

## Parallels || The Disarming Stories Jesus Told

### *Levi's Big Party*

Luke 5.26ff

3.20.11

*They were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen remarkable things today."<sup>27</sup> After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me."<sup>28</sup> And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.<sup>29</sup> And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them.<sup>30</sup> The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?"<sup>31</sup> And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick.<sup>32</sup> "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."<sup>33</sup> And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink."<sup>34</sup> And Jesus said to them, "You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?"<sup>35</sup> "But the days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days."<sup>36</sup> And He was also telling them a parable: "No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old."<sup>37</sup> "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined."<sup>38</sup> "But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins."<sup>39</sup> "And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'"*

We've been looking at the parables – the stories Jesus Christ used as the primary vehicle for His teaching.

A lot of the parables answer the objections of Jesus Christ's opponents. He's always saying the most controversial things and making the most controversial claims AND when He's asked to explain, He often uses a story.

And having looked at several stories all answering one basic objection, TODAY, we flashback to where that one objection began, namely the Pharisee's concern, "If Jesus is so RIGHT why does he hang around people who are so wrong?"

After last week's sermon someone said, "I've never seen before how much the parables interlock and can only be understood as a whole picture." It's really true. And today, before leaving this one major theme (of Jesus' bad company) we'll see where it started and hopefully some things will fall into place.

Today you are "the fly on the wall" at a big party where the controversy began. We'll hear, at the party, two objections to the way Jesus Christ does things AND THEN these five mini parables He uses to respond. Hopefully we'll leave the party with the mission and method of Jesus Christ clear AND with this huge theme sealed in our hearts and minds for good.

Let's look at 1) Levi's Big Party 2) The Symposium on Appropriateness and 3) What it all means for life in Modern South Florida.

Before this passage, Jesus Christ is claiming to be God to be able to forgive sins as only God can forgive. And to show that He has that ability, He heals a paralyzed man and sends him home walking. And everyone's stunned. No one had ever seen that before. It wasn't a trick or group hypnosis or some sort of con... It was a man whom everyone knew; for years he couldn't walk, Jesus tells him to stand and walk and the next minute he was walking. And that section ends with these words "They were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, 'We have seen remarkable\* things today.'" The completely unexpected (paradoxos\*).

The next scene finds Jesus Christ noticing this toll collector named Levi sitting in His tax-booth. And as He had said to the paralyzed man, He now says to this sort of skeevy, bottom-feeder type of guy, "C'mon, get up and follow me" and (about as likely as) the paralyzed man, this Levi, got up and began to follow. ("Really!? A tax-collector?" – they were like snitches...like neighborhood watch on steroids, always noticing sources of income and trying to collect...Nobody liked them.) "We have seen remarkable things today!"

And then Levi throws a big party, a feast (such as we've seen in so many parables – the Kingdom of God is like a feast...) and he invites his co-workers and people who could stand to be around his type – i.e. tax collectors and other people (v.29).

And THAT'S where all this controversy began – at Levi's big party.

Now, modern scholars say that this account was a standard way of reporting...and that Luke the historian had a real category for this big party because it was a common thing throughout the whole Greco-Roman world. It was called a symposium. And Luke basically writes about it as any writer would who recognized this kind of a meeting. Friends would get together to eat and drink and they would share ideas for the purpose of deepening their friendship. Often there would be a sort-of guest speaker and some current event or other topic would be determined...and then let the discussion begin! And here there are two objections that define the discussion: 1) v.29 "Why do you eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners? 2) v.33 "Other disciples – like the Pharisees or the students of John the Baptist fast and pray but your disciple eat and drink?"

And even though it's pretty clear that the Pharisees are not interested in deepening their friendship (and this is very inappropriate conduct for a symposium) still Jesus goes with it. And by His answers to their rude objections He makes this a symposium on appropriateness. "You think I'm being inappropriate so let's make that the topic for our symposium! Let's talk about things that match, things that belong together...things that fit or don't fit"

Let's make it like a game-show – "The Match Game" I'll say a word and you say what fits that word: "Sick people....?" "Physician!" (ding-ding-ding-ding!) That's it! ("Johnny, tell him what he's won!...")

And all five of these little parables work on that same exact basis – some thing or situation in which there's a very clear congruity or incongruity, something that obviously matches or clearly doesn't.

These people need healing and I am a physician – My mission is to heal the broken-hearted and afflicted (Isa. 61.1). What I offer FITS what they need (31). It only makes sense. That's why I hang around sinners.

And when it comes to the second objection – "Yeah, but why aren't the sinners sad? Why are you eating and drinking rather than fasting and praying? We don't do things that way around here – we have no category for that – doesn't fit! It's inappropriate!"

And His answers are all along these same lines: what fits with the situation? "If the bride-groom is there at the reception isn't it time to party and celebrate? Sinners are

repenting and coming to the reception we had to celebrate...right? Now is not the time for sadness. It wouldn't fit. There's joy in heaven when even one sinner returns but we have a whole crowd coming to be with Me – the Guest of honor, the Groom! So, we have to really, REALLY celebrate...right?" (When the groom goes on his honeymoon and you miss him, then you can be sad!)

And you don't cut a piece off a perfectly good new shirt to patch a torn old shirt...that's not appropriate! It would only ruin the new shirt and will also ruin the old shirt...It'll just shrink and then pull away from the tear.

Then a fourth little parable – you don't put new wine into old wineskins. A goat would be skinned and then the skin sewn up and made like a bag. New wine would be poured in and then it would be sealed. During the fermentation process it would expand but because it was new skin, it would be flexible enough to stretch.

But when you take the wine out a year later, that skin would be all stretched out and hardened (like a raw-hide that puppies chew) and then you can't pour new wine in ever again because when that new wine ferments and expands, it'll split that old hard raw-hide and everything will be lost. "Ya' just don't do it...doesn't match...incongruous...not fitting! Everyone knows that!"

It's the law of congruity – one thing matches another and if you get it wrong, it ruins both things! Doctors go with sick people...Fasting isn't fitting for a wedding reception...Old rips call for old patches...New wine needs new wine-skins...No substitutes permitted.

And Jesus Christ is saying, "Today, you have seen remarkable things...the lame walk...the blind see... the creepy, smarmy bottom-feeders who live like parasites on society are willing to stop sitting on you, get up, leave it all and begin following me – Do not try to squeeze what you are seeing in to some nice category. It won't work.

If you try to think of me like you think of think of one of the Pharisee/Scribes and their DE-formed Jewishness or even like you think of John the Baptist and his RE-formed Jewishness – it won't match. It'll be a big mess!"

You assume that because I hang around sinners I must therefore be cool with sin– that won't work. I do not fit that category.

I'm not a hippie and I am not a yuppie. I am not a right wing conservative or a left-wing liberal. Do not try to enlist Me in your cause – I will not fit.

There's a strange text in the OT that brings those home with force. You'd think, if God was ever for any one group, it would be for OT Israel. And YET when Joshua took Israel into battle we read this:

*Joshua lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand, and Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?"<sup>14</sup> He said, "NO; rather I indeed come now as captain of the host of the LORD." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down, and said to him, "What has my lord to say to his servant?"<sup>15</sup> The captain of the LORD'S host said to Joshua, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. (Joshua 5)*

Jesus Christ comes to us in the same way and says, "I am not for the spiritual or the religious for the laid-back hedonist or the responsible moral guy, I'm not for the the Jews or the Gentiles, the Americans or the Chinese or the Indians or anyone else – I am ONLY for those who humble themselves, repent and believe."

"I did not come to patch you or tweak you or even so much to educate you. I came to obey in your place and I came to die for you... and to rise for you and carry you to a totally new kind of life ... It's not the traditional "God helps those who help themselves". It's not the alternative/non-conformist way of the undefined "om" – the higher power however you define it... I am in a totally unique, remarkable category and I am calling all people everywhere (Acts 17.30) as I called LEVI to get up and follow me."

Admit you are sick and the Physician can help you. The only credentials you need...is to recognize your need.

TWO FINAL THOUGHTS: religious people (and I put myself in that category) – we value tradition and there is a valid place for tradition. BUT Jesus Christ is saying that there's a danger in valuing it too much. The last verse says "And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough.'" (39) It's a warning: I am calling you to a life of perpetual renewal. Beware of settling for the comfort of tradition: it easily turns to arrogance and complacency. You must come broken, humble and needy

every new day – His mercies are new every morning and so must be our repentance. (“I found it” ...and that’s the end of that!)

LAST, grace always leads to change and change always hurts. It’s like Eustace having his dragon skin torn away. But we must trust Jesus Christ to grace us into that painful, painful glorious change. Paul said, “One thing I do – I press on...” (Phil 3.12, 14). Ask God right now: “Father, how have I tried to fit Jesus Christ into my life – my categories – asking ‘Are you on my side’ instead of taking off my shoes and seeing His holy purposes for me? And than wanting to celebrate His love for me and his presence.”

Have the courage to pray for grace and for the grace to undergo painful change.