Need a Doctor?

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 5:27-32

August 9, 2015
Roland Hazard was a successful businessman in the early 1920s. His addiction to alcohol was also destroying his family and career. He resolved to seek treatment in Switzerland with a renowned psychiatrist named Carl Jung. While under Dr. Jung’s care, Roland made strides and felt ready to return home. But he relapsed and started drinking again. He went back to Switzerland for more treatment. Dr. Jung rocked his world when he said, “Roland, you’re a hopeless alcoholic. There’s nothing more I can do for you except take your money and I don’t want to do that.”

“Isn’t there anything more I can do?” Roland asked.

“Yes,” said Jung, “There is something else you can do. Have a religious conversion. Have a religious experience.”

Roland took his advice and joined the Oxford Group. This ministry is based on four key practices: confessing our sins and temptations to another Christian, surrendering our life—past, present and future—to God’s care and keeping, making restitution to all we have wronged and listening for God’s guidance and carrying it out.

Roland admitted his addiction to alcohol. He surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. He made restitution with people he had wronged and listened to God’s Word in Scripture and sermon, and sought to put it into practice.

Roland returned to the states and started an Oxford Group in Vermont. He started it with one of his former drinking buddies. One of the first people to join their ranks was Bill Wilson, who went on to start Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

Dr. Jung had the audacity to tell Roland his situation was hopeless as far as medicine was concerned. His only hope was to turn his life over to God. Today’s story is about another man who was healed and transformed by God’s power.

Jesus calls people to follow him. He calls Levi to follow him in our story. Levi is also identified as Matthew in the gospels although he’s no relation to the guy who invented Levi jeans.

Levi makes his living as a tax collector. Some of you will recall that I spoke about tax collectors last month. The Romans contracted with Jews like Levi to collect taxes in Israel in order to fund military expansion in
the Roman Empire. Any Jew willing to collect taxes for the dreaded Roman government was considered a traitor.

Tax collectors were notoriously corrupt. They collected a designated amount for the Roman government. Anything above that tax was theirs to pocket. Honesty among tax collectors was so rare according to one early Roman account, that people actually built a monument to an honest tax collector.

Levi is sitting at a toll booth one day collecting a tax on goods coming into Capernaum when Jesus approaches Levi and says, “Follow me” (Luke 5:27). Luke reports that Levi gets up, leaves his toll booth and follows Jesus (5:28).

Was it really that simple? Whether Luke has compressed their dialogue into a single summons is anyone’s guess. But clearly Luke is highlighting Levi’s sudden break with his past.

Our story now shifts to Levi’s house. Levi has invited his tax collecting buddies and other sinners to dinner in Jesus’ honor. All manner of tax collectors, robbers and prostitutes are seated at the table with Jesus. The party is a virtual “who’s who” among sinners in Capernaum. The Pharisees are grumbling off to the side about Jesus choice of dinner guests, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (5:30).

These Pharisees are decent, law-abiding people. They are fastidious about keeping all 613 laws of the Torah. They eat only kosher food. They tithe 10 percent all the way down to table spices. They commit large portions of Scripture to memory. They never miss a synagogue service or religious festival.

The Talmud (rabbinic commentary on the Torah) states that people of the law (Pharisees) had no business dining with people who didn’t observe the law (tax collectors). Sharing table fellowship would be tantamount to full acceptance. If truth be told, these Pharisees think Jesus ought to be winning and dining them!

Jesus’ answer to their question is classic: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (5:31-32). This is where our dialogue ends. Jesus has stopped his critics dead in their tracks. Will these Pharisees admit to being sick?
We would never say, “I think I’ll go to the doctor when I feel better.” Only those who are sick know they need a doctor.

Luke doesn’t ever tell these tax collectors to clean up their act. Here’s my hunch. They already know themselves to be sinners. Society has reinforced this message many times over. People knee deep into sin don’t typically need to be reminded of their transgressions. Religious people, on the other hand, need to be periodically reminded.

Tim Keller, who pastors a church in New York City, writes, “One of the interesting things about preaching to New Yorkers is you don’t have to spend much time convincing them they’re sinners. They know they’re wading waist deep in evil every day of the week. It’s on every block. The city can bring out the worst in people. When I preach in New York on Sunday morning, I spend only two minutes telling people they’re sinners. When I’m in the suburbs, it takes about twenty minutes.”

I have four action steps to suggest regarding this passage. In case your mind has been wandering, let me bring you back to the “so what?” portion of this sermon.

First Step: we need to be honest enough to admit there is something wrong with us that we cannot fix ourselves. Our spiritual diagnosis is something called sin. Sin is any thought, word or deed that separates us from God. Sin can be something we have done or have failed to do. The problem caused by sin cannot be fixed by us. We need rescue from a power beyond ourselves.

Ninety people from our church participated in a Global Leadership Summit this past week. Bill Hybels, the keynote speaker, told a story about traveling on an airplane. He exchanged pleasantries with his seatmate who asked about what he did for a living. When Bill said he was a pastor, the man replied, “We don’t need to talk about religion. I’m good. I’m good.” Yet the man continued to engage Bill in conversation about faith. Finally, Bill drew a diagram for the man with God at the top and evil the bottom. Then he asked, “Where are you on this goodness ladder?”

“Are you as good as Mother Teresa?” he asks. She struggled with self-doubt and periods of God’s absence. She would rank herself in the bottom half of this diagram.”
Bill continued, “Are you as good as Billy Graham? Graham often said of himself, ‘I am a very sinful man that God has looked kindly upon.’ Bill placed his name under Mother Teresa.”

“What about you?’ the man asked.” It would not surprise you that Hybels positioned himself below these two giants in the faith.”

“Where would you place yourself?” Bill asked. The man tucked his name under Bill’s. Then he asked, ‘Am I in trouble?’ Hybel answered, ‘You have a gap. God sees this gap and provides us a means by which our sins can be forgiven and we can be brought back into union with God.’ Only those who know they are sick need a doctor.”

Second Step: We need to be humble enough to receive God’s means of healing through our Great Physician Jesus Christ. Jesus said to the people in our story, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). Repentance in the Greek means to turn around. We turn around from going our own way to going God’s way. We follow Jesus Christ, this Great Physician of our souls. He can save us in ways a medical doctor never can. Only sick people need a doctor.

Third Step: We need to be courageous enough to follow through on Jesus’ prescription for a cure. Let’s suppose my signature sin is gossip. I like to talk about people behind their backs. If I am intent on following Jesus’ prescription, I read what he says about gossip which is substantial. Then I ask him for help in speaking more graciously about people.

John Newton was a captain of a slave ship who brought people against their will from Africa to work the sugar cane plantations in West Indies. He became a Christian and later a pastor. He writes, “I have suffered relapses since I have come under His care. I am a perverse and unruly patient. I have too often neglected His prescriptions and broken the regimen He appoints me to observe.” Only those who know they are sick need a doctor.

Fourth Step: We need to be disciplined enough to attend to practices to help our growth and recovery. Think of this step as comparable to following up a medical procedure or surgery with physical therapy.
Our nine directors on staff met together last month and wrestled with how to distill our ministry into a format people can easily follow. We arrived at a formula we call Worship+2.

It starts with worship. We ask you to give the same priority to worship that you give to your work. (Work is defined as being in school, raising children at home, retirement or working for a paycheck). You won’t wake up tomorrow and decide whether to go to work or raise your children. You’ve already made that decision. We don’t advise waking up next Sunday morning and deciding whether you feel like coming to worship. Make this commitment in advance so that worship is already a priority in your schedule.

We also want you to identify one place for growth and one opportunity for service. We’ve highlighted in your bulletin six possibilities for growth and six possibilities for service in this church. There’s a wall along the entrance to the Great Hall that provides more information about these 12 possibilities for growth and service.

I know what you are saying. “I’m too busy.” Funny thing! We always seem to have time for the things important to us. I’m inviting you to take faith to the next level. If you are new to faith, start at the beginning by opening your life to this Great Physician. If you are a veteran to matters of faith, attend to practices that will help you grow and serve God. Only those who know they are sick need a doctor.

Worship + 2

• Make worship a weekly priority
• Identify a place to grow
• Find an avenue for service