

Who does Jesus accept?

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1 John 4:7-8 says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” These stark, bold words from the Apostle John make a couple of things clear. First, it makes clear that God is the source of all love. God is love. Love is from God; that’s where love comes from. Secondly, John also clearly says that your love for others displays your connection and knowledge of God. That’s the logic, right? God is love; love is from God. Therefore, if you are born of God, if you know God, you will have love for others. But the opposite is true, too. If you do not have love for others, that means you do not know God. Why? Because God is love and to know God means you love like God loves.

How you treat others, your love of them, your regard for them says an awful lot about you. And not just you, like your make up (i.e. your character, your morality, your integrity). No, more than that: how you treat others, what you say to them or about them, how you think of them speaks volumes about your view and relationship with God.

Here at FBC, we say it this way: Loving people is our greatest expression of our love for God. That’s our 2nd of 5 heart statements (if you are newer to FBC, we’d love to tell you more about that). So, how do you treat people who you don’t like so much (because everybody loves people they like)? What do you say about others when they are not around? What do you say to them? What do you give them (dirty looks or an invitation for dinner?) What do you call them; meaning, “how do you label them?”

Our passage this morning from the Gospel of Luke shows us the very significant difference between Jesus and his religious counterparts, the Pharisees and scribes. There is this enormous difference between how Jesus views people, how Jesus treats people and how he interacts with those who are different and stuck in sinful habits and how the religious people view and treat and interact with those same people. We should take passages like this very seriously, my brothers and sisters. Look at us: we are the religious. We are the one’s who study the words of God. We work hard at seeing and knowing God’s way and following it as best as we can. That’s what the Pharisees were about. The Pharisees were the people passionate for God and his word. They were the one’s who tried to avoid sinful, licentious living. They were the regulars in the temple worshiping God. While the broader community may have talked about believing in God, the Pharisees took it seriously. That’s us; that’s what we do. That’s the kind of life we want to live.

Over time these Pharisees grew hard to God’s words of life and cold to other people. They began to apply God’s word to everybody, but themselves. They started presuming on God’s kindness rather than living lives of repentance. And once that happened, they couldn’t stop looking down at others. They couldn’t stop pointing fingers. They started ignoring the

Word of God which they studied on a daily basis. Friends, we can become just like that. But I don't want to be like that; I don't want you to be like that. Christ is not honored by that kind of prideful life. In fact, the Pharisees and scribes are the ones Jesus leveled his most ferocious curses to. Let's read and study this passage with humble hearts eager for Jesus to correct us (READ Luke 5:27-32).

There are two scenes to this account; let's look at the first one. We have two people, Jesus and Levi. Levi is a tax collector. And he's not just a tax collector, he's a tax collector on the job. He's working. He's doing his thing. From a societal perspective, tax collectors belonged to a class of people who were labeled "sinners." Look at vs. 30; when the Pharisees saw Jesus in the second scene they grumbled saying they couldn't believe Jesus would associate with tax collectors and sinners. This isn't the only place we learn this; tax collectors are called sinners in other places in the gospels, too. In fact, even Jesus himself refers to tax collectors as those outside of the people of God. In Matthew 18, in the passage about church discipline and what to do with a brother or a sister who refuses to repent, it was Jesus who commanded (vs. 17) "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Ouch! Tax collectors are on the outside; they are not a part of the family of God.

So, notice how Jesus treats this sinner. He extends a hand of invitation; he sends a word of welcome. He's calling sinners home. Don't mistake this a Jesus ignoring or accepting sin (he's calling Levi to repentance, which we'll talk about in a minute.) But his evangelistic message has a hospitable and kind tone. And remarkably, Levi responds to the call. Look at the call from Jesus; it's a simple, "Follow me." I love that call. Not pray a prayer, sign the card, not repeat after me. Just, follow me. Look how Levi's response is described in vs. 28 (READ).

This verse is such a short, simple statement, but in it we see radical repentance. The first phrase says, "And leaving everything." Jesus really emphasizes this aspect of following him in later chapters so I don't want to spend too much time on it now, but Levi's first step of obedience was letting go of everything he was holding onto in his life. He left everything. Secondly, it says he "arose." Why tell us such inconsequential information, unless, maybe, it's not so inconsequential? Look at Levi's posture In vs. 27. Before he meets Jesus, he's sitting down; after he meets Jesus and hear the call he stands up. Luke is trying to show the radical nature of the repentance. Levi is changing everything. Before Jesus, he was sitting; after Jesus, he arose. Nothing stayed the same about Levi's former life.

Maybe you are here this morning and you are seeking God; you're trying this whole Jesus thing, this whole church thing out. You're wondering, "Is this for me?" Here's a little picture: Jesus' call on your life is simply this. Follow me. Follow him wherever he goes. The Bible tells us that in Jesus is found all the wisdom, all the forgiveness, all the maturity you will need in life. And to prove you can trust him, he laid down his life for you. He died on a cross so you could be forgiven of your sins. You can trust him. His words are gracious; his power is evident. He will lead you to a place of joy (we'll talk about that in a minute). But know that

when you follow Jesus, everything changes. You actually leave your former life. Your commitments change, your loyalties change. So do your passions and desires. You now will love and serve God when before you loved and served yourself. Come! Be reconciled to God! Jesus loves you and has come to save you. Levi did it; and so should you.

Scene 2: Levi throws a party. I love this about Levi; he celebrates this new relationship he has with Jesus and the forgiveness that he undoubtedly is happy about. We should do this more. If you get saved, throw a party. When we know someone has turned and repented of their sins, let's throw a party for them. Parties are only parties with all your buddies. But who are Levi's buddies? A bunch of people just like him. Tax collectors and others. What does that mean? Well, for a bunch of religious stiffies, it's a rowdy bunch. Rowdy enough where the Pharisees criticize Jesus for feasting with them. Clearly, this was taboo. Clearly, Jesus feasting with these people labeled sinners was out of bounds as far as the Pharisees are concerned.

But why wasn't it for Jesus? Why was Jesus hanging out with these people? Let's look at Jesus' response (READ vs. 31-32). We learn a couple of things from Jesus. First, Jesus tells us that he is for broken, rebellious sinners. That's who he came for. In that vs. 32 he says, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." He uses the metaphor of health in vs. 31. Sick people need doctors, not healthy people. I'm the physician; who do you think you'll find me with?

Ok, who are those people? Who are the sick Jesus has come to heal? Who are the sinners in need of repentance? If you asked the Pharisees, how would they answer? Levi! His buddies. The prostitutes hanging out with them, no doubt, they would say they are the sinners and the sick. And, there's no question about it: they were sick. Jesus doesn't even deny that. But how about you, reader? Who are the sick and the sinners in this passage? Who comes across the ugliest? Of these three groups of people, who would be the last group you would like to be associated with? The Pharisees, right? The religious people pointing the finger.

Here's why the Pharisees are the villains in this passage. It's not that they were completely wrong. Levi really was a tax collector. His buddies and friends really were sinners and without repenting, without turning away from their former loyalties and following Jesus, they would remain on the outside of God's family. What the Pharisees couldn't see is that they too needed to repent. They too needed the mercy of God. They couldn't see that they were sick, too, that they were rebellious, too, because of their pride and stiff-neck; they could see they were no better off. They needed a physician just like Levi and his buddies, but they couldn't see it. They were blind to their own blindness.

Who are the people that need to repent? Who are the sick, the rebellious? Who are the sinners? We all are. Every single person. That's the whole point of Romans 1 and 2. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of all men and women. We all need salvation; we all need forgiveness. When Paul hits Romans 2

and starts talking to the religious people he says, “You are worse!” You sit in judgment on those who practice such sinful, prideful ways. You tell them that their coveting is wrong; you tell them that their adultery is wrong. You make sure that everyone knows that stealing is wrong. But you covet, you commit adultery, you steal. You do all those things, too. But, remarkably, rather than repenting you make excuses for your sins while you judge others. “Believe me,” Paul says, “you will not be spared the wrath of God.”

You see, if you point the finger at others, if you can look at others with disapproval thinking or saying, “I’m sure glad I’m not like them. At least I don’t do what they do,” the spirit of Pharisaism lives in you. Romans 1 teaches us that the root problem with every sin (you name it: a gossipy mouth, alcoholism, sexual sin of every kind, disobedience to parents, the fear of man) is a failure to worship and honor God as God. It’s not the behaviors; it’s not the specific sin actions. That’s why a relatively quiet church-goer who hoards all of her possessions with crippling anxiety about the future ought not to condemn the flamboyant and loud alcoholic who won’t watch his vulgarity. Neither one is honoring God; neither one is worshiping God as their greatest treasure.

The Pharisees are ignorant of this and being unaware that they are no different than Levi, they are no different than his friends, they judge and label these other human beings with self-righteousness. So, FBC, know this about yourself. Know that your heart is no different than another human being’s on the face of the earth. And the only reason why you know the love and grace of God for you is because Jesus Christ overcame your rebellion and pride with grace by revealing himself to you. And when you know this and rejoice in this, rather than having judgment and condemnation for others you will have love for them because you know God’s love.

Here’s the second message from Jesus: Jesus accepts and welcomes the repentant. That’s really a major theme in this passage. Levi’s actions can be summed up in that one word - repentance. Levi repented. How do we know this? Because of what Jesus says in the last verse (READ 32). Jesus made the call to Levi to repent and he did.

So, here’s the takeaway: Jesus aligns himself with those who repent. That’s who Jesus favors; that’s who he dines with and accepts. He doesn’t accept anyone on the basis of ethnicity or culture. He doesn’t accept anyone on the basis of religious participation or experience. Not because of family heritage. God doesn’t accept people on the basis of their education or on the basis of their experiences. God’s merciful welcome is not based on gender, age, class or sexual orientation. None of these are reasons for God’s acceptance of anyone. There’s is just one question: are you a repentant? Will you turn away from yourself and your pride and turn to Jesus?

Now, what is that? What does it mean to repent? repent means “change your mind; change your direction.” Take Levi as an example. When Jesus met him, he had a direction in life; he had commitments and loyalties and values. As we know from the Gospels, because he

was a tax collector, those commitments, loyalties and values were contrary to the ways of God (even Jesus said that). But when he met Jesus he left everything. He walked away from those commitments, loyalties and values. He turned away from them and turned towards... Jesus. He's now committed to Jesus; he's loyal to the ways and purposes of Jesus. He values what Jesus values. That's what it means to repent; that's what it means to follow Jesus.

That's who Jesus is for. And every single person in this room can be one of those. Only one thing is required: humility. The Bible calls this a broken and contrite heart. Those words give us a picture of a person who admits their sin, who recognizes their need for God's help. A contrite person is a person who is sorry. And that true sorrow, that true remorse actually compels a new direction in life... a direction towards Jesus. Friends, are you one of those kinds of people? No matter your former life, no matter your former mistakes and sins and rebellions. No matter how ugly you used to live and maybe still live, Jesus will accept you if, like Levi, you leaving everything, arise, and follow him.

#### Questions for the week

- When are you tempted to label and point your finger at others? (i.e. when you see someone's sin? differences of appearance? differences of opinion?)
- Pastor Brian said a key to being loving rather than being judgmental is reminding ourselves of how much God loves us in spite of our failures. How might you go about reminding yourself of such things?
- How would describe repentance to someone who asked?