

Francis of Assisi was born in 1181. He was an Italian friar, mystic, and preacher who came to be known as St. Francis. On one occasion, a friend asked him, "Why you? Why does everybody come to you? You're not well educated or from a noble family." Francis said, "It's because God could find none among sinners any smaller, nor any more insignificant and sinful, therefore he's chosen me to accomplish his marvelous work."

I know that sounds so spiritual, like the kind of thing a saint would say. But what if it was true, true for each of us? What if it was true God doesn't call us in spite of our sin, but because of our sin? What if the thing that really qualifies us to belong to him and be used by him isn't our worthiness but our unworthiness?

We see this in Luke 5 as Jesus encounters four people. This is a common thread that runs through each encounter. The first and the last encounter describe how Jesus called two different disciples to follow him and join him in his work. In between, there are two stories of healing—so two calls sandwiched between two healings.

Jesus calls a sinful fisherman to be a fisher of men

First, Jesus calls Simon Peter to follow him. This isn't their first encounter. Simon has already taken his first steps in following Jesus. But this would turn out to be a big day for Simon.

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. vv. 1-3

Jesus is teaching by the lake. The crowd presses around him. A couple of empty boats lie on the edge of the lake. Jesus climbs into Simon's boat, who is there with his partners: his brother Andrew and James and John. When we think of fishing, we think of a fun day out on a lake or river. A couple of weeks ago, I went fly fishing with my son, Matt. We had a lot of fun. By the way, I think my fish was bigger! But these weren't weekend fishermen out for a fun day on the river. They're commercial fishermen. They've been doing backbreaking work all night. At dawn, they beached their boats, began the tedious work of washing, mending, and drying their nets in the hot sun. Once dry, they'd be folded and placed back in the boats for the coming night. I'm

sure when Jesus stepped into Simon's boat as a floating pulpit; he took notice. "Hey, look! The preacher is in my boat!"

But I don't think he was prepared for what happened next.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." vv. 4-5

You have to wonder if Jesus knew what he was asking. He's asking a man who'd worked all night to re-launch his boat, load hundreds of pounds of wet nets, row out into deep water, and lower his nets—all in the middle of the day, which was the world's worst time to fish! And what right did a carpenter have to tell an expert fisherman how to run his business? I'm sure Simon wanted to say, "You stick to preaching; I'll do the fishing!"

Years ago, I was coaching my seven-year-old son's little league baseball team. It was a league where the coach pitched to the kids. I was pitching, but I needed to take a break. So one of the coaches from the other team came out to replace me. He came out to the mound, and I began to give him a few pointers about pitching to my team. He wasn't very receptive to my advice. What I didn't realize at the time is that I was offering my expert advice to a guy named Dave Righetti, who happened to be the pitching coach for the Giants! That must have been how Simon felt when Jesus told him how to fish! Simon puts up a mild protest, but he's seen Jesus do enough wild stuff he's willing to play along.

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. vv. 6-7

Fishermen have a little saying, "May all your fishes come true." Well, here, all Simon's fishes came true! He hauls in a record catch of fish that threatens to sink two boats that were 27 feet long. This was raw power, a massive miracle. What do you do with that if you're Simon? How would you react to such an awesome display of power?

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So

they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. vv. 8-11

This is the last time he's called Simon. From now on, he's just Peter-the rock. He didn't start out as a rock; he started out like a marshmallow. He is traumatized by the power and holiness of Jesus. He'd seen it before, but never in his own personal domain, and that's what blew him away. Peter knew he was in the presence of holy power. With that came deep awareness of his own sinfulness. He felt both unworthy and unsafe. His confidence was gone. And so he says, "Depart from me, Lord." But Jesus doesn't depart. Instead, he gives him a new calling, "Don't be afraid; from now on, you'll fish for people." And that's what he did. In Acts, after Peter preached his first sermon, 3,000 souls were netted for the Kingdom. That's a lot of fish! Enough to sink a boat!

But it's almost as if Peter wasn't ready to be used by Jesus until he comes to that crisis of seeing his own sinfulness. It seems the thing that really qualifies him to be used by Jesus isn't his worthiness but his unworthiness.

Jesus cleanses a leper and uses him as a testimony

The second story is a healing story. It's the story of an encounter Jesus had with a leper.

While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him. vv. 12-13

This man comes to Jesus out of desperation. Dr. Luke says he was "full of leprosy." In other words, the disease had run its course. The man's appearance was loathsome. Not only that, lepers were considered spiritually unclean! They lived alone, ostracized from society. Rabbis taught it was illegal even to greet a leper. Everyone had to be socially distanced from them.

So this man breaks all the rules and approaches Jesus. Like Peter, he falls down on his face before him. He has a deep awareness of his own need. He knows he's unclean; there's nothing he can do to help himself. He's in the advanced stages of leprosy. He's a hopeless case. But he has faith: "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." In those days, it was believed curing a leper was as hard to do as raising the dead. But he's confident Jesus can do it. What he's not sure of is if Jesus is willing to do it. He doesn't presume to know what the Lord wants to do. But Jesus is so willing, and he shows that by touching him, becoming unclean himself, and cleansing him.

In the Bible, leprosy is symbolic of sin. The leper may not have been any more sinful than anyone else, but he was "an outward and visible sign of innermost spiritual corruption" (Maclear's Handbook o.t). That's what we are: unclean. Just as he was full

of leprosy, so we're full of sin. Sin controls people through two opposing lies. The first is denial: "I'm not a sinner. I'm not that bad. Nothing is really wrong with me." The second is despair: "I'm a sinner, and there is no hope for me at all. I'm beyond help." Both are lies!

This leper doesn't deny his sin, but he doesn't allow it to keep him from coming to Jesus either. Instead, it drives him to Jesus. The thing that really qualified him to be touched by Jesus wasn't his worthiness but his unworthiness. It's the same with us. We have to know our need, and we have to come to him. If we do, Jesus will deal with us just as he did with him. He'll touch us. The touch of Jesus' pure hand on the rotting flesh of the leper is a parable of how Jesus took our sin upon himself and became unclean for us, and in doing so, he cleansed us.

Jesus heals a paralytic as proof of his authority to forgive sin

The third encounter is another healing story. Again, Jesus is teaching. But this time, Luke says some of the religious "bigwigs" were there as kind of an investigative committee. The curious populace squeezed around them. Suddenly, there was a noise from above.

Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. vv.18-19

These guys want to get their paralyzed friend to Jesus. They can't get through the crowd, so they walk up the stairway on the side of the house and step onto the flat roof. They pull off the tiles, dig through a foot of dirt and lower their friend down to Jesus. Imagine watching all of this from below! First, you hear someone up on the roof. Then you hear someone digging through the roof. Then debris starts falling. You see a little crack of light that gets bigger and bigger until it widened to the size of a man. You look up and see four wide-eyed, sweaty faces peering down. Then one of them issues a warning, and little by little, a lame man on a bed is lowered on ropes like a first-century elevator. Finally, he's right in front of Jesus. How excited these friends were! Jesus had healed many, and they couldn't wait for that power to be unleashed on their friend. They're just like the leper. They believe Jesus has the power to heal. They're willing to overcome huge obstacles to get to Him because they're confident in His ability to heal.

"When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven" (v. 20). What a strange thing to say! These guys have gone to all this trouble, and then Jesus says, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." That's not exactly what they had in mind. I can just see the men on the roof look at each other, "What did he say?" "His sins are

forgiven?' Oh, nice! That's great. He could have shouted that out the window. So now we have to lift him back up through this hole?"

In verse 21, the focus shifts. Luke centers in on the religious leaders who were sitting there thinking, "He can't do that. Only God can forgive sins. He's making himself out to be equal with God!" In certain respects, they're right. Only God can forgive sins. Why did Jesus say this?

Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. vv. 22-25

Jesus pronounced forgiveness so he could confront his critics with the implications of the healing he was about to perform. Which is easier to say? It's easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven" because anyone can say it, but there's no way of knowing if they have the authority to do it. But if someone says to a paralytic, "Get up and walk," we know if they're for real. If the man gets up, he's the real deal. Jesus does the harder thing, so they will know that he has the authority to do the "easier" thing. He goes on and commands the paralytic to get up and walk home. And that's just what he does.

Jesus also pronounced forgiveness because, even though the man was paralyzed, he had an even deeper need. What was it? He needed forgiveness. Jesus saw beneath the surface to the greater need. What good would it do for him to be able to walk but spend eternity in Hell? Jesus met his greatest need first.

Verse 25 says the man walked home "praising God." Why? Because he could walk, or because his sins were forgiven? What would make you happier? I often hear people say, "My health is the most important thing." But is it really? What does it profit you to gain perfect health but lose your soul? What will you give in exchange for your soul? I guess it depends: If you know your sin; if you're conscious of how unworthy you are; if you feel the dreadful consequences of sin, then nothing will be more important than forgiveness. But if your sin really is no big deal, if you don't believe you need forgiveness, then perhaps your health will be the most important thing.

Jesus calls a sinful tax collector to follow him, and he does.

Are you starting to see the thread that runs through these stories? One last story. This one is about another call.

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got

up, left everything and followed him (vv. 27-28). Tax collectors were about the worst scoundrels of all in Jesus' day. Many of them were wealthy who'd sold out to the Romans. They made their money by extortion. They were the most hated men in Jewish society. They were not allowed to serve in court as witnesses. They were excommunicated from the synagogue. Remember, Zacchaeus was also a tax collector. Levi and Zacchaeus were probably best friends! But, out of the blue, Jesus calls Levi to follow him. And he does! Just like Peter, Levi, later to be named Matthew, drops everything and follows Jesus.

But he doesn't just follow Jesus. He throws a party for him. *"Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them" (v. 29).* New Christians are always the best evangelists. Why? Because they haven't been "Christianized." They haven't been a Christian long enough to have made Christians their only social group. Instead, they do everything they can to introduce their old friends to Jesus! That's what Levi does. He's so excited about Jesus he wants his friends to meet him too. He's doing what Jesus said Simon would do—he's fishing for men!

But every party has a pooper, right? Well, this one did. The Pharisees aren't at the party, but they've snooped around enough to know what's going at Levi's house. So they bring their complaint to Jesus' disciples.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." vv. 30-32

There is it again. What is it that qualifies us not just to belong to Jesus but to be called by him and used by him? Is it our sickness or our health? Is it our worthiness or our unworthiness? The thing that qualifies us to belong to him and to be used by him is not our worthiness but our unworthiness.

We learn from these four encounters that Jesus' primary mission is to deal with the problem of sin. Jesus claims to be a physician of the soul. Only those who are morally sick need that kind of a doctor.

Max Lucado tells a story about a man named Li Fuyan who tried every treatment imaginable to ease his throbbing headaches. Nothing helped. An X-ray finally revealed the culprit. A rusty four-inch knife had been lodged in his skull for four years. In an attack by a robber, Fuyan had suffered lacerations on the right side of his jaw. He didn't know the knife had broken off in his head, causing stabbing pain.

Lucado comments,

We can't live with foreign objects buried in our bodies. Or our souls. What would an X-ray of

your interior reveal? Regrets over an [earlier] relationship? Remorse over a poor choice? Shame about the marriage that didn't work, the habit you couldn't quit, the temptation you didn't resist, or the courage you couldn't find? Guilt lies hidden beneath the surface, festering, irritating. Sometimes so deeply embedded you don't know the cause.

You see, that's the kind of thing Jesus came to cure. But for that to happen, we have to recognize our own need and come to him in persistent faith. Have you ever been in physical pain, and you'd go to any length to get relief? Jesus says we should have that same motivation on a spiritual level. Our soul is diseased. We have a problem we can't fix. We have to let that need drive us to Jesus. We may have to overcome a few obstacles to get there. Like the leper overcame social barriers to get to Jesus, and like the paralytic's friends dug through a roof, we have to be determined nothing will keep us from Jesus. Jesus says the "righteous" don't do that because they don't think they need to. He says that tongue in cheek because no one is righteous; they just think they are. Those who think they're righteous are on their own.

But those who are healed and cleansed are also called to make fishing for men their highest priority. Simon and Matthew both left everything and followed Jesus. It's not that they were now in full-time ministry; it's rather that whatever job they might have, they couldn't help telling their friends about the Savior. Someone has defined evangelism as one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. If you find a good doctor, if he's really taking care of your need, you're going to send others to him. You can't do that if you only hang out with people who are well.

Let me ask you, are you more like the teachers of the law, or are you more like Levi or Zacchaeus? Are you spending all your time at church meetings with saints who look and talk a lot like you, or are you raising eyebrows by throwing dinner parties for sinners? Don't become so Christianized that you forget the mission of Christ. The church is the only fellowship on earth where the one requirement for membership isn't the worthiness but the unworthiness of the candidate.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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