

A SECOND CHANCE IN LIFE

Luke 5:12–29

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I've called this message "A Second Chance in Life," because in our passage, we see three persons who are given a second chance in life: a leper, a paralytic, a tax collector.

I saw a young boy being given a second chance in life this week, and it was really thrilling. Last Sunday morning in the service, in my pastoral prayer, I prayed for Rick, who was going to have heart surgery. I didn't know it—I hadn't spotted him—but he was in the congregation. He said, "My heart almost stopped when you called out my name." He went into the hospital on Monday, and on Tuesday he was operated on. There was a membrane in the area of his heart that was causing an 80 percent blockage of the blood. It was a very risky surgery. The surgery was going to take between four and a half and five hours. Ricky came through it in two and a half. On Friday, all tubes were disconnected and he was already walking about a block, and he comes home tomorrow. He has been given a second chance in life. When he's well enough to come to church in a couple of weeks, I want you to meet him, because so many of you have been praying for him that knew about his surgery this week.

It's great to see a young person—or a person of any age...you may be here in your eighties, and not ten, and you need a second chance in life. One of the great things that ought to happen to us when we read the Gospels is that we simply can't treat the story as though it were external to us. If you go away from this service today and say, "The pastor talked about a leper from a long time ago, a paralytic and a tax collector," then the message won't have any value for you. But if you can internalize it and find the leper in you, the paralytic in you, the tax collector in you, then this will be a message where the Lord will really speak to your heart.

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I. The first story is of a leper who comes to Jesus and is healed.

When I was a kid and would read this word “leper” in my Bible, I didn’t know how to enunciate it correctly and I thought it was a “leaper.” I could never figure out what these lepers had that they kept coming to Jesus. Had I realized it, I knew what leprosy was because my parents were missionaries in China and Tibet. On many occasions in my childhood, I had seen lepers begging beside of the road, wrapped in the dirt; sort of the bag-people of the Orient...their fingers gone, their toes gone, noses, ears, facial features gone. Leprosy in its form like that is a very deteriorative kind of disease.

Luke, who is the medical physician, is telling us something very profound about the man with leprosy that Matthew and Mark in their accounts don’t give. That is, Luke notes that the man was full of leprosy. In the King James or the RSV, you’ll find that word “full” or “advanced stages.” Luke alone knows that. He’s a doctor and he’s interested in things like that. That means that this man’s leprosy was in its later stages.

So my mind can readily picture him as a person who was sort of dirty, had worn-out clothes...a disheveled kind of a person. My mind can also picture that man a few years before, when perhaps as a married man, a husband and father, he came home from work. Maybe he had a middle class job and the blotch on his skin had appeared. He had just been given the word that he was unclean. That man, in his day, was isolated. I doubt that his wife would have even kissed him goodbye. He’d have left his home, left his community, left his town, to live out in the countryside and in the caves with the other lepers.

Not only was he confined to a terrible illness and to a social stigma, but lepers did not even work, because no one would buy the products that they made. So they had no chance for even feeling like their life was in any degree productive. Probably the only comparison we have in our

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culture with a person with leprosy would be a person with AIDS; someone who is just sort of written off. They're contaminated and no one wants anything to do with them. So they segregate them, restrict them and let them die.

This man came to Jesus and said, "If You will, You can make me clean." He confessed the power of Jesus. And that was a significant step of faith on his part because, thus far in the Gospels, there is no other account of healing of leprosy. So, for this man to make the transfer that, if Jesus had done other kinds of things He could also do this—arrest the worst disease there was and make him new and do a restorative touch of plastic surgery in his body—he was a believing person. "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean."

But it's no enough to simply look at the leper. I've said it was important to look at the leper in us. Perhaps you have the sense, "If you really knew me, Jesus, You wouldn't have anything to do with me." But, of course we know the Lord knows everything about us. If I were to ask you an honest question, how many of you have something in your life that is a secret with you, that nobody else knows? It's uncleanness... a spiritual contamination in your life. Only you know and you realize God knows. Jesus is telling us, through this healing of the leper, that it's right that we come to Him and bring that contamination that keeps us away from God, keeps us away, even from wholesome relationships with others, and cries out to Him, "Lord, You can if You're willing touch me."

It's so easy to stigmatize people. No one was touching the leper. Maybe there are people who feel that God won't touch you because you're too contaminated. I had a special sense that, even in the service today, there would be one woman or more who at one time in your past has had an abortion. When you sit in a service or hear a pro-life statement by someone such as myself, it sort of goes through you to the core of your being, because you feel like that which has happened

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in your life has forever soiled you and you'll never be the same as a result. Without minimizing the consequences of that decision, let me at the same time say that, if I understand anything about God's grace, there is no act in our life in the past which is beyond His healing. No act beyond His forgiveness. No act beyond cleansing what has been contaminated in our life. He is quite willing and ready to reach out and touch any of us at whatever level of need and hurt we have in life.

So Jesus touches this man. I think that's so significant. The Old Testament law of uncleanness was that if you're in a condition of uncleanness, which leprosy was, you couldn't touch anybody who was clean or you'd contaminate them. But Jesus does a wonderful thing. He has a flow of energy that goes the opposite direction, and instead of leprosy contaminating Him, He purifies the leprosy, the energy goes in the opposite direction. While He is still speaking—"I will. Be clean"—He is reaching out to restore him to community. To restore Him to fellowship.

Jesus, in healing this man, wanted to not only make him physically well but to give him a full restoration to society. In those days, the way you were restored to society was that you had to follow the law of Leviticus 13—to quarantine yourself for a couple weeks under the jurisdiction of a priest who was acting sort of like a medical doctor. The priest would have to certify that indeed you no longer had this medical condition of a skin disease called leprosy. So Jesus said, "Go, show yourself to the priest. Offer for cleansing what Moses commanded that is an offering, a sacrifice as proof to the people." Jesus was saying, "In order to get properly restored to society, you've got to have the right credentials, the right certification. So go get it done in the right way." And, by the way, that is real authority from Jesus, to go get your healing checked out.

People say, "I've been healed in a meeting but I don't want to go see a doctor because I'm afraid

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I really didn't get healed." If you've really been healed, go see doctor. Have him certify it. It's ok. That's what Jesus says. Have the doctor certify it as a proof to the people.

But the man got so excited—and we can understand why he doesn't want a two-week quarantine—he goes out and begins to spread the news freely. Mark's Gospel tells us that because he spread the news freely, Jesus could no longer go into the city, he had to minister out of public places. His enthusiasm caused him to not give the full restoration that he needed and also hindered Jesus' travel movements. That often can be a problem with us; that, in the flush of fresh enthusiasm toward the Lord, we may neglect the harder thing of following orders and living under discipline. It is so much easier to be enthused than to be disciplined.

The man, although healed, lets his enthusiasm get in the way of his discipleship. But Jesus had restored him. Jesus had healed him. Jesus had reached out and touched and cleansed the contamination in his life.

II. The second person who comes to Jesus is a paralyzed person.

He is also given a second chance in life. Luke 5:17 shows us the attention that Jesus had begun to command. There were people coming and sitting there, listening to him, who were from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. They were coming from a distance of a hundred miles to hear Him. The place where He was ministering, on this occasion, was packed with people. Luke also says the power of the Lord was present with Him to heal the sick. Perhaps that's Luke's way of telling us that His power to heal the sick was not just something He turned on and off, like you'd turn off a water spigot; that the power of the Lord needed to be present. Perhaps there's a linkage between verse 17 and verse 16. Verse 16 says, "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." The reason why the power was present was because He found that

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personal time of meeting with God. Spiritual power and authority always grows out of fellowship with God.

So Jesus is in this place and this guy, the paralytic, has friends. The leper evidently didn't have friends. He'd been isolated, walled off. But the paralytic was not in that kind of state of illness.

So his friends came up on the roof. Mediterranean roofs were made with different kinds of materials, and it was a relatively easy thing to dig up the tile and drop him down. I'd like to have been in that room. Have you ever thought of being in that room and seeing the roof open up and somebody dropped down on a stretcher with ropes?

Luke notes that he was put down on a mat or a bed or cot. There are actually four words possible in the Greek language to use for the word "bed," and Luke uses all four of them. He's the only Gospel writer to use all four Greek words for "bed." The reason why he does that is: He's a doctor. He notices things like that. So he calls it by its right name. Knowing that is not going to add any spiritual growth to your life, but I thought it was interesting, and it's another indicator of the reliable historicity of the Gospels; that a writer such as Luke is keen on details, medical details.

This man comes through. Jesus surprises everybody. He surprises us, as we read the text, because He doesn't deal with the issue that brought the man dropping down from the roof, which was his paralysis. He says a thing that must have totally floored everybody in the room, including the guy on the cot. It was, "Man [or son] thy sins be forgiven thee." Who would think that he could commit sin? He was paralytic and confined to a cot. Perhaps he was a quadriplegic, we don't know. He couldn't go out and rob banks. He couldn't commit bodily assault on people. But there he was. Jesus perhaps knew that there was bitterness in his life, bitterness toward his parents; perhaps bitterness toward God, bitterness toward other people. We don't know what the

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sin was, but Jesus said, “It’s no use if I send you out of here well if you’re still sick on the inside.” So, if you’re going to go out well, go out well on the inside as well as the outside. He says, “Your sins be forgiven you.”

This was a costly statement for Jesus. If you read the Gospels closely, you’ll find that this is the moment in which opposition begins in His ministry. Because He claimed to forgive sins, the journey to the cross was now underway. Might I respectfully say that this issue still is the division issue of Jesus in the world today? Does this man have authority to forgive sin? The secular minds say, “Is there such a thing as sin? And if there is such a thing as sin—and Karl Menninger wrote a book: *Whatever Happened to the Idea of Sin?*—is there only one person on this planet earth that’s ever lived, that uniquely has the power to forgive it? Jesus’ claim is “Yes. I’m the only one who is qualified to deal with the sin question. Only I can take sin and forgive it.” The Pharisees said, “Anybody who made that claim has to be God.” And that’s exactly what Jesus is claiming here: the power of God, the prerogative of God to forgive sins.

I am teaching a sophomore Bible class at Newport Christian High School. I have about sixty young fifteen or sixteen-year-olds in my class four hours a week—the sharpest group you’ll ever want to meet. I’ve been teaching them the Gospel of Matthew the first semester. We just had the final about three weeks ago. This was the final exam: I asked them, “Write for two hours everything you know about the Gospel of Matthew.” I gave them five subheadings of things I wanted them to cover in order to give an intelligent answer. What was interesting was, on the first day of the class, in September, I asked them to write down everything they knew about Matthew and they got it all into one, two, or at the most three sentences. That was it. At the end of the semester, there were students in that class that, after two hours, could have written for two more. They had really learned Matthew. But I knew that they were a little traumatized by a test

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like that. They had never had a test like that. So I had this temptation come over me. I told the students, as I was getting ready to hand out the exam, “I’ve had a crazy idea strike me. How would you like it if, instead of all of you taking the exam today, you have a decision among yourselves and nominate one in the class to take the exam and the fate of everybody will ride or fall on how well they do?” They instantly had some suggestions about who they nominated to take it. I said, “If I did this, I would give you a superb lesson on atonement. That’s exactly what Jesus did for us. He took our sin. He took our place. Our fate rides or fails on whether or not He succeeds. If He succeeds in His mission of going to the cross and rising again from the dead, we’re all winners, and we don’t do anything but have Him take the test for us. If He loses, we all lose. But I’m not quite filled with the same grace of God. So you’re going to take this test. But it’s still a marvelous lesson.”

Jesus shows that He has power over the inner man by healing the outer man. By healing the body. Some of you cannot identify with physical paralysis, but you can identify with paralysis in life. You try to break an addiction to cigarettes, to overeating or to alcohol, or captivity to drugs. Or perhaps your emotions are paralyzed, maybe you want to reach a member of your family that you’ve really had a tussle with all your life and you just can’t bring yourself to hug them because you’re paralyzed.

Jesus told this man, “Rise up.” What’s so great about this word is it reflects a tremendous understanding of our nature, that we never become free when we indefinitely postpone action. If we say, “Someday I’m going to get around to it...Someday I’m going to quit drinking...Someday I’m going to quit smoking...Someday I’m going to quit overeating...Someday I’m going to start reading my Bible...Someday I will begin praying...” we indefinitely postpone it and we will never change. The only way to change is to do exactly

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what Jesus tells this young man to do. He says to him, “Rise up. Do it right now. Get on your way. Start! Today’s the day. Now’s the moment. Seize it. This is your chance.” That is the most effective way I know to deal with any paralysis in our life, in a spiritual or moral or mental dimension. Rise up and no longer put off until some undefined date what we’re going to do about what’s happening in our life. Act today.

III. Jesus goes to the third person in this Gospel text. He is a tax collector and he is unlike the leper or the paralytic.

The leper was not in control of his life and the paralytic was really not in control of his life. But Levi, by all odds, was in control of his. He is not ill. And he is rather well-fixed. He is a tax collector. Probably the kind of tax collecting he did—it is guessed by those who have studied the period—was that he sat at strategic locations on a roadway and collected toll taxes on merchandises coming through. The Romans put their taxation system up for bidding. Whoever got the highest bid got the job and then they could charge a certain amount to pay to Rome and keep the rest for themselves. There was some latitude. These people were most of all hated because they were into the share of the pie.

Levi was that kind of a guy. I see him as living in a three level, split-level house; a four car garage.

You heard about the poor guy who was out of work and needed to support his family and he went to this well-appointed house and the man of the house met him at the door. He said, “Do you have any work for me to do? I’ll do what you want.” The guy said, “No, I don’t have any work. But I’m desperate. I need help.” The guy finally had pity on him said, “I’ve got a bucket of white paint. You can go out in the back and paint my porch. The man happened to be an

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immigrant. He said, “I’ll paint your porch.” The end of the day came, the man came to be paid.

As he was leaving, he said, “By the way, that wasn’t a Porsche, that was a Ferrari.”

I imagine Levi was the kind of person who had a good Porsche in the garage. I see him with a yacht in Galilee. He was into the good life. I think he even had two names on his personalized licensed plate—Levi Matthew. Some Gospels call him Levi, some Matthew. Same person. For sure, we know that he was a church dropout. How do we know? We know he was Jewish. We know that the practicing religious Jews had absolutely nothing to do with members of their own ethnicity who were out collecting taxes for the Romans. That was absolutely reprehensible. So Levi was a dropout from synagogue or from church. I would imagine his attitude toward life was, “I’m glad I left that bunch. A bunch of legalists, a bunch of rule keepers, bunch of hypocrites, a bunch of people who talk about God but don’t have anything vital.”

I like people like that. I like people who have dropped out of legalistic backgrounds of religious life. The reason why I do is I understand their struggle. I believe that once they meet the real Jesus, they’ll understand the difference between Jesus and religion.

What came walking past Levi’s toll collector’s booth one day was not a religion but a person: Jesus. My suspicion is that Levi had a godly Jewish mother. The reason I suspect that is that his name is Levi. He has the name of the priestly line. Levi. This kid that had been a dropout all of his life now suddenly finds Jesus. And Jesus is giving him the invitation of his life, “Come, follow Me.” It’s a second chance for him in life, a chance to step out of the bankruptcy of his material prosperity and into the richness of the Lord’s spiritual wealth. How difficult it is to learn the lesson that material goods in and of themselves are not sufficient to bring inner well-being in life. Anybody who has money comes to know that in their heart of hearts. Levi came to

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recognize that. There was a God-shaped vacuum in his life that money wouldn't fill. Only Jesus could fill it.

Of the three persons in our story today, only Levi is named. The leper doesn't have a name. The paralytic doesn't have a name. Levi has a name. In fact, if you go through the healing miracles of Jesus, which are specifically enumerated in the Gospels—there are eighteen of them—in only three of them are names given: Bartimaeus, Lazarus and Malchus (the one who had his ear cut off by Peter). In all the other healings, the person is unnamed. The reason why I think we have the names of these persons who were healed is that they went on after their healing to become vital members of the Christian community. They didn't simply fade back into the tapestry of life. They went on to give distinguished service to the Lord. Their healing was their entry point to their Christian discipleship.

Levi is that kind of a person. His name is remembered because he went on from that call to give himself in tremendous commitment to Jesus Christ and the Lord's work. There's a quiet heroism in the text that we might miss, a heroism in that, when Jesus called him, he got up, left everything and followed Him. The Greek tense is very fascinating. He got up and left everything is the aorist tense, which is past tense, meaning the action was all at once and was completed. Then the verb tense changes. He got up, left everything—that was done. "And was following Him." Continuing action—begun at a point in time and was continuing. He was following Him. This Levi had a quiet heroism. His call had different implications for him than the four fishers. When Jesus called the four fishermen to follow Him, they could follow Him and, if things didn't work out, they could go back to catching fish. That was their trade and it was an honorable profession. But when Levi walked away from his tax commission that day, he left it forever. There was no going back. He had no chance of returning to his vocation.

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Maybe some of you are in that kind of state in your life. You burned your bridges to follow Jesus Christ and you can't get back to where you were. Maybe you're even wondering if you're going to get to where He called you. But don't worry. If the Lord called you to burn your bridges, He's got some new ones ahead of you. Just keep going. Levi burned his bridges behind him and followed Jesus. Did he quit with resignation? "Oh no! I've got to become a disciple of Jesus! That's probably going to mean I have to leave what I'm doing because He's going to want me to go with him full-time." No, he didn't quit with grim resignation. He threw a party. He invited all his friends. And he announced to everybody he was giving up everything and following Jesus. He thought that was a wonderful thing, so everybody ought to celebrate it. He invited Jesus there to meet with all the sinners and tax collectors that were his friends.

I think Levi shows us the only way to go about following Jesus Christ—if you're here and you're not a Christian and you're in the course of this day going to become a Christian, you've just recently become one—the best thing to do is throw a party. Invite all your friends who don't know the Lord and say to them, "A tremendous change has occurred in my life. I've started to follow Jesus." That's what Levi did. He threw a party and he announced his intentions. He didn't go at it as if Jesus laying a hand on his shoulder was the worst thing that had happened to him. It was wonderful. It's wonderful when Jesus puts His hand upon your life.

This message is not complete unless you find yourself in the story. Is there a part of you that is a leper, stigmatized by yourself or by others? Contaminated by some inner uncleanness in your life which is moving you away from God and from others? Come to the Lord and experience His touch.

By the way, I realized, in reading this story anew, that unless the Lord returns for us one day, we will all lay down in death and we'll all be contaminated by the deterioration of the body and the

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grave. If you say, “A wonderful miracle never happened to me like it happened to that leper. I wonder if the Lord is playing favorites.” Just give Him a hundred years. He’s going to bring you back to full form in your body, to a better shape than even the leper. He’s going to give you a new body made like His.

Are you paralytic in your life? Helpless in an area of your own life? Needing to hear Jesus’ words, “Get up and get going. Start today. Begin the process”?

Is there a tax collector in you? Do you need to be changed from the quest of being a success to being an authentic disciple of Jesus in your life? He wants us to have a name. That’s why, when we are in His presence forever, our names will be celebrated, because we have chosen to follow Him. Just as Levi’s name is remembered because he became a disciple, so the Lord knows those who are His.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we bring to You our lives anew. The leper in us is contaminated and unworthy to approach Your presence; the paralytic in us, unable to free ourselves from things that seem bigger, stronger than we are. And the tax collector in us puts worldly values ahead of following You. Give each of us a second chance. Speak Your Word of healing to the contamination in our life. May we go from this place cleansed and purified. Speak Your Word to the paralysis and we may no longer postpone action in an area of our life where You are calling us in this moment, “Obey. Get started. Get going.” May each of us have that tremendous joy that Levi found when he discovered You. Oh, Lord, how guilty we are in thinking that You’d never call us; that You somehow don’t even notice us. And, “What are You doing wasting Your time with us?” That’s probably how Levi felt. Help us to realize that You don’t feel that way about us. I pray for the person in this audience who may find himself or herself here today and, perhaps at an early age,

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they really wouldn't have anything to do with you because they were rejecting the Christianity that they saw modeled in perhaps their home or a church that didn't have Your lifestyle. Maybe they caught a strong dose of Pharisaism and legalism and never caught You. They're here today and they're very open to You. Very closed to religion. I pray for them, Lord, that they come to follow You this day, give You their life, and experience the joy that only You could provide. And that You'll put them on solid ground and bless them. We ask this, Lord, in Your name. Amen.