

Luke 5:27-33

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 August 2012

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] What do you think of sinners? I trust that your response is along the lines of, well, I'm one of them, and that is true. Something we were giving some thought to in the morning, how we're all sinners. But in the passage that we've read and that we want to think about this evening, the word sinners is used in a way that evidently is intended to refer to a specific grouping of people in distinction from others who were not, in the estimation of those using the term, sinners. There in Luke's Gospel and in chapter 5, in verse 30, we have this language used, but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belong to their sect complained to the disciples, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? So clearly, those who used this phrase thought that you could distinguish between a particular group of people, and we'll think about who these people might have been, who you could call sinners, and that there were others who were not part of that group, who were not sinners, as the word was being used. What I want to do this evening, what I want us to do together, is to explore different attitudes that are evident in the passage to this class of people designated sinners. Now, for this to be of any profit, to be of any practical value for us, we need to think a little bit about who these people were, and as we do, try and establish who would be the modern equivalent of those so designated as sinners. Now, there is a variety of definitions that are given for this word. Those who comment on the way this word is used in this passage, and in a similar way in other passages have different notions, not necessarily mutually exclusive, but a variety of definitions or descriptions of who these people are, who are these sinners, who are being described in this way. At one end of the spectrum, if we want to think of it in those terms, is the suggestion that the suggestion that the sinners refers to, and forgive the language, the scum of the earth, the lowest of the low in society. Those who are publicly and brazenly morally degenerate, they are sinners.

And this is what the Pharisees are thinking of, those who fit that description. They're sinners. Well, that's at one end, if you wish, of the spectrum of possibilities as to who are being referred to in this word as sinners. But the term could also be used, and is perhaps being used here less colorfully, of any who were guilty of any publicly known sin. Maybe not the lowest of the low, if we can use that language, and I'm not vouching for it or saying that that's appropriate language to use, but in the context of what we're saying. So, not the lowest of the low, but those who, for one reason or another, are morally suspect, at least in the estimation of those making the judgment.

Now, really what we're trying to do is to identify who the Pharisees were thinking of. We're not giving credit to their way of thinking. We're simply trying to work out what it is they're saying and who it is they're describing, and we're looking at possibilities. But there's another way in which this designation, this term sinners, could be being used, and I would suggest it's the more likely way in which it's being used here. The term would have been used in New Testament times and in the New Testament itself, especially by the Pharisees of what we might call the common man. There's a term in Hebrew that would have been current in the time of Jesus, *am hairetz*, which translated is the people of the land. And the religious establishment, and very especially those of a stricter disposition like the Pharisees, would have had this view that the people of the land, that is the common man, were below them. And they might be using a term like sinners to speak of the common man. So, not those who were particularly morally degenerate, but those who the Pharisees considered to be ignorant, particularly ignorant of the law and of their many and varied regulations that they had added on to the law, and as a result of their ignorance, were likely to be those who did not comply with the many and varied regulations. They were the people of the land. They were the sinners, and they were below the Pharisees. And it seems to me that it's much more likely that this is what is being considered, or these are the people that are being described by the Pharisees when they speak of tax collectors and sinners. These are people who were not, in the opinion of most, you might say, in the opinion of reasonable people, these are not people who were really bad. It's interesting, actually, that the word, literally, sinners, is a word that, in Greek, comes from the verb to miss. So, if we were to translate it literally, we could say that the missers, the idea being those who miss the mark. And that would tie in a little with what we're saying.

So, you have all these regulations that the religious establishment had said were important, but you had all these people, the vast majority of people, who missed the mark. They didn't live up to these regulations. They were ignorant of many of them. It's not surprising there were so many of them, but they were disparagingly referred to by the elite or the religious elite as the people of the land, the common people, the sinners. So, you have these different possibilities. Well, I've already indicated what I think is the more likely one, which is this final one. But maybe it's necessary to give some justification for why we would go for this option. Well, if we look at the passage itself and consider what is the more likely way in which this word is being used by the Pharisees in the context of this passage. The context of the passage is of Levi, or Matthew, who was despised, yes, but nonetheless a wealthy member of society who holds this banquet in honor of Jesus. And we're told that at this banquet were gathered tax collectors and sinners. Well, that's the way the Pharisees describe the guest list, tax collectors and sinners. Now, at a gathering of that nature where these people would have been meeting with the host who was, as I say, an important person, though, yes, a despised one, is it likely that there would have been the lowest of the low, those who were morally degenerate in a public and brazen way? It seems unlikely. It seems unlikely that they would have formed part of Levi's or Matthew's social circle. It seems much more likely that they would have been just the regular people, the people of the land, in the view of the Pharisees, to be despised because of their ignorance and their disobedience to the many regulations, but nonetheless, just regular folk.

[8 : 18] Now, if indeed that is a legitimate conclusion to come to, I think that's a very helpful one for us to think about how we will apply what we're going to do, which is to think of the attitudes that there are to these people for ourselves. Because, you see, if we say that this is who is being spoken about, then we can bring this forward, as it were, to our day and think, well, who would be the equivalent people in our day? Well, the equivalent people in our day would be just your regular folk who aren't religious, who aren't Christian, who maybe know very little about the Bible, aren't particularly concerned with obeying God's law, but just regular folk. They could be very pleasant neighbors, very appreciated colleagues, the common people, the people of the land. These are the kind of people that it would seem that the Pharisees are speaking of and despising.

Well, having established that, or at least suggested that that is what is being spoken of, or these are the people who are being spoken of, I want us to think about the different attitudes that we find towards them. And I think in the passage we find four people or groups of people who give evidence of the attitude that they have to sinners. Or if you wish, we could think of outsiders. We who are Christians, by the grace of God, we can think of ourselves as the insiders, and then you have the outsiders. What is the attitude that we should have to them as illustrated by the attitudes that we find in this passage? Some that we will want to replicate and some that we will want to avoid. Well, who demonstrate an attitude of one kind or another? Well, clearly the Pharisees and those of their sect, the teachers of the law, they give evidence of a certain attitude to those whom they designate as sinners, to those who are irreligious, to those who don't match up to their standards. They show a particular attitude. I suggest that Luke also hints at his attitude, and we'll just notice that briefly, and you can see what you think of whether he does indeed give evidence of his own attitude. Then, of course, Matthew or Levi, he demonstrates a particular attitude to those designated sinners. And then, of course, Jesus very clearly and very powerfully demonstrates what his own attitude is to these people, these sinners or these outsiders. So, let's think of each of these in turn, these attitudes that we can identify in the passage. First of all, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Well, in verse 30, we can read what they say, and from that take a view.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to the disciples, that is, the disciples of Jesus, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

Well, we can say a few things concerning their attitude that is very evident in what they say. First of all, we can notice that their attitude towards these people was of disdain and of superiority.

They look down on and are very proud to look down on those they consider ignorant and sinful.

[11 : 59] They consider themselves very much better. They are not sinners. These people are sinners, but they are not sinners. These people are ignorant, but they are not ignorant. So, there is a very crude, you might say, quite brutal attitude of disdain and superiority. Now, I would imagine, I would hope, and I think I can safely conclude that all of us here would agree that that is not a proper attitude to those designated by the Pharisees as sinners and that we are suggesting simply as a reference to the bulk of regular people who are not particularly religious as we try and bring it to our own times.

I would hope we would all say, well, that's not a right attitude. We shouldn't look down on such folk with disdain. We shouldn't consider ourselves to be superior. And I'm sure we would agree that that is not a right and proper attitude. But let's think a little bit more about the attitude of the Pharisees.

Another aspect of this attitude that they have towards sinners is of avoidance. Now, the Pharisees would not have been at this banquet. You read the passage, and you might imagine that they were mingling there at the banquet, but we can be pretty certain that they wouldn't have been doing that precisely for this reason, that they wouldn't have been seen dead in such company. But they had ways of finding out who were at the party. I imagine it wouldn't have been that difficult to have discovered, well, who were present there. And having discovered who were there, that Jesus was there, that His disciples were there, that the tax collectors were there, well, clearly it was at the home of Matthew, that these sinners were there, they come to a judgment on this. And their judgment is that Jesus and His disciples are doing wrong because they are mingling with these people. They're mingling with tax collectors. They're mingling with sinners.

And this is something that they should not do if they consider themselves to be religious. Jesus was a rabbi. He was a teacher. His followers were clearly men, though ordinary people, but nonetheless, clearly those who claim some religious conviction, following this rabbi, this teacher of the law. And they shouldn't be mixing with the people of the land, with the common people, with the irreligious, with the ignorant. That wasn't proper. Their attitude was one of avoidance.

They were of the view that to mix with those kind of people would not only be unpleasant, but spiritually damaging. Theirs was a theology of salvation by separation.

[14 : 52] But what about us? We would, I hope, reject the theology, the theology of separation in principle, but what about in practice? In practical terms, is it not the case that we can often be separatists?

One way of considering whether that's the case is to just ask ourselves, and I ask you in this past week, just as an example, in this past week, with whom have you mixed socially? Have you mixed socially with any who are outsiders, who are not Christians, who don't share your convictions of faith? Or in practice are you one who separates yourself from them? Not because you think you must, or because that's what you should do, but simply in practice, that is the way you live. The Pharisees then looked down with disdain and superiority. They avoided sinners. Another thing we can say about them in their attitude towards sinners, and in their behavior towards sinners, so-called, is that they were reactive rather than proactive. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, here I'm simply saying something that we don't actually find in the passage, but that I think is legitimate to include at this point, and that is that among the Pharisees, there would have been those. You know, the Pharisees often are presented as the baddies in the New Testament account and in the Gospels. They're the baddies, but of course, many of them were genuine, sincere men who thought that they were doing what God wanted them to do, and many of them would have been pleasant enough, I'm sure. And among them, perhaps among many of them, their attitude would have been that if one of these sinners had come to them seeking help, if they'd come to a Pharisee and said, you know, I'm ignorant of the law, I'm living a life that I know isn't pleasing to God, help me, I want to learn, I want to change my life. There would have been many Pharisees who would have been very happy to help such a person, to provide them with the instruction that they were looking for, and to help them to live lives that were more pleasing to God as they understood it. But what a Pharisee would never have done, even the best of them, is they would have never have gone out in search of such. They would have never gone out to look for those who were in need of instruction in the law that they might live lives that are more pleasing to God. That's why I say they're reactive rather than proactive in their attitude to outsiders. Now, I think when we think about that aspect of the attitude of the Pharisees, we're coming, I think, a little closer to home.

I'm sure we would all be delighted if many neighbors here from the neighborhood would come to church. We would be delighted. I hope we would give them a good welcome, and I think in some measure we would.

I hope we would. But will we go out to seek them out? Will we go out to look for them? Will we simply wait and react? No doubt, very happily and generously, I hope. Or will we go out and seek those who are outside? Just of general interest on this matter of this idea of the people of the land, the *ham haret*, the term used in Hebrew, that we're identifying with this grouping called sinners.

I was reading an article in the Jewish Encyclopedia. This is a publication that dates to the beginning of last century, but by those who know about these things is deemed to be a very helpful source of information on the Jewish world, and it's a Jewish publication. Very interesting what it says concerning the attitude of the Pharisees, of the religious establishment, to the am haret, the people of the land, the sinners in the time of Jesus. And I'll just read what it says, because I think it's instructive in terms of warning us as to the kind of attitudes we should have and the dangers of not having the right attitude. And I simply quote from the Encyclopedia, such exclusiveness, it's referring to the Pharisees, naturally tended to intensify the hatred between the masses and the Pharisees. See, the masses, not just some small group of really bad people, but the masses and the Pharisees. There can be no doubt that it was this contemptuous and hostile attitude of the Pharisaic schools towards the masses that was the chief cause of the triumphant power of the Christian church. In preaching the good tidings to the poor and the outcast,

[19 : 52] Jesus of Nazareth won the great masses of Judea. This isn't a Christian publication. This is a Jewish publication. But isn't it interesting, this analysis that it gives? It says this superior attitude of the Pharisees was actually favorable for the advance of the gospel because the masses saw the contrast. They said, well, the Pharisees hate us. The Pharisees don't want to mix with us. The Pharisees avoid us. But the Christians, this Jesus, these disciples, they're not like that. And so they were drawn to the message that they brought. I think there is a challenge there for us if we just give it some thought. Well, that's one group, one attitude, the attitude of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. But moving quickly on, I want to suggest an attitude that we find in Luke himself.

Now, Luke here serves as the one who records for us the incident. So we might ask the question, well, does he express an opinion? Is he not simply telling us what happened? I think there is a little detail that may or may not be revealing in this regard. I would invite you to notice the different way that the Pharisees and Luke describe those present at Matthew's banquet. So first of all, we've already noticed how the Pharisees describe them. They're in verse 30. They are tax collectors and sinners. But notice that in verse 29, where we have Luke describing the incident, we have Luke's way of describing those present at the banquet. How does Luke describe them? There in verse 29, a large crowd of tax collectors and, well, not sinners, and others. There may not be great significance there, but it's an interesting contrast. The Pharisees speak of this gathering as tax collectors and sinners. Luke speaks of them as tax collectors and others. It becomes more intriguing when we notice a parallel passage and of particular interest is in Matthew's gospel, because who better to tell us about this incident than Matthew himself. And we notice there in

Matthew chapter 9, and from verse 9, we have his account of this occasion. Matthew chapter 9 and verse 9. But of particular interest is the way he describes those who gathered at his party.

There in verse 10, we read, while Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. So Matthew uses the same language of the Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners, whereas Luke speaks of tax collectors and others.

Now, can we draw anything from this? Is it significant, this distinction? Could it be a function of Luke being Greek, while Matthew is a Jew and so uses Jewish designations? I think, in all honesty, I don't know.

[22 : 58] But I do wonder whether there might not be warrant in suggesting, and I wouldn't go beyond that language, in suggesting that Luke deliberately avoids a derogatory term to describe these people. He treats them, even in his description of the account, with courtesy and respect, and avoids language that would create barriers or distance and lack of trust. I leave that with you to see what you think of that possibility. If it is the case, then surely there is a lesson there for us in the manner in which we even speak about others and treat others, that we would do so with courtesy and respect, even when we are in the way in which we are in the way in which we are in the way in which we are in the way in which we live. And that which we believe or do not believe is maybe very different to ourselves. But moving on to Matthew, Matthew and Jesus, the attitudes first of Matthew and then of Jesus.

Matthew's attitude finds expression in verses 27 to 29. Now, very briefly, we can identify Matthew as a tax collector who worked in Capernaum in the service of Herod Antipas, various theories as to what taxes he collected. One intriguing view is that his tax booth by the Sea of Galilee would have served for taxing fishermen. Now, if this is true, then it makes his willingness to follow Jesus and align himself with his erstwhile victims particularly courageous. But as I say, there's many views as to what taxes he did collect, and it's not of great significance. More importantly, given our concern this evening, is what can we say about Matthew's attitude to sinners? He, of course, in the estimation of the Pharisees, was a sinner. But our interest is the attitude he demonstrates following his dramatic decision to follow Jesus. We're not going to think about that decision, about Jesus calling him to follow me, and he leaves everything and follows Jesus. There's so much that could be said, but that's not our concern. What of the attitude he adopts to those designated sinners?

Well, Matthew, very differently from the Pharisees, far from adopting an attitude of disdain, which would have been very hypocritical, or of separation, throws a party. He arranges this great banquet to which the sinners are invited. They don't just happen to be there. They haven't turned up, parachuted at the event. No, Matthew has invited them to be there at his banquet in his home. His attitude to those deemed sinners is of friendship and generosity. He provides food and drink for all those who gather. His home is open to them. There is no hint of superiority or seeking to keep a distance and maybe establish a completely new circle composed entirely of fellow followers of Jesus.

Matthew doesn't say, well, I'm a follower of Jesus now. I can have nothing to do with these sinners. I'm a follower of Jesus now. All my social interaction and the people who are going to be on my guest list, they have to be followers of Jesus. No more mixing with tax collectors and certainly no more mixing with sinners. That's not for me. That's not his attitude at all.

But there's also merit in noting the root motivation for holding this banquet to which sinners are invited and welcomed. Well, what is the language that we have there in verse 29? Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house. Tax collectors were invited, sinners were invited, but the purpose of the banquet, the motivation of the banquet, the one in whose name the banquet is held and for whose honor the banquet is held is Jesus. He held a banquet for Jesus. And that surely is significant. His primary concern is to honor Jesus. Now, we can, I think, reasonably assume that he was concerned with making Jesus known, presenting Jesus to his friends and acquaintances that they too might choose to follow him as they hear him speak and teach. And I think that recognition of the fundamental purpose for the banquet does provide a helpful balance for us as we consider our attitude and social interaction with those considered by the

[27 : 32] Pharisees to be sinners, those we have identified as simply outsiders, those who are irreligious, those who don't share our convictions of faith, those who are not Christians. We should not shy away from such friendship. We should open our homes in a spirit of generous friendship. But we should be ever concerned that whatever we do is for Jesus and with the purpose of honoring him. Now, that doesn't mean that every social occasion is some devious means of proselytizing, but nonetheless that underpinning everything that we do, everything that we do, everything that we do, and the manner in which we relate to others, there is this concern that what we do is for Jesus and to honor Jesus. I think it's helpful for us to even evaluate the friendships that we have and the social interaction in which we engage and ask ourselves, well, why do we do it? Is it for Jesus? Is there in what we do a concern to honor Jesus?

But we finish with looking briefly at Jesus himself and his attitude to these sinners or outsiders. Verses 31 and 32, Jesus answered them, that is the Pharisees and teachers of the law, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. What is the attitude of Jesus to sinners? Well, we can say two or three things. First of all, we can say his attitude is realistic. He recognizes that these sinners, so-called, are indeed spiritually sick and needy. They do need a doctor. He's not saying that the Pharisees are healthy. There is clearly an ironic edge to what he says, and we're not going to touch on that. But what we are simply identifying is that he does recognize, Jesus does recognize, that those designated sinners in a very hypocritical way, but nonetheless, those designated sinners by the Pharisees are sinners and do need to repent. So, he has a very realistic attitude towards these people. But perhaps even more importantly, or alongside his realism, there is, in the attitude of

Jesus, a great love towards them. This love is implicit in Luke's account. His concern to bring healing and his call to repentance is grounded in his love for them. He wants the best for them. He wants to heal them. He wants to restore them, and this is motivated by his love for them. That's, as I say, implicit in the account we've read in Luke. In Matthew's account, it's more explicit because there's an additional or a fuller account of what Jesus says. In Matthew's account, in chapter 9 and verse 13, there's an additional phrase that Jesus is recorded as saying in response to the Pharisees, and it's this, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. And then rather intriguingly, he says, go out and try and work out what I mean by that. Well, what does he mean by that? Well, I think what he means by that is that the Pharisees were concerned with sacrifice, where sacrifice simply is a word that represents all the regulations that they were so careful to perform. And Jesus is saying that his primary concern, he's not disparaging sacrifice, but he's saying his primary concern is mercy. His primary concern is steadfast love for those who are in need, and that his motivation is grounded in love. It is love that regulates and explains his attitude to sinners. He loves them. He loves them.

And the question, it's such an obvious one, but one that needs to be posed, what about us? Is that the attitude that we have to those who are outsiders, if we want to use that designation? So, Jesus is realistic. He's loving, but also, and here to contrast him with the Pharisees, he's proactive.

We said of the Pharisees that they might receive a sinner who came looking for help, but they would never go out to find such a person. With Jesus, it's completely different. He himself uses the language of having come. He says, I have come. I have come in search of sinners. That's why I'm here.

[31 : 55] That's why I left. Communion with my Father in heaven. I have come to seek and to save that which was lost. What about us? Do we go out with gospel intentionality, to use a bit of jargon, to engage with those who are on the outside, motivated by love and grounded in a realistic recognition of the urgent need that all have to hear and respond to the gospel? So, we have the attitude of Jesus very briefly commented on. But as we draw things to a close, I end where I began by posing the question, what do you think of sinners? As we've sought to understand this designation, is there something of the Pharisee in you? What of the generous friendship shown by Matthew and his underlying desire to honor Jesus? And what of Jesus himself? As servants, we are not greater than our Master. And so, may our attitude be grounded in love for those who are outside, and find expression in conscious and persevering, reaching out to such. And may God help us as so to do. Let us pray.