

Luke 5:27-39

Old and New way of life

I'm not sure what kind of videos you get on your Instagram or TikTok feeds, but one I see often is that of a before-and-after photo. One example is where a person goes from unhealthy, overweight and looking plain miserable. To a second photo where they are smiling, healthy, fit and just loving life. They'll often be wearing the same clothes in both photos just so you can see how epic their transformation is, how far they've come from the old to the new. Or maybe the opposite, a cautionary tale. Often shown in anti-drug and alcohol campaigns, where someone has descended into unhealthy habits. In the before photo, you see the loving, smiling face of a regular person. But the after-photo looks like a hollowed-out person, the light is gone from their eyes, and they are incredibly dishevelled. There are many different forms of these before and after videos, gardening, makeup even before and after 12 hours nursing shifts at work. In each case, something has happened, something has changed to enact the transformation. I wonder what your before and after photo would be, what is the biggest transformation that you've undergone?

Going from old to new is something we see in the Gospel. Jesus calls people to follow him, and they are transformed by their relationship with him. This brings us to Luke 5:27-39, and my first point.

Who does Jesus call?

The first question we need to answer is, who does Jesus call to follow him and transition into this new way of life? At the commencement of his ministry back in chapter 4, Jesus asserts he has come to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set the oppressed free. And between the commencement of his ministry and today's passage, Jesus does the following: drives out impure spirits (4:31-37), heals the masses (4:38-44), calls some fishermen to be his disciples (5:1-11), heals a leper and finally heals a paralysed man (5:12-26).

So far in his ministry, Jesus has predominantly spent his time with those on the bottom rung of society, such as the leper or paralysed man and the working class, like Simon James and John, who were fishermen. I find this rather interesting. If my goal was to set the oppressed free, I would probably try to gain as much influence as possible, starting with politicians and wealthy people, not the homeless guy on the corner. Jesus clearly does things differently from me.

But let's see how Jesus continues his ministry. At the beginning of our passage Jesus approaches a tax collector named Levi and asks him to follow him, in a similar vein to the disciples. Alright so a tax collector now, surely, we are getting somewhere. It seems like a respectable job, being an accountant today is a well-respected profession. At our congregational meeting we all vote on who is going to be our tax accountant, so clearly it must be important. It requires high levels of education and attention to detail. Surely this is Jesus starting to work his way up the social hierarchy, he's done with the working class and the bottom rung. No more sick and injured, straight to the big leagues where he can really start to push his agenda.

Well unfortunately tax collectors were very much not the respected profession that on the surface they feel like they should be. 2000 years ago tax collectors were despised by most people for 2 main reasons. First they were seen as traitors, Israel was under Roman occupation at the time of Jesus. So tax collectors seemed to support their oppressors by collecting tax for the Romans. Secondly, it opened up one to take advantage of people, alongside taxes they would always take additional money to enrich themselves. Exploiting those around them. This means Levi would have been a complete social reject, with no regular person wanting to hang out with someone like him out of fear for others thinking they too were corrupt and a sinner as well. Only those on his same level would associate with him.

So where any self-respecting Jewish individual, let alone a rabbi would've ignored Levi, Jesus continues the trend of his ministry and reaches out and asks Levi to follow him. After Levi's prompt acceptance the scene quickly changes to that of a banquet that Levi is hosting. He invites all his tax collector friends and others labelled simply as sinners. Basically Levi has invited all of his friends to come and meet Jesus.

Verse 30 introduces to us the conflict in this passage, the Pharisees. They are the religious elite, the top dogs of Judaism. In Verse 30 they ask Jesus

"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

Now, for us having dinner with someone doesn't mean much past, were good mates catching up or I really enjoy hanging out with you. There are not many social implications past that. But for Jesus it was quite different, dining with someone in this manner communicated to everyone else that he accepted this person. Which is why the Pharisees would be concerned with Jesus' actions. They would never have dinner with someone like Levi as they want to avoid the suggestion that they accept and condone his Sin. They want to quarantine the sinners away so as not to contaminate others with their uncleanness.

But what is Jesus' response? V31 says

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."

Jesus seeks recovery not quarantine, If Jesus has come to heal the sick it would make sense that he goes and spends time with them. So to answer our initial question, Jesus has come to heal the sick. Jesus constantly is dealing with those on the outskirts, those marginalised in society. I wonder how often we are praying for, spending time with or evangelising those forgotten by society. Maybe the elderly or the homeless, or maybe even that weird guy at work or school no one talks to. It could even be showing love and kindness to the person you don't normally, after the service you may talk to someone who is alone who you normally ignore? I know I find it easy to forget, to place my comfort over loving others. But Jesus doesn't, and he doesn't stop there, he continues in V32:

"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance".

He widens the scope to all sinners, not just those on the outside. This encapsulates exactly what Jesus is coming to do and more specifically who he is calling. He is calling all sinners to come and live a new life.

Who are the Sick?

But who are these sinners, who are the sick that Jesus has come to heal?

When Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness Satan offers him all "authority and splendor". But in 4:8 Jesus responds with:

"It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

We are commanded to worship God and serve him only, anything outside of this broad sweeping statement falls under the category of Sin. This includes the "Bad Things" that we might do, but also so much more. Jesus' is this story also rejects personal power over others and material pleasures. All these speak to a deeper attitude problem. Are we living as if God is not the boss? This is something we are all guilty of. At different times and in different ways we all make decisions and think in ways that at the centre do not please God, we all sin.

It took a long time for me to really internalise this, for the longest time I still thought, like the Pharisees, that I was really "one of the good ones". I knew in my head that I was a sinner saved by

grace, but that didn't always translate to my heart and hands. My own pride gets in my way and it has taken a long time to realise how truly sinful I am and how far short I fall.

Is this the case for you as well, do you like me tend to think of yourself as "actually ok" and thinking you're a "cut above the rest"? Let me burst that bubble for you, you are a sinner, Levi was a sinner, The Pharisees were sinners, Paul was a sinner, I am a sinner and you are too.

So, what do we do with this? Jesus has called us all, Sinners to repentance. How are we meant to respond?

In v28 we are told Levi's response,

28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him

Levi immediately gets up, leaves everything and goes to follow Jesus. He doesn't wait around and see what Jesus is going to do for him, he doesn't ask a million questions of him. He simply just starts following him.

Implicit in his revelation of who he has come to call, is a call to action. "Call sinners to repentance". We must repent of the sin we so casually commit. First to repent we must acknowledge that we are sinful, we must bring ourselves before Jesus and admit we have wronged and seek forgiveness, knowing that the Holy spirit will help us to be more like Jesus. We can be confident in this because just earlier in 5:20 we read:

²⁰ When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

Earlier in the same chapter, we see Jesus' clear response to one's faith, we see Jesus' complete authority and willingness to forgive sin.

What does this new life look like?

But what next, once we recognise we are a sinner and come to Jesus seeking forgiveness. What changes for us, what is the difference in our lives? What is that second step of repentance? What is the new that Jesus brings for us? Let's continue in the passage, directly after Jesus' statement he is asked yet another question in v33:

"John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."

There are a few reasons why the Pharisees would question Jesus in this manner, they see him as a religious rival and may be seeking to undermine his standing. By pointing out that his disciples act differently to their own disciples they are subtly questioning the legitimacy of Jesus. By bringing up differences between Jesus and John they may also have been seeking to drive a wedge between the two, who represent a different ideology to the Pharisees.

Fasting was a time-honoured act of zeal, normally taken up for the following reasons, and the verses are in the transcript: mourning (1 Sam 31:13), requests for aid (2 Sam 12:16; Ezra 8:21), repentance (Jonah 3:6-9, Joel 1:14) and seeking God's guidance and wisdom (2 Chron 20:3). Fasting for the Pharisees and their disciples was seen as a massive act of piety, which means to do something in order to be more Godly, fasting normally twice a week (Luke 8:12). To fail to do so for them would have been seen as lacking respect for God.

At this stage John would have been in prison so his disciples may have been fasting on his behalf, both out of mourning and as a petition for aid.

In v34 and 35 Jesus responds,

“Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? 35 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.”

Jesus does not give a systematic theology lecture on fasting, but instead claiming that while he the bridegroom is present it would simply be inappropriate for his disciples to be fasting. The wedding imagery signals that his presence is an occasion for celebration. Jesus also hints at a time "when the bridegroom will be taken from them". A clear foreshadowing of Jesus' death on the cross, when his disciples will be mourning and it will be appropriate for them to fast. Jesus is not commanding fasting to them or to us, but simply saying it will be appropriate for them to fast in the future. He is also condemning the Pharisees for the legal view of the purpose of fasting, as for them it was mainly done for ritual's sake, instead of an act of true worship.

Jesus continues his response with a parable in v36-38

“No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. 37 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. 38 No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins.”

Jesus uses 2 examples to help clarify what following him will look like. For those who aren't familiar with sewing and fabric, which was very much myself, let me explain why you don't use new cloth to patch an old garment. New fabric shrinks when it is washed for the first time. So if you use it to patch the hole, when you go to wash it for the first time only the new part will shrink while the rest of the garment won't. This means the fabric won't be able to lie flat and everything will look out of place. Meaning you end up wasting both the old garment and the new piece of cloth.

Likewise, you wouldn't pour new wine into old wineskins. Wineskins were made of leather and as they aged they became tougher and tougher, becoming less pliable and more rigid. New wine as it ages continues to ferment, during that process it releases carbon dioxide which increases the pressure inside the wineskin. If an old wineskin is used, without any flexibility the increase in pressure will eventually burst the wineskin, leading to the wasting of the new wine and the old wineskin. So new wineskins must be used which still have that flexibility and can expand as the CO₂ is released by the new wine.

Jesus is contrasting the old and the new. Illustrating that the old and the new are incompatible, if you try to mix the old and new together you end up ruining and wasting both. For the Pharisees and Jews of Jesus' time the old represents the Levitical law and the traditions built up around it.

Lev 16 which was read earlier describes the process that one person once a year can enter the full presence of God - known as the day of atonement. I hope you can see from when it was read out that it was an incredibly tedious process. Involving a young bull, ram, and special clothes, the priest must bathe multiple times during the process, 2 goats, fragrant incense, and at the end if the high priest got it wrong they would die as they entered into the presence of God. That is what the old Levitical law of the Pharisees was building towards, a complex and imperfect way to atone for the sins of Israel. Which needed to be repeated yearly. But let me be clear here, this was an incredible gift that God gave the ancient Israelites. He gave them a means that allowed him to dwell amongst a sinful and imperfect people. Without the day of atonement the impurity of Israel's sin would have piled up and God would have left them. So God in his grace and mercy gave them the means to maintain a relationship with him. But the day of atonement was only effective as it pointed forward, it was a sign of what was to come.

Jesus fulfills not only what the Day of Atonement promises, but he fulfills what it symbolised and pointed to. Bringing in a new and more complete version. Jesus' death on the cross was the atoning sacrifice for us, making the day of atonement in Lev 16 unnecessary. The Day of atonement

foreshadows Jesus bringing the same closeness, forgiveness and purity offered through the day of atonement and by Grace gives it to all. Without Jesus' death on the cross the day of atonement would have been futile, Because of Jesus' death on the cross all are able to have a relationship with the lord at no cost for ourselves. The Israelites would no longer be bound by the law that they constantly fail. Hebrews 10:1-4 reminds us of this:

"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. 2 Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. 3 But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. 4 It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

The Pharisees would need to leave behind the old ways of the laws, where they try to reach God by themselves and instead embrace the new and better gift of grace offered by Jesus. Leviticus 16 also presents to us the only commanded fast in the entire Old Testament, the Pharisees had built up a tradition expanding upon the law including their bi-weekly fast. In effect they made up their own extra rules about fasting. So not only did the Pharisees need to leave behind the ceremonial law in coming to Jesus but the traditions which they valued. They need to realise how much better Jesus is. Instead of a bunch of rules and traditions to follow, they can receive grace and freedom.

Levi the tax collector would have been a wealthy man. All of his physical needs and more would have been met by his secure job as a tax collector. Levi could not say he was going to follow Jesus, yet continue to take advantage of the people he was collecting tax from. In following Jesus Levi had to give up his old way of life, the cheating and stealing and completely follow Jesus, repenting of his old ways and following Jesus' example. In Levi moving from his old way of life to a new one in Jesus, there is a clear difference. His inward decision was matched by an outward change.

For us this may look differently, the old wine or garment is not the Levitical law as it was for the original Jewish audience. In today's culture we are told to seek freedom and our search for our own truth. We are in the age of 'You do you' and 'follow your own destiny'. Where it is seen as evil and controlling to derive our path from anything other than ourselves. Maybe for some their worth is derived from going out partying every chance you get, sleeping around and getting drunk. For others maybe it is a life pursuing financial gain similar to Levi, always grinding to make more money, stepping on others to climb the corporate ladder. Maybe you have grown up in the church, and for you religion is all about following rules such as 'no swearing' or 'don't have sex outside of marriage'. For me, it was a life of apathy and laziness. The only thing I really cared to do was hang around with friends and play video games, things that I wanted to do that served me alone.

But upon stepping into a new life with Jesus, there is a discernible difference. Where the world tells us "me, me, me", those in Jesus look towards the service of others with Joy. Where the world promotes money at all costs and having more things, Jesus promotes generosity and living humble lives. Do you need to leave behind your view of following Jesus as a list of rules to follow and step into the forgiveness and relationship that truly transforms your desires?

Like those in Jesus' time, we too are faced with a choice. To try and add Jesus to our current way of life will simply ruin both. We cannot simply apply Jesus like a patch to our shirt, but put on an entirely new shirt. We can't continue to live, think and act the same way after following Jesus or be at risk of bursting the wineskin so to speak. We are called into a new life where Jesus gives us the freedom that society tells us to find within ourselves. If we try to just tack Jesus on the side we will not get the benefits of a life following Jesus. It was the same for those 2000 years ago, they could not blend their Judaism with what Jesus brings because they would end up with an amalgamation that is neither Judaism or Christianity and ruin both.

What choice will we make?

This passage presents us with two different responses that we have to the new way of life that Jesus offers.

The first response we see is back in v28.

"and Levi got up, left everything and followed him"

It is so simple, the first response to Jesus is to follow him. To see the goodness that Jesus is offering and simply start to follow him. I pray that this is the response of all who hear the Gospel.

But v39 shows us that alternative response:

"And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.' "

We can find it easy to ignore the gospel, the new that Jesus offers because our old way of life seems so much better. We may not want to change our lives because right now we are comfortable. Maybe you'd much rather stay as you are, unchanged. Jesus presents this as if it will be a common occurrence. So if you are sitting here today thinking that your current way of life without Jesus is better, then please reconsider. Please see the goodness that a new life with Jesus brings as I have discussed earlier, how the salvation brought by Jesus is so much richer than whatever was governing our life before.

What you'll notice is that there is no third option, no blending or middle ground, no half and half.

Do you remember Lily's story from the meet Jesus weeks, her story of accepting Jesus as her lord and saviour and coming into a new life with him. I would encourage you to listen to it if you haven't already but she talks about the clear difference we can expect upon accepting Jesus's offer of a new life. Where before she was stuck in a mire of mental health issues, constantly searching for answers that no medical professional could answer. She was propping herself up on her achievements, her sense of worth coming from her academic achievements and what people thought of her.

Upon coming to Jesus she felt an overwhelming sense of peace that can only come from Jesus. Instead of worrying about what others thought and how well she scored on tests, she cast those burdens on Jesus. Her identity now firmly rooted in her being adopted by Christ, secure in his love. Before in her old life she would hold onto bitterness and resentment, while now in the new she loves and forgives others freely. Because of the love and forgiveness Jesus has shown her. She now has true and lasting hope that only Jesus can give.

Lily had a response like that of Levi, she heard the call to a new life upon entering church that first time and she "got up, left everything and followed him".

There is nothing more secure, loving, freeing or truer than what Jesus offers.

Jesus called a sinful tax collector like Levi to follow him, and he calls us to follow him as well. Even those marginalised and on the outskirts of society. He has called us all to repentance, he has reconciled us to him and given us a new life. There is no one too sinful no one too far away. Jesus provides a new way to live, following him and his example. We need to leave behind our ideals of freedom and truth and lean into Jesus.

So I urge you, to not sit on the fence. But to make a decision to follow Christ. Believe me, the best before and after photo you could ever take is the one before and after coming to know Christ.