus. Perhaps you can relate to how Levi might have felt when he first met

Jesus. Levi was a member of God's family but he had drifted so far away that practically speaking, he had become an outsider. He lived with a burden of shame and perhaps he had given up the hope of transformation.

We all know what shame feels like—head's down, avoiding eye contact. Perhaps you've even stopped praying because you can't bear to think of God's disappointment in you. This morning, I want to invite you to return to the Lord and allow Him to lift your head. He is for us, not against us! We are saved by grace and we continue by grace. Jesus still meets us where we are, forgives us, and invites us to follow.

c) And now a word to our church. Jesus regularly risked His reputation to reach people—*will we?* Jesus was willing to go to where people were, and our church must follow His lead. Meeting people where they are at might open you to criticism; you might be accused of associating with the wrong kind of people.

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

As I've said before, the church is meant to function like an airport. All travellers know that the airport isn't the destination, it's a launching pad from which we are sent out. Our church is like an *airport* in that we gather together—for worship, teaching, prayer, and

⁴ Romans 3:10.

fellowship—and then we are sent 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.

Pray (Salvation)