

# Why with Sinners?

Zechariah 7:4-10, Luke 5:27-39 (ESV)

December 26, 2004

“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Of all the things to complain about! Levi threw a feast for Jesus, and this was the best his opponents could come up with. The Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” “Why with sinners?” Why not with nice, respectable people like us? That is what they were asking. Why not with us?

Their question has to do, of course, with more than eating and drinking. It has to do with life. It has to do with people. It has to do with family and society, race and ethnicity, church and nation, poverty and wealth, male and female, likes and dislikes, every distinction we make between us and them. “Why with sinners?” Why with those other people? Why with those not like us? Or, why not with us? Of course, the more pressing question is, why did Jesus come at all to be with any of us by being born as one of us? What strange news comes to us at Christmas! They did not deal with that.

“Why with sinners?” The complaint was made to his disciples, but Jesus answered them directly. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Why with sinners? Because they are the ones who need help! That makes sense. The doctor does not come for people who are well. The doctor comes for those who are sick, for those who need help. And that raises the question, How are you doing today? Do you want to see the Good Doctor?

What is this help which Jesus extends to sinners? “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” The good news here is that Jesus calls people out of one way of life and into another, out of darkness into light, out of despair into joy, out of gonewrongness into made-rightness, out of rebellion into service, out of sin into repentance, out of death into life, out of damnation into salvation, out of lostness into found-ness, out of alienation into reconciliation, out of the cold into the house, out of loneliness into love. Is that a kind of change you would like to make? Is that a kind of transition that would be good for you? Is that a turn in life that you would like to take? Does that speak to the aching and yearning of your heart?

The good news here is also that when Jesus calls, people listen. When Jesus calls, people come. When Jesus calls, lives are changed. He makes it happen. Look at what he did to Levi. Jesus “went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting

at the tax booth. And he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And leaving everything, he [Levi] rose and followed him.” Just like that. There was no looking back. There was no thinking about it. There was no getting a second opinion. There was no taking of polls. “Leaving everything, he rose and followed him.” Just like that. There is the miracle in today’s reading.

What is more, “Levi made him a great feast in his house.” John Calvin pointed out from this that while Levi resigned from his tax office, he used his house and means for the ministry of Christ. He put aside all hindrances but not all household interests.<sup>1</sup> The feast was not the point of the calling, and that was not the reason that Jesus called him, but the feast did become the occasion for “a large company of tax collectors and others”—others meaning, of course, other sinners—to be “reclining at table with them.” The calling of one sinner just brought in more! Of course, if you are looking for sinners, that is good. If you came for sinners, that is good. If your purpose in life is to help sinners, that is good. At our best, the church still works that way today. We bring in one sinner, and that sinner brings in many more. Thanks be to God! For now, remember where it started: “Leaving everything, he [Levi] rose and followed him [Jesus].” Just like that.

Our ancestors in the faith have named this “Effectual Calling.” As it is written in the “Westminster Confession of Faith”:

1. All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ: enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.

2. This effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas W. Torrance, vol. 1, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Vol. I*, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 1:262.

thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.<sup>2</sup>

That means that when God calls a person, God's very calling brings about what it intends. The call is effectual or, as we might say today, effective. It effects what is included in the call. The call itself makes the intended results happen. Again, Jesus called Levi to follow him, and so he did. That is to say, Levi is not the hero of the story. The point of the story is not what a wonderful man Levi was. He was a tax collector! He was collecting money for Rome, the foreign, occupying military force, from his own poor and oppressed people. He was working for the enemy. He was probably as corrupt as the day was long. If anything, that is what this reading is all about. Levi was *not* such a wonderful man. Jesus called him anyway. Maybe there is hope for us.

The point of the story is to say that Jesus made Levi a disciple. Jesus called him to follow, and so he did. Jesus called him to be a disciple, and so he was. Jesus named him one of his own, and that naming made it so. I am not saying that Levi's response was unimportant. But I am saying that the call of Jesus made Levi's response possible and, more than that, actually brought it about. So the good news for us is not about Levi. The good news for us is about the birth of Jesus and the healing, calling ministry of Jesus Christ, and the powerful, saving, transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. And he continues to call us today. "Follow me." "Follow me." Do we hear him?

The Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" "Why with sinners?" This is a dangerous question. This is a dangerous question because it assumes that the sinners are over there instead of right here. It is pointing the finger at others instead of examining oneself. And, in so doing, it is setting oneself beyond the pale of the stated intent of Christ's ministry, calling sinners to repentance. Therein lies the danger. As the late Dr. John H. Leith has said, "The only people in the New Testament whom Jesus could not help were those who did not want to be helped." So this dangerous question is recorded in scripture and remembered through the centuries not merely as a history lesson but as a current warning to us of a clear and present danger.

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<sup>2</sup>*The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002), "The Westminster Confession of Faith," Chapter XII/X, "Of Effectual Calling," 6.064-65, p. 134.

Do we not run the risk of thinking of sinners as everyone else out there except us? Do we not run the risk of thinking of ourselves as basically okay or maybe even pretty good, decent, respectable, and upstanding? And is not the real risk not simply that we might be haughty and arrogant toward all those other people but that we might exclude ourselves from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, cut ourselves off from the love of God, and eliminate ourselves from the communion of the Holy Spirit? Do we really regard ourselves as so well that we need no help from the Great Physician? Never underestimate the power of self-delusion.

Let me offer an alternative. Instead of worrying about all those sinners out there, let us do three things. First, let us identify with the sinners. That is to say, let us confess our sin. Let us realize and admit that we are the ones whom Jesus came to help. As John Calvin, again, has said of this passage, “The grace of Christ is only of benefit to us when we are conscious of our own sins, and come to him in humility, groaning under their weight.”<sup>3</sup> So, confession and repentance are not something we can do once and be through with it. This is a part of our continuing and deepening conversion throughout our lives.

Second, let us profess our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and so give thanks to God that it is for us that Jesus came. God’s faithfulness to us calls forth faith from us. God’s grace elicits our gratitude. We are not called to be apostles. But we are called to be believers, to be followers, to be disciples, to be Christians, to be members of his church.

Third, let us rise and follow Jesus. Leaving everything, let us rise and follow him. Leaving all our self-importance, leaving all our self-righteousness, let us rise and follow him. Those old things need to make way for the new. Leaving the surety of our self-estimates, whether good or bad, let us take his calling of us as the true measure of our lives. Let us rise from the graves of our sinfulness, let us rise from the tombs of our selfishness, and follow him. Let us follow him into church, let us follow him into the world, let us follow him into mercy and compassion, into witness and mission, into worship and gratitude, into justice and righteousness, into peace, into all things good, let us follow him into life, and let us follow him into heaven.

In just a moment, a young man is going to stand before us, profess his faith, and so join this church. It is no accident that the affirmations we will ask him to make follow exactly the pattern I have just set forth: confession of sin, profession of faith, and promise of faithfulness. Let us all use this occasion as a time for our own reaffirmation of faith and rededication of service. In fact, our whole order of

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<sup>3</sup>Calvin, *Harmony*, 1:265.

worship follows this pattern: confession at the beginning, proclamation of the gospel and affirmation of faith in the middle, then commitment and thanksgiving at the end. That is a pattern for worship, a pattern for discipleship, a pattern for life.

As we gather once again to hear the word of God, to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, and today to hear the call of Christ to follow, let me ask you these questions. Has this week been all that you had hoped? Has this past year been everything you had hoped? Has your life been what you had once hoped and imagined? Is everything going absolutely great for you? Or could you use some help? Could you use some medicine from the Good Doctor? Could you use some turning around? Could you use some repentance? If so, we have good news. That is why Jesus came. The Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” “Why with sinners?” Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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