Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we continue a sermon series titled, “So You Can Know For Sure.” It is a study through the Gospel of Luke.

The text we are studying today is ▶ Luke 5:27-32.

This text is for anyone who has ever felt like a black sheep—the one who doesn’t fit, the one who is shunned, the one who feels unlovable, the one who stands out as a disgrace, the one whose constant companion is shame.

At the same time, this text also speaks to those of us who may feel that, based on merit, our station lies somewhere above the black sheep.

There are lessons for us today across the social spectrum.

Our text begins in ▶ Luke 5:27, where it says,

> ESV Luke 5:27 After this he [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. . . .

Levi lives and works in Capernaum. Capernaum is a small town. It has no more than 1,500 people. Everybody knows everybody in Capernaum. It is a predominately Jewish town within the land promised by God to the people of Israel, but it is now under Roman rule.

It is a commercial fishing town. It is also a customs post, where taxes are levied by the Roman government on goods sold, including fish. It’s situated on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee. There is a tax booth near the Sea—an elevated platform or bench—where the taxes are paid by commercial fishermen.

Levi is a tax collector. Tax collectors were generally despised by Jews. And for good reasons.

Tax collectors represented the Roman government, which was hated by Jews for conquering and now ruling the land God had given them. Tax collectors routinely abused and exploited their position. They served under Herod Antipas *(ahn-TEE-pawce)*, the Roman ruler of Galilee who granted them absolute power to take people's money. Rome would levy a certain tax on all goods, and tax collectors were authorized to collect that amount, plus whatever commission they wanted on top of that. Gouging was commonplace.

And so, hatred of tax collectors ran deep. Ancient Jewish writings tell us:

- Tax collectors were grouped with thieves and murderers.
- The mere touch of a tax collector rendered a Jewish person unclean.
- Jewish culture forbade receiving money from a tax collector because it was considered money from robbery.
- And while Jewish culture valued honesty, lying to tax collectors was permitted as a reasonable exception.

And in the eyes of Jews, as bad as tax collectors were, the very worst kind of tax collector was a ***Jewish*** tax collector because they were considered traitors. And Levi himself is a Jewish tax collector, named after the priestly tribe of Israel no less.

Ancient Jewish writings tell us:

- Jewish tax collectors were prohibited from serving as judges or witnesses in a court of law.
- They were excommunicated and expelled from the synagogue.
- And they were considered a disgrace to their families.

So, Levi is a social pariah in Capernaum. He is viewed as an immoral, disgraceful traitor—a black sheep.

Levi probably sees Jesus as he approaches the tax booth. He has seen him before and knows something about him. Let's consider what Levi must have known about Jesus by listing a ▶ chronology of events leading up to this point.

A little over a year earlier, in February, AD 29, Jesus called the first disciples to believe, as recorded in John 1:35-51.[1] John and Andrew were the first disciples to believe in Jesus. Then Andrew brought his brother, Simon, to Jesus, saying, "We have found the Messiah." Jesus changed Simon's name from Simon to Peter. It is believed that Simon's change of name marked his conversion.

What does this have to do with Levi?

Well, Peter and Andrew have a fishing business. And guess where it's headquartered? You got it: Capernaum. Part of Levi's job is to collect a kind of sales tax on fish brought to market by fishermen. So, Levi probably knows Peter and Andrew. They may see each other just about every work day. It's a small town.

Levi was beginning to learn about Jesus.

Then in January, AD 30, nearly a year later, Jesus healed the son of a government official.[2] The story is recorded in John 4:46-54. The official's son was seriously ill. The father left his hometown to go to Jesus in a neighboring town, asking him to heal his son. Jesus agreed, and the official returned home to his healed son. The father's hometown is none other than Capernaum. And he's a government official. And, what a coincidence, so is Levi! How many government officials can there be in the small village of Capernaum?

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[1] The timeline of events is taken from Johnston M. Cheney and Stanley Ellison, Jesus Christ: *The Greatest Life Ever Lived* (Eugene, OR: Paradise Publishing, 1999), 26.
[2] Ibid, 48.

Levi was learning more about Jesus.

Then, the following month, in February, AD 30, according to Luke 4:16-32, Jesus was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth.[3] and so he moved to Capernaum as his home base and began to preach. That's where Levi is. Levi probably heard him preach.

Levi was learning more about Jesus.

Then, according to Luke 4:33-37, Jesus cast out an unclean spirit in the synagogue in Capernaum. Exorcisms get attention. We're told that reports about Jesus "went out into every place in the surrounding region."

Levi was learning more about Jesus.

Then, according to Luke 4:38-41, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and many others in Capernaum. In the parallel account in the gospel of Mark, we're told "the whole city" was gathered around Peter's house. Surely, Levi heard about it.

Levi was learning more about Jesus.

Then, the next month, in March, AD 30, Jesus gave a miraculous catch of fish to Peter just off the shore of Capernaum.[4] It's recorded for us in Luke 5:1-10. Chances are good Levi watched the whole thing and even levied the tax on the fish.

Levi was learning more about Jesus.

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

In the same month, according to Luke 5:17-26, in Peter's home, Jesus forgave and healed a paralyzed man, who walked out of Peter's house glorifying God.[5] And you can bet Levi heard about it. Capernaum is a small town. He may even know the paralytic who was healed.

Back in ▶ Luke 5:27, when it says, "after this," it is referring to the healing of the paralytic. So, as Jesus is walking toward the tax booth, Levi's head is swimming with all he had learned about Jesus.

I cannot prove it, but I suspect that sometime before this moment, Levi had already come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

And yet, having believed in Jesus, I suspect Levi doubts that he has anything to offer Jesus. And he doubts if Jesus would ever want him. Because nobody else does. Levi probably doesn't even accept himself. He's a Jewish tax collector, the lowest of the low, a black sheep.

Levi is like the rich, profiteering slum lord that everybody hates. He has lived with the public scorn because there is good money in it. He has sold his soul, and he knows it. He has come to believe in Jesus, but he believes he is completely unworthy of anything Jesus has to offer. Surely, the Good Shepherd could not care about a black sheep like Levi.

As Jesus approaches Levi and then makes eye contact, we can only imagine what Levi is feeling. Perhaps he feels the familiar warm flush of shame. Perhaps the instant Jesus is about to say something, there is a flash of fear of what he might say.

And this makes what Jesus actually says so shocking. The last part of ▶ verse 27 records,

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[5] Ibid.

ESV Luke 5:27 . . . And he said to him, “Follow me.”

Jesus extends an invitation to Levi to become a follower. Jesus is recruiting Levi to be one of his disciples. Jesus is asking Levi, “Would you be one of my guys?”

And this is not a private moment. Jesus had just finished forgiving and healing the paralyzing man lowered through the roof of a house, which we covered last week. The parallel account in the gospel of Mark (2:13) says that, when Jesus left the house, a crowd followed. So, there are a bunch of people present. It is broad daylight. Everybody can see Levi on the elevated tax booth. Everybody can hear Jesus say to Levi, “Follow me.”

And you can almost hear the collective gasp from the crowd when they hear the invitation.

A Jewish tax collector!?

The people are shocked at the invitation. And Jesus wants them to be. He has orchestrated this moment.

And Levi is astonished. He can’t believe he is being extended this honor. “Why me?” And he begins to entertain a crazy idea Luke wants us to know. It is the crazy big idea of this sermon: ▶ Jesus loves black sheep. Jesus loves Levi, and he wants to be with him and work with him.

On Tuesday morning, Opie and I were pulling up to my office when a song came on the radio I had never heard before. It was mesmerizing to me, particularly as I was in the middle of thinking about Levi.

The song is called “Black Sheep” by Ben Fuller. It might as well be titled, “Levi’s Song.” Here’s what I heard Tuesday morning.

▶ [Music video here. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erc4IeGwfjk ]

▶ Jesus loves black sheep.

Without this idea, what Levi does next may seem rash and unrealistic. But when the power of this idea takes center stage, what he does next is more understandable. ▶ Verse 28 explains,

> ESV Luke 5:28 And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

Levi accepts the invitation to be a disciple. He immediately walks away from the job site to follow Jesus. Levi walks away from the good money that compensated for his bad reputation. Now all he's got is a bad reputation, and a new identity in Christ, who loves him and wants him. He is a disciple.

By the way, Levi goes by another name, too. In the Bible, after this encounter with Jesus at the tax booth, he is called Matthew. Eventually, he would be appointed as an apostle and would write the gospel that bears his name, the gospel of Matthew.

When something this good happens to you, you want to share it with your friends. Levi has friends, just not the socially upstanding kind. He's got friends in low places. And, no, I won't be playing Garth Brooks right now.
▶ Verse 29 explains,

> ESV Luke 5:29 And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

This is Levi's application of the big idea from last week: Find a way to bring a friend to Jesus.

Levi must have a pretty big house and the means to feed a crowd. Tax collecting is lucrative.

The guests include fellow tax collectors. We know from parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark that the "others" mentioned here include people labeled "sinners," which is a technical term used as a slur by the religious to describe people considered untaught, unrighteous, and otherwise undesirable. Such sinners were not fully welcome in synagogues.

And Jesus' disciples are there as well, including the Jewish fishermen, Peter, Andrew, and John. They are likely still reeling from the prospect of Levi joining their small group of disciples—not just a tax collector, but a *Jewish* one at that. Before they ever got to the feast, I imagine them wondering if Levi was going to spoil their small group of disciples. "How's this going to work?"

And just think of what it must have been like for them to be at this feast, sharing a meal with people who rip them off for a living. I can imagine Peter leaning over to Andrew, whispering, "What are we doing hanging out with these scumbags?"

When the Pharisees and scribes discover the kind of people who are at the feast, they grumble at the unseemliness of it all. ▶ Verse 30 says,

> ESV Luke 5:30 And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

The problem is not that Jesus and his disciples would have contact with such people, but that they would eat and drink with them. The table was a place where ideas were exchanged and fellowship was enjoyed among guests who are welcomed and honored. Eating and drinking with them

was tantamount to accepting them, which was deemed inappropriate and beneath any legitimate religious leader.

So, the question is put to the disciples: “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

Before the disciples can say, “Funny you should ask; we were wondering the same thing,” Jesus intervenes in ▶ verses 31 and 32.

> ESV Luke 5:31 And Jesus answered them, . . .

> ▶ ESV Luke 5:31 . . . “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Jesus mentions ▶ two groups of people here: those who are well versus those who are sick. He labels the same two groups another way: those who are righteous versus those who are sinners. We could label them the white sheep and the black sheep.

A key to understanding these two groups is to realize Jesus is referring to perception not reality. Some people, such as the Pharisees and scribes, *think* they are in the well and righteous group. That is their perception. But it is a self-righteous delusion because there is no such group. There are no white sheep.

In reality, there is only one group. In God’s economy, we are all black sheep. Everyone is a sinner in need of a Savior. Everyone is spiritually sick and in desperate need of a physician.

And Jesus casts himself in the role of the physician.

Scripture makes it very clear that, without Jesus, we are all incurably sick. Apart from Christ, no one is righteous; we're all sinners. I won't show it on the screen, but in Romans 3:10-12, the apostle Paul quotes the Old Testament in affirming this truth.

> ESV Romans 3:10 . . . "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

The point Jesus is making in answer to the Pharisees is that he has come to save those who humbly recognize their own need of a Savior. Jesus has come to rescue those who are open to the reality that they are black sheep who are lost.

Those who self-righteously deny their own spiritual sickness based on the delusion that they are well and don't require a physician overlook the very healing they need. Jesus offers salvation from the penalty of sin, but this offer will not be entertained by those who perceive they have no sin problem.

An important idea Jesus is trying to convey, not only to the Pharisees, but also to his own disciples, is that self-righteousness is self-defeating. This is true for both believers and unbelievers.

For unbelievers, such as the Pharisees in our story, self-righteousness is self-defeating because it deceives you into thinking that you don't need a Savior. It dupes you into thinking that you're alive and well, when, in fact, you are spiritually dead and need the new life only Jesus can provide.

For believers, such as the disciples in our story, self-righteousness is also self-defeating, but in a different way. When we believe in Jesus for eternal life, it is easy to think that we have become white sheep who are now morally superior to the black sheep.

But we're not. We're just black sheep who got saved.[6] And not because we were in any way deserving, but solely because the only white sheep who ever lived, Jesus, the unblemished lamb of God was sacrificed in payment for our sins. And he did it voluntarily because Jesus loves black sheep and wants to be with them. That's our ▶ big idea: Jesus loves black sheep.

Saved black sheep are no better than unsaved black sheep. Just ***better off***.

When self-righteousness deceives Christians into thinking we are better than others, it undermines the mission Jesus gave us. As his representatives, we are to bring the life of Jesus to our world. Self-righteousness obscures the truth at the center of the gospel message: Jesus loves black sheep.

It's hard to imagine any unbeliever wanting to hear anything about love coming from the mouth of a self-righteous, arrogant, condescending believer. The stench of Christian self-righteousness is repulsive. And everybody smells it but the person who wears it.

Our polarized culture tempts us to demonize those who are different than we are, those who don't share our values, those with whom we disagree. We can dress up our demonizing as righteous indignation. We can call it courageous and then high-five each other when we put the black sheep in their place with a good zinger. Especially on social media.

But I wonder. Is it just self-righteousness that deceives us into thinking we're white sheep?

[6] Of course, those of us who are born again enjoy the righteousness of Christ credited to our account and are thus declared righteous before God. But just because we have been declared righteous before God does not mean we are intrinsically righteous. We have no righteousness of our own.

Proverbs 6:16-17 lists seven things the Lord hates. Number one on the list is "haughty eyes," which is basically self-righteousness that looks down on others from an imagined position of moral or spiritual superiority.

If anyone had reason to be self-righteous, it would be Jesus. But it is Levi himself who would later quote Jesus in Matthew 11:29 as saying, "I am gentle and humble in heart" (NASB). And his life backed up his words.

Where is the love—where is the humility of the Lord Jesus Christ today?

Back in ▶ verse 32, Jesus says he has come to call sinners to "repentance." Contrary to popular opinion, this is not a call to clean up your act so you can be good enough to join the white sheep.

The original Greek word for "repentance" is μετάνοια *(meh-TAH-noya)*. The verb, "repent" is μετανοέω *(meh-tah-no-EH-oh)*. The verb is formed from two words, μετα, which means change, and νοέω, which means to think. So, the basic meaning of repentance is a change of mind or a change of heart.[7]

Context determines the nature of the change of mind. In our text, Jesus calls for sinners to have a change of mind about him and ourselves. To recognize that he is the Son of God, he is the one who gave himself to be our Savior, he is the source of eternal life, and we are all sick, sin-addicted black sheep for whom Jesus is our only hope. The change of mind is from unbelief to belief in the person and work of Jesus who saves sinners.

At the heart of this good news is the reason Jesus saves us. It is our ▶ big idea: Jesus loves black sheep.

[7] Charlie Bing, GraceLife Ministries at Repentance: What's in a Word.

Let’s pray. Thank you, Lord, that you love us as black sheep. May your love keep us humble and grateful. Amen.