

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

September 14, 2014



JESUS SAYS

Discussion Guide

You must be sick

Luke 5.27-32

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Imagine for a moment you could design the “perfect” follower of Jesus. What would this person be like?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read Luke 5.27-32 aloud, slowly. Pause. Read the passage once more, aloud, slowly, trying to imagine yourself present, watching the scene unfold.
- As you watch Jesus, what does he seem to be looking for in those who would be his followers? Seek to discover as many ideas as possible from this scene.

- When people discuss what it takes to follow Jesus, what is typically presented as that which Jesus is looking for from people? In what ways, if any, are these the same or different from those we see in the text? Where might these differences come from? Have you observed how these differences affect people? What have you seen?
- With which of the following statements do you most resonate on your faith journey? (1) Deal with your stuff so that you can follow Jesus. Or, (2) Follow Jesus as a way of dealing with your stuff.
- In what ways, if any, has your faith journey been shaped by the statement you resonate with the most? Could you elaborate?
- If Jesus came to you and invited you to follow him today, just as you were, what would you think? What might it look like to respond to his call? What might keep you from responding affirmatively to his call? Could you elaborate?
- Read Luke 5.27 once more, aloud. Imagine yourself as Levi, hearing Jesus’ call. Spend some time individually and then together as a group responding to Jesus in prayer.

Context and Background

Tax Collectors

In the Roman period, people paid two types of taxes: direct and indirect taxes. Direct taxes were often referred to as tribute and were required of all people who owned land or were levied upon all “of-age” males (Romans 13.6-7). Such a tax may be in view with the census in Luke 2. Indirect taxes were taxes levied upon goods as they were moved from one place to another. Tradesmen often bore the brunt of these taxes which were paid at roadside booths and at many bridges and major crossings. In Jesus’ time, the Romans utilized a form of collecting taxes which might be referred to as tax farming.

The Romans would auction off the right to collect taxes from a particular area or province under their control. The person who won the auction would then pay the full, required tax levied by the Romans and then begin the process of organizing the collection of taxes from their assigned area, often in hopes of making a profit. The people who won these taxation rights and organized their collection were called chief tax collectors, and many of them became rich through unscrupulous and dishonest practices (Luke 19.1-10).

The people who worked for the chief tax collectors are called tax collectors in the New Testament but they might more accurately be called toll collectors (Matthew 5.46; 9.10; 10.3). These men often set up toll booths at bridges and along major thoroughfares to collect indirect taxes on the movement of goods (Luke 5.27). While some of these men were probably honest and good, the general type of person who filled this job was someone who was rootless, unable to find any other sort of work because this work involved the collection of taxes on behalf of an occupying force (Romans) within an oppressive tax structure (tax farming). Because of the nature of the work and the character of those who filled such roles, tax collectors were often considered as outcasts, and were given a status separate and beneath the status of sinner (Luke 5.30). It is of great importance that one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus was one such toll collector (Luke 5.27-28), underscoring Jesus' insistent reach to the outcasts of his society.

The Text

Luke 5.27-28: *Ministry at the fringes*

The larger context for the calling of Levi ("Matthew"—See Matthew 9.9-13.) is series of encounters between Jesus and the outcasts of his society. After calling Andrew, Peter, James, and John to follow him (Luke 5.1-11), Jesus encounters a leper and agrees to heal him by violating established Jewish purity codes and touching the leper (Luke 5.12-16). Jesus next encounters a paralytic, lowered before him through a hole dug in the roof (Luke 5.17-26).

In both encounters, Jesus is confronted with those deemed unacceptable and untouchable by his culture, and he willingly restores them to a state of wholeness. Jesus describes his actions as his way of dealing with sin (Luke 5.20) which gives insight into what Jesus thought about sin. For Jesus, sin involved the lack of wholeness in a person's life. Therefore to bring about restoration involved dealing with sin. What is important to note is Jesus' willingness to deal with outcasts who approach him. He is not turned away or offended when those deemed unacceptable approach. In the next scene, Jesus takes a bold and daring step by approaching the outcasts rather than waiting for them to approach him.

As Jesus is traveling down the road he sees a tax collector by the name of Levi. (See Tax Collectors.) As a tradesman who grew up in the area, Jesus was more than likely already very familiar with Levi and Levi was more than likely more than familiar with Jesus' recent ministry activities in the tight-knit Galilean countryside. Spying Levi in his familiar tax booth, Jesus approaches and invites Levi to follow him, to become a disciple by physically coming after him for the purpose of taking up Jesus' way of life. Levi is far from the ideal candidate to receive such a call, but Jesus seems intent on having Levi be part of his ministry movement. Levi accepts Jesus' call and leaves his tax booth so that he might follow Jesus.

Luke 5.1-11: *Hanging with the wrong crowd*

It quickly becomes apparent that Levi is not the token "fringe person" among Jesus' followers, but Jesus is keenly interested in reaching those labeled as outcasts by his culture. At some later date, Levi hosts a party for Jesus at his home in order to introduce Jesus to his peer group. It is not surprising that Levi's friends consist of people just like him, tax collectors and other such people (Luke 5.29). To the chagrin of the Pharisees, Jesus chooses to attend the party and dines with Levi and his friends. It appears the Pharisees and the Scribes who are also Pharisees are deeply offended by Jesus' actions. Their offense is rooted in the statement Jesus'

actions made. In Jesus' time, to eat with a person was to state that this person was accepted as they were as an intimate friend. This confused the Pharisees because Jesus was demonstrating that he was willing to be friends with tax collectors and other dirty people (sinners). The real issue at hand is not Jesus' reaching out to these societal fringe-people, but with Jesus' acceptance of these people where they were. The Pharisees also reached out to people like Levi but they required them to first "clean up." Specifically, the Pharisees asked that the tax collectors first leave their way of living and begin living a new way (the Pharisee way) if they were to be friends. Jesus made no such request but intentionally befriended people like Levi.

When pressed to explain his actions, Jesus explains that he went to people who needed him. Jesus notes that he has no interest in befriending people who already have their act together. Rather, Jesus is interested in befriending people who might be labeled as sick. Thus, Jesus' ministry philosophy is in direct opposition to that of the Pharisees. Rather than asking people to clean up so that they might come to him, Jesus goes to people and asks them to follow so that in following they might be cleaned up.

Real life with Blake:

Jesus wants me to follow him. That much is clear, but, often, I stumble and get stuck in my attempts to answer. While a number of things trip me up, the primary reason I hesitate in responding is a deep sense of unworthiness related to my present state of being. My life is a mess. How could someone like me follow Jesus? Convinced that Jesus wants me to follow him, but equally convinced that someone in my condition could not possibly follow, I set about the process of trying to clean myself up so that I might be good enough to draw near to Jesus. After some fumbling and less-than-successful attempts at righting my own life, I give up and begin to imagine that following Jesus is for those much better, much more put together than I.

I am coming to discover that Jesus' invitation to follow is not an invitation for me to clean up first. Rather, when Jesus invites me to follow, he is giving me the path I need to tread so that I might be put right, for it is in following that I am cleaned up.

Real life with you:

Jesus wants us to follow him, but we are told (or at least we imagine) that Jesus wants us to clean up first. Our hands, our lives, our hearts are dirty and Jesus hates dirty. But, if we would do a little cleaning up, we might find that Jesus allows us to tag along for the ride. So we set about the process of cleaning ourselves and others up so that we might be good enough to follow. The reality is that none of us is good enough to follow. This is the very reason Jesus invites us to follow him. He knows we are a mess. He knows we don't have it together. This is why he invites us to follow him, because it is in following him that our lives are made whole. This week, think about your own attempts to put your life together. How successful have they been? Spend some time considering Jesus' invitation to follow him as a path to putting life back together. Would you be willing to follow as you are? What might this look like? If you would like to learn more, consider attending the Christianity Explored experience starting on Sunday, September 21 (www.unioncenter.org/events/) or reading the Gospels on your own to see what can happen when broken people say "Yes" to Jesus' invitation to follow.

Want to know how this looks in real life? Check out Blake's blog at BlakeShipp.blogspot.com



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