

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Luke 5:27-39

5:27-32

- Q. Do you enjoy parties? Why or why not? In your mind, what makes for a good/enjoyable party? (Possible icebreaker)**

- Q. How well/quickly do you handle change, to embrace the new and let go of the old? Give an example. (Possible icebreaker)**

Let's look at this passage from the perspective of each of the key players involved:

Levi/Matthew is a tax collector. That means he's likely well off financially, and not so well off socially. His job as a tax collector and the ability to host a "*great banquet*" would lead us to believe he wasn't hurting financially. His job as a tax collector, thus viewed as a traitor or at least a collaborator with the hated Romans, would make him despised by his fellow Jews, and the fact that the large crowd of party-goers at his party were other tax collectors and "*sinners*" lead us to believe that socially he wasn't the most respected guy around (at least by those who thought their opinion on such things mattered). Also, tax collectors were often extortionists as well...whether Levi fit that description we're not told. And due to tax collectors regularly having to deal with Gentiles, the religious establishment often thought of them as "*unclean*", and certainly unfit to socially interact with.

Imagine his surprise, along with the surprise of everybody else, when Jesus invited Levi to follow Him. Unlike Andrew, Peter, James, and John we have no background information as to what Levi knew of Jesus. We're not really told what his motivation was to leave everything and follow Jesus. But the fact that he threw a great party as a response speaks volumes. It appears he wanted all those that he knew to also know Jesus...even if the only people he really knew or associated with were people of disrepute. Levi apparently didn't think that would be a problem. He must have figured that if Jesus liked him, He'd like anyone/everyone else. Levi didn't seem to operate from the paradigm that some had to be cleaned-up and proper to interact with Jesus. This is a stark contrast with the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law, you'll recall, were those who emphasized following the Torah/Mosaic law above all else. And it was by following the Law carefully that one was considered righteous in their thinking. So this crowd at Levi's party were all the wrong people. And to complicate the whole situation, this new/young rabbi/prophet Jesus seemed to be enjoying Himself and these people, these sinners. For the Pharisees and teachers of the law, this caused a great deal of skepticism toward Jesus. Didn't Jesus know these were the wrong type of people? For the religious leaders any possible/potential Messiah would be righteous in character, and according to their paradigm, who Jesus was associating with disqualified Him.

What about the earlier disciples...Peter, Andrew, James, and John? It was to them that the Pharisee's initially complained. What did they think about all this...asking a tax collector to join their group, now having all this tax collector's friends around, and then the pressure from the religious leaders for an explanation to it all? We're not told what they were thinking or feeling. But it's worth considering it for a moment. This might be the first time the disciples felt a little uncomfortable/awkward because of being around Jesus. Likely they had grown up respecting the Pharisees and teachers of the law (and looking down upon tax collectors and "sinners"), so this may have been a true paradigm shifting moment for them. (I'd be willing to bet Jesus orchestrated it for that very reason/purpose.) And even Jesus' response to the Pharisees and teachers of the law may have been more for His disciples than for the religious leaders.

Jesus answered (so we get the sense that Jesus stepped in for the disciples to answer the religious leaders), *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* (5:31-32). It is worth noting that Matthew's Gospel adds that Jesus also quoted a verse from the prophet Hosea in His response to the Pharisees, *"Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'"* (Matthew 9:13, quoting Hosea 6:6)

I imagine *"go and learn what this means"* might have been taken offensively by the religious leaders, since it implies they didn't know/understand their Scriptures. Also, who are the "healthy/righteous" Jesus referred to? Pretty much nobody. Who are the "sick/sinners" needing to repent? Pretty much everybody.

"I desire mercy, not sacrifice.", is a statement God made to Israel through the prophet Hosea several centuries prior. By quoting it, Jesus was implying that the Pharisees were standing in the same position of heart as ancient Israel that was being judged by God. And it's an important statement to consider for "religious people" today. If we are going to represent God to the world, it's vitally important that we understand the heart of God. God has always wanted a people whose heart reflected His heart (mercy), not a bunch of rule followers (sacrifice). This is not to say that the rules/laws God gives in scripture are unimportant...only that there is something more important. The rules/laws themselves were/are meant to guide people to an understanding of God (who He is, what He is like)...they were not designed to make us righteous, and certainly not designed to be used to wield against one another. Religious people (then and now) often forget this.

As humans we have interesting ways of categorizing people, labeling them, and building all kinds of generalizations, stereotypes, caricatures, and judgments of people. One of the most amazing things about Jesus is that He doesn't operate that way...which is to say, God doesn't operate that way. This is a very important point/lesson for us to get as Jesus-followers. "Religious people" tend to create standards people must meet BEFORE they can be acceptable to God (or themselves). Interestingly, those standards tend to be things they are good/strong at. Or perhaps another way of saying it, people tend to create God in their image...so God (as they conceive Him) likes the same people they like, and hates the same people they hate). As followers of Jesus we are called to imitate Jesus...taking all our cues from Jesus. And what we

see in all the Gospel accounts is that Jesus loves EVERYBODY...and was doing everything He could to get them to repent of their life-denying ways and accept His live-giving ways.

Unfortunately, as the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus put it, "Is it impossible for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows." The religious leaders already thought they knew God, and how to be righteous. The tax collectors and sinners didn't operate from that presumption...and thus were in a better place to receive, to learn and grow...to truly be in a place where they could accept the invitation/challenge to repent. It is truly hard for people to repent if they think they don't need to (like the Pharisees).

- Q. Which of the key players/characters in this passage do/can you relate to? (Levi and his friends; the disciples; the religious leaders; Jesus). How so?/Explain. (Or perhaps another way of asking it, HOW do you relate to each of the key characters/players in this passage?)**
- Q. (Now be honest, this could be a tough confession)...in your heart/mind are there those who you would have a tough time associating with if they became part of your church (or home group)? Explain**
- Q. What do you find most striking/impactful in this passage?**
- Q. Do you ever (or have you ever) felt tension/pressure from "religious people" for who you hang out with? Or, do you hang out with anyone that "religious folk" might take exception to? Explain**
- Q. Who are the unhealthy/sick people in your life that you are trying to bring the light and life of Jesus to?**
- Q. Describe how you've found health and hope, acceptance and healing/restoration in Jesus.**
- Q. Jesus calls/seeks everyone...and His invitation/challenge is the same for everyone...Repent. In what ways have you repented? In what ways do you still need to repent?**

One quick tangent before we move on to the next section. Have you ever considered the make-up of the 12 original disciples? We know that Peter and Andrew were brothers, as were James and John...and these 4 were business partners. We know that Matthew/Levi was a tax collector. We know that Judas Iscariot would betray Jesus. But what about the rest of the guys? We don't know a lot about them (at least from Biblical sources...though there are traditions that vary in reliability surrounding them.) But we do know that one of them was called Simon the Zealot. This should cause us pause. Why? You ask. Because a Zealot would have a very hard time being on the same team as a tax collector (even a reformed/repented one). So what we see, even amongst the original 12, was diversity...even rather tense

ideological differences. But they were able to unify around Jesus. That's beautiful. That should give us hope.

5:33-39

It's difficult to tell, when we take Matthew's and Mark's account into consideration (Matthew 9:9-17, Mark 2:13-22), if this next section is a continuation of the same conversation we just looked at (as Luke's account would make it seem), or if it's a different occasion or perhaps a new conversation with different people (John's disciples?) but still at Matthew's party. Thankfully, such details don't derail the main point/lesson.

The question regarding why Jesus' disciples don't fast like the Pharisees and the disciples of John actually betrays a misunderstanding of the point/purpose of fasting in the first place. Again, we see attention to the letter of the law (or tradition) and a lack of understanding of the heart/spirit of it all.

Today we call such exercises/activities such as fasting "spiritual disciplines" (ala Richard Foster's popular book, "Celebration of Discipline"...a good read I might add.) In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus called such activities/exercises "*acts of righteousness*"...which might be a jab at their poor understanding of such activities/exercises in the first place.

It appears that such things as fasting were being used to earn (perceived) righteousness, like some sort of spiritual merit badge or something. Spiritual disciplines, rather, were meant to be used as a way for us to draw near to God, to experience Him afresh. As Jesus pointed out, just as it would be inappropriate to fast during a wedding celebration, why would someone participate in a religious/spiritual exercise to draw near to God when God is standing right in front of you, eyeball to eyeball? Additionally, for ancient Israelites, fasting was a time of mourning (their sins and the consequences they had experienced as a nation) as well as waiting (for the promises of God to be fulfilled). Again, when God in the flesh is present, this just wasn't the appropriate time for that.

Jesus was not poo-pooing the idea of fasting (or spiritual disciplines in general), there is a time and place for them. But that time is not when God is presently incarnate. Today, such spiritual disciplines would be highly encouraged...so long as we do them to draw near to God as opposed to earn spiritual brownie points, or in an effort to be holier-than-thou.

The parable Jesus offered in explanation may seem strange to us, as most of us are not likely tailors or seamstresses, nor do we put wine in skins anymore (well, perhaps in some parts of the world they still do). So perhaps a different illustration that tries to make the same point would be helpful. In our day of high-tech tools, parallel illustrations abound. The point of Jesus' parables is one of "incompatibility". New clothe is incompatible with old clothe and new wine is incompatible with old wineskins. It would be like trying to install outdated PC software on the latest Mac operating system. It's incompatible.

Additionally, Jesus was saying that He, His message, and the new order He was ushering in (the Kingdom of God) would not be able to be contained by the old system, structure, and mindset. And verse 39 serves as an important reality check, *“And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is better.’”* (NIV) Those who were/are accustomed to the old would not be too keen on the new. Some people simply don’t like change. Some people have too much vested in the old that they think the new would cause great loss.

- Q. When you consider your faith journey and your relationships with Jesus, do you view it more as adding a new program/application/software to your life, or as a completely new/different operating system? Explain. (The point being, Jesus doesn’t simply desire to add a few improvements to our lives, but rather He wants to make a complete change.)**

- Q. Living as a follower of Jesus in this world can (should) be a tense/awkward experience. Describe the “incompatibility” issues you’ve experienced between the “operating system” of this world and the “operating system” of the kingdom of God.**