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The Gospel of Luke
XV. New Wine in New Wineskins
Luke 5:27-39

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The concept of sin is a tough sell in this day and age. In many of the seeker-sensitive megachurches that have sprung up like mushrooms over the last couple of decades, one can go years without even hearing the word “sin”. Market research has told these churches that talk about sin is a downer for church growth, so these churches have simply done away with it – so that everyone can just be free and happy and rich and healthy while living their best life now.

But even more mainstream churches tend to avoid the topic. The corporate confessions of sin in many church bulletins often read more like the minutes of a group therapy session. Kathleen Norris, the wonderful Presbyterian writer, tells of being asked to confess: *“Dear God, our communication with Jesus tends to be too infrequent to experience the transformation in our lives You want us to have.”*¹ That’s a far cry from Peter falling down before Jesus in the boat and crying out, *“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”*² And I can’t tell if Norris is laughing or crying when she tells about another congregation that felt the opening lines of the great hymn “Amazing Grace” were just a little too judgy – so they changed the line, *“that saved a wretch like me”* to the far more uplifting *“that saved someone like me.”*³

How are you doing on sin? I don’t mean, *“Are you a sinner?”* – I already know the answer to that question, and I most certainly include myself in that answer. No, what I mean is, *“What is your understanding of yourself as a sinner before God; and how does it shape your understanding of God’s grace freely offered to us in Jesus Christ?”* A lot more is riding on our answer than we might even be aware. Fleming Rutledge, the wonderful Episcopalian preacher and writer, says that in any church, you will generally find three different groups in reference to this question of how we understand ourselves as sinners and of Christ’s grace in answer to our sin. Group one has, basically, no real awareness at all that they are sinners. They may admit that they are sinners on Sunday mornings, praying along with the prayer of confession – but they don’t really believe it about themselves in their hearts. In fact, what they believe is that they are a cut or two or three above all the real sinners out there in the world. This group acknowledges the grace of Christ extended to sinners – but not so much as a personal lifeline to keep themselves from perishing, but rather grace more like a God-added cherry on the top of their own fundamental goodness. They don’t really think they need grace, but will politely accept it since it has been freely offered.

And then, she says, there is group number two in the church. This group, says Rutledge, likes to ride a sort of sin and grace teeter-totter – going back and forth between thinking they are sinners and basically not thinking about sin at all. In fact, as long as the teeter-totter stays balanced

– as long as life stays on a fairly even keel, they don't really think about grace at all, or God at all. Grace (and God) are reserved for emergencies only – for those isolated moments when they cannot avoid the thought that just possibly they might have done something seriously wrong.

And then, says Rutledge, there is the third group in the church. This third group has taken a good long look at their own dirty hands and impure hearts, their own failures in love – both sins of commission and omission – and have concluded that they are indeed sinners in the eyes of God, and in their own eyes too. In fact, they may well have come to understand something of the seriousness of this problem of sin – something of what the Bible keeps saying when it speaks over and over of sin as a serious problem which alienates us from God and from one another. That is not to say that this group lives in constant fear of judgment, but rather that they have come to understand how flawed we human beings really are, how far we are from what God created us to be and from how God created us to live – as well as how powerless we are to overcome those failings. And, therefore, how profoundly we must cling to God's grace if we are to know any hope of being forgiven, of being washed clean, of being made better, of being made whole.⁴

So, two questions then. First, which group, individually speaking, do we think we are in – one, two, or three? And, more importantly, which group do we think God considers us to be in, or which one do we think God wants us to be in?

Here's the deal: if we don't understand our sin and ourselves as sinners, then we cannot comprehend God's grace and how it is the profound and perfect answer to our sin and to us as sinners. The Word of God simply will not permit us to dodge the issue of our sin against God and against one another – it's kind of what the whole Biblical story is based upon: our sin and God's response of grace by which our sin is dealt with and overcome. And if we don't understand and acknowledge our sins and ourselves as sinners, then we do not and cannot ever truly get to real understanding of who we really are, much less of what the Gospel is all about. I John 1:8 comes rather bluntly to that conclusion: *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."* But, even more, if we deny that we are sinners, then we are also in danger of denying entrance to that very grace of God which removes our sin – the very next verse in John's letter: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to clean us from all unrighteousness."*

That's what's at stake in this matter of understanding our sin and ourselves as sinners, as defined by the Bible: if we can't even admit the problem, then we can't receive God's solution to that problem. Without that understanding of sin, we cannot begin to comprehend, much more to receive, God's gift to us of grace through Jesus Christ. And, on a much lower note and much smaller scale, without that understanding of sin and of ourselves as sinners, the extraordinary meaning and power of the story of Levi we have read this morning will be lost upon us. For this is a story precisely about that decision of God, that desire of God, and that power of our Lord Jesus Christ to forgive our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. This story of Levi is that great hymn "Amazing Grace" made flesh.

Let's look at it. In our day, if you want to heap the highest possible condemnation on another human being, you call them a "Hitler". Hitler is our go-to-guy, and deservedly so, when it comes to the extreme of sin and evil. Well, in Jesus' day, that go-to-guy of sin and evil would

have been the tax collector. If you really wanted to tell someone off, the way we love to do these days on social media and the network news, you would say to them, “*You’re no better than a tax collector!*” Tax collectors, back then, were universally considered to be a) traitors to their own people and country, collaborators with the hated Romans and their occupying armies; and b) thieves, cheats, greedy rotten no good thieving cheating . . . well, you get the picture. They would regularly shake down their fellow citizens for more money than was really owed to Rome as taxes – and then pocket the difference for themselves. Tax collectors – in Jesus’ day the lowest of the low, the worst of the worst, sinners supreme.

So, what does Jesus do when He comes across this particular tax collector, Levi, sitting at his tax collector/extortionist booth and stacking up his coins with glee? Jesus walks right up to him – great, enormous sinner that Levi is – and Jesus says to him, “*Come, follow me.*” Just like that. There’s no threat of hellfire and brimstone, no words of contempt, not even any calling to account for his crimes. Not even a little mild scolding, leading to at least a little bit of repentance. Jesus just simply goes up to him and calls him to Himself: “*Levi, come, follow me.*” And just like that He welcomes Levi – the bigtime sinner – into His inner circle, into His mission of mercy, into the embrace of His grace.

And what does Levi do – that no good, thieving, cheating, traitorous, miserable sinner tax collector? He gets up immediately and he follows. No, more than that – the Scripture is quite clear about this. Levi gets up and first leaves everything behind. Leaves it all behind – all that he had been doing, everything that he had been, everything that up until Jesus appeared he was certain made for a good life. He just gets up, leaves everything behind – the same exact words used to describe what Peter and James and John did, by the way.⁵ He gets up, leaving everything behind – and he follows after Jesus. You see, grace can do that to a person, turn him or her around one hundred and eighty degrees in an instant – and especially in the case of one who knows himself or herself to be in desperate need of grace.

And so, also, in that moment, in that one little moment of grace, we see how God really feels about sinners like you and me – even about those who are the worst of sinners. In that moment we see, that despite every reasonable thought, God actually and really and truly and deeply loves sinners. He longs for them to turn around and draw near to Him. He wants to give them His amazing grace, so that sin will not cause them to perish from His presence. It doesn’t even matter what we have done against Him or against one another, or even the degree to which we have done it – still He stands ready to forgive. Proving precisely what Jesus Himself had said, that He had come into this world because God so loves this world, even as it is and even as we are. He had come into this world, not to condemn the world; but so that the world, and those who dwell therein, might be saved from condemnation and death, the ultimate penalty for our sin.⁶

Jesus Christ has come to put His arms around sinners, to forgive us, and to lead us back home where even now a feast is being prepared for all of us prodigal sons and daughters. Just listen to what He says when the scribes and Pharisees (who, by the way, belong to group number one, those who think they are without sin and who like to look down on others) – just listen to what He says when they start complaining about Jesus eating dinner with a bunch of other tax collectors at Levi’s house that evening: “*Why is he eating with those people?*” Jesus turns to

them and says, in effect, *“These are my kind of people, the very people I have come to heal – the ones who know that they are sick and in need of healing.”*

Grace. Grace. Amazing grace. That is how God feels about sinners, and what God is constantly reaching out to give to sinners. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher/theologian, puts it even more strongly:

When it is a question of a sinner He does not merely stand still, open his arms and say, “Come hither”; no . . . He goes forth to seek, as the shepherd sought the lost sheep . . . He goes – yet no, He has gone, but infinitely farther than any shepherd . . . He went . . . the infinitely long way from being God to being man, and that way He went in search of sinners.⁷

“Levi, come, follow me. Leave what has been behind – it shall be forgiven. Levi, come, follow me – and I will give you a new life, a better life, a good life – the new wine of my grace filling up the new wineskin of your new existence in Me.” “And leaving everything, Levi rose and followed him.” Because what else can you do when Someone loves you that much, and is that gracious and kind and forgiving upon all that you are and all that you have done. *“Levi, come, follow me.”* And have we not heard Him calling our name in just the same way and for just the same purpose?

*Tell me, where is the road
I can call my own
That I left, that I lost
So long ago?
All these years I have wandered
Oh, when will I know
There’s a way, there’s a road
That will lead me home.*

*After wind, after rain
When the dark is done
As I wake from a dream
In the gold of day
Through the air there’s a calling
From far away
There’s a voice I can hear
That will lead me home.*

*Rise up, follow me
Come, away, is the call
With the love in your heart
As the only song
There is no such beauty
As where you belong*

*Rise up, follow me
I will lead you home.*⁸

“Levi,” says that Voice, says that Savior, “*Levi, come, follow me.*”

We are sinners – this is true. And that we are sinners and in what ways and to what extent is what this season of Lent is calling us to examine and to confess. So that we might then be prepared to celebrate on Good Friday and Easter Sunday – and on every day for the rest of our lives – the Good News of what God has done for sinners like us in Jesus Christ.

Grace. The grace by which all is forgiven and washed clean. The grace by which we are made able, like Levi, to leave behind what has been that we might follow Him into that better version of ourselves that we shall one day become in Him. The grace by which is poured into the wineskin of our flesh the new wine of a new life in Him. A life made clean and made holy, a life made true and deep, a life made fruitful and faithful and a blessing to others – all by the grace of God, that new wine made from the blood of Jesus, shed for the love of sinners like you and me.

¹ Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 165.

² Luke 5:8.

³ Norris, p. 166.

⁴ Rutledge, “The Condemned Man,” in Not Ashamed of the Gospel, pp. 227-228.

⁵ Luke 5:11.

⁶ John 3:16-17.

⁷ Soren Kierkegaard, Either-Or, quoted in William H. Willimon, “We Never Saw Anything Like This,” Pulpit Resource, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Year B – January, February, March 2000), p. 34.

⁸ Stephen Paulus, “The Road Home.” Here is a video of the wonderful group Voces8 performing Paulus’ beautiful song: [VOCES8: The Road Home - Stephen Paulus - YouTube](#) .