“Rx for Wellness”

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Luke 10:25-37
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Each year the Gallup Poll measures the professions Americans admire most. People are asked to evaluate 22 professions in terms of honesty and ethical standards. The nursing profession has been at the top of the polls for 11 years running.

Pharmacists follow second on the list and doctors are fourth. It’s curious that nurses consistently outperform doctors in this poll. Clergy, I’m sad to report, are well down the rankings. Somehow, I don’t think Jesus would approve of our showing.

If you look to the bottom of the list regarding the professions Americans admire least, I hate to break the news to you that lobbyists are dead last. Politicians don’t fare much better. Car salespeople appear near the bottom every year. Don’t you think there ought to be a category for telemarketers?

If we were compiling a list of least admired professions in Jesus’ day, tax collectors would certainly be on the list. Tax collecting was considered a dirt bag job. No respectable Jew would aspire to collect taxes for the Roman government.

Since Israel was a vassal state in the vast Roman Empire, its citizens were obliged to pay all sorts of taxes to Rome—poll taxes, sales tax, road and bridge taxes and property taxes. Any Jew who would lower himself to collect money for Caesar would be labeled a traitor.

A tax collector was obliged to raise a specific amount of money for the government. Any income above this base amount functioned as commission for the tax collector. This would explain why tax collectors were notorious for gouging people. People relegated them to the same category as robbers and thieves. Tax collectors were ostracized from Jerusalem society and banned from the synagogue.
Jesus travels on the road where a tax collector named Levi has set up his toll booth. Levi happens to be his Jewish name. Matthew is his Greek name. No doubt Levi has taken a Greek name since he works for the Greek-speaking Roman government. Incidentally, he’s likely the same Matthew whose gospel bears his name.

Jesus invites Levi to, “Follow me” (Luke 5:27). Evidently, that’s all it takes. Levi gets up from his toll booth, leaves his lucrative trade and follows Jesus (5:28).

There must be more to this story than meets the eye. It’s hard to imagine that Levi makes a life altering decision after a single two-word summons from Jesus. My conjecture is that this tax collector has heard Jesus on previous occasions and has been already counting the cost. In any event, when Jesus issues the invitation, Levi is ready. He makes a clean break with his past to follow Jesus.

Levi wastes no time in telling his tax collecting cronies about what has happened. He then invites all his buddies to a barbeque to meet Jesus. The Pharisees show up unannounced. You could do this in those days. Guests could show up to a dinner party to which they were uninvited. Family homes were large in those days since they were built for several generations, and open, so that people could come and go easily. Uninvited guests could stand in the doorway or line the perimeter of the room to watch the interaction.

This isn’t the only time Jesus is queried about the company he keeps. In Luke 7, his detractors accuse him of being a glutton and drunkard. He has acquired something of a dubious reputation for associating with deviants and undesirables. He has gained a reputation for being known as “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (7:34).

The Pharisees went out of their way to avoid associating with people “with unclean hands.” They were fastidious about keeping laws of ritual purity. They wouldn’t think of breaking bread with these religious bottom-feeders. You can imagine their horror when the Son of God goes to dinner with them. Maybe now you can appreciate why Jesus always seems to be in the crosshairs with the religious establishment.
The Pharisees may be uninvited guests but they’re not shy about voicing their displeasure. They ask Jesus, “Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (5:31). Their brash question must have sucked all the air out of the room. Jesus, who never seems to be at a loss for words, delivers two one-line metaphors. The first has to do with health and sickness; the second contrasts righteous people with sinners.

Jesus’ first metaphor, “It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick,” is designed to trap his critics in their own twisted logic. Would they prefer doctors treat only healthy patients, for fear of catching an infection?

If there’s any ambiguity about Jesus’ intent in this first metaphor, the second clinches it. “I have come to call not the righteous but the sinners to repentance.” That’s why I dine with tax collectors and sinners. Do you have a problem with that?

Jesus’ decision to eat with sinners is very controversial in the gospels. He doesn’t pal around with the religious establishment. Instead, he hangs with all sorts of questionable people. It makes me wonder if Jesus were to make a surprise appearance in our day if he would spend all his time in church or frequent places where people gather; the Vienna Inn comes immediately to mind.

We urge you to spend time with spiritual friends in this church who share your faith and values. Our purpose isn’t to create an exclusive spiritual club; it’s to encourage one another in the things of faith. We also want you to mix it up with your neighbors. That’s what we’ve been talking about this Lent—how we can fulfill Jesus’ command to love our neighbors. We’re challenging you to reach out to the neighbor next door or the person who works in the cubicle near you or the people who ride the subway with you.
Let me go back to the way Jesus concludes our story. He makes a point of saying he has come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance. This word repentance scares some of you. That’s unfortunate, given that the word simply acknowledges that I’m going the wrong way. Jesus inaugurates his ministry with the words, “Repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Turn around and come to God.

I don’t suppose it’s much of a stretch for these tax collectors to identify themselves as people who need a Great Physician to heal them of the contagious sin. Yet, what about these Pharisees—I bet they have the hardest time admitting they need a spiritual cardiologist. No doubt they balk at the thought of checking the sinner box on their application to heaven.

Jesus wants to transform people. He wants to change us into the people God intends us to become. The first step in this transformation process is to admit our need. If we are unwilling to admit our need, there’s not much Jesus can do for us.

Let me illustrate what I believe Jesus is saying. There are all sorts of addictions in our day. We hear lots about addiction to substances like alcohol and prescription drugs. But we can also be addicted to everyday pleasures like food, gambling, sex, video games, computers, work, exercise and shopping. There is a marked tendency for people to take God’s good gifts and to give them exaggerated importance.

Suppose for the purpose of illustration that you are addicted to something I just mentioned. It’s pretty obvious to everyone who knows you. But it’s not so obvious to you either because you are too close to the situation or you have a hard time admitting that something else has control over your life. When well-meaning people gently try to point out this problem to you, you become defensive and snap, “I don’t have a problem.” And everything goes along this way until the problem intensifies and we hit bottom. Then we have a big problem!
The first step to facing the problem is admitting our need. It starts with the honest admission that something seeks mastery over our lives. Nothing happens until we acknowledge the need.

Why is it so hard for us to admit to ourselves, let alone somebody else, that we have a need? Are we so concerned with coming off as capable and self-sufficient that we actually refuse outside help?

Let’s circle back to our need for God. Some people cringe at the thought that they might need God. It sounds so, well, needy. But I wonder if God created us to want him and need him. What if God placed eternity in our hearts?

As long as you insist, “I don’t need Jesus, I’m perfectly capable of handling this problem on my own,” it’s not going to matter what Jesus offers because you’re not buying. As long as you take umbrage with being labeled a sinner and put yourself in the clean living category, Jesus’ invitation to salvation will likely fall on deaf ears.

Some of you don’t like the thought of giving up control of your life to anyone, not even God. But as I’ve said many times, we are not in control. There is only the illusion of control. I can turn my life over to this Great Physician who heals our souls and whose purpose for our lives can be trusted.

Jesus as the Great Physician heals human hearts. The first step in this transformation process is to admit our need. Don’t deny Jesus’ benevolent offer. Admit the need.