

Hurt and Hope

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Preacher: Neil MacMillan

[0 : 00] So this is Luke and chapter 5 and verses 12 to 32. 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. Then Jesus ordered him, don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

One day, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there.

[1 : 06] And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came, carrying a paralytic 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.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, Friend, your sins are forgiven. 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 that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

He said to the paralysed 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.

[2 : 26] Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, We have seen remarkable things today. 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. Then, Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.

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.

Amen. Thanks, Fergus. So, my name is Neil MacMillan. I'm the minister at Cornerstone.

[3 : 33] I'm going to speak with you for a while now about the passage that Fergus read from. So, it's Luke chapter 5. If you have a Bible, have a look, keep it in front of you as we work through the passage, or look it up on your phone or your laptop.

I've kind of got in my head this idea of a spaghetti western, and I don't know if you were a fan of the spaghetti western, or if you even know what they are, if you're a young person. But anyway, Clint Eastwood was acting in these westerns, and he played this very silent, sort of focused, intense character wandering through the desert heat with his hat pulled low over his head, the brim of the hat shading his eyes.

And I kind of, I see Clint Eastwood walking down a dusty, hot road towards the customs booth where the tax collectors sat. And he's digging about in his pouch looking for some coins to pay, to pay the tax due to the customs collector.

And as he approaches the booth in the searing heat of the summer's day, he finds out it's empty. The booth has been abandoned.

There's a half-drunk, warm, still warm cup of coffee. There's a sandwich that has just been opened but not eaten. It looks as if somehow the person who was in the tax booth has been abducted.

[5 : 10] They've just vanished into thin air. And that's what happened the day that Levi was collecting taxes on the roads through Galilee. Suddenly, the customs booth is left empty.

He just abandons everything to follow Jesus. and Luke's trying to remind himself and Theophilus who he was writing his gospel to and all his readers, including us, he's just trying to remind us who is Jesus.

and he's saying Jesus is the kind of person that when you meet him, you might just abandon everything, walk out the door and follow him.

That's how incredible Jesus is. Theophilus and many others since, of course, including you, are probably often asked the question, why be a Christian?

What's the point in that? Is it worth it? And the only answer that we have to that is really to say Jesus.

[6 : 23] Jesus. That's all that we point to as Christians is Jesus. We're not pointing to the church. We're not pointing to our own goodness. We're not offering wealth or influence or popularity or power.

The only thing that we have to offer you is Jesus. But when we offer you Jesus, really, we're offering you everything. That's what the people in this story find. The leper, the paralyzed man, Levi, they find that Jesus is everything, that there is a goodness and a love and a beauty in Jesus that just cannot be surpassed.

Right at the end of the passage that Fergus read, Jesus said this. He said, I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.

Now, when we say that, when we talk about calling sinners to repentance, you maybe imagine a street preacher shouting at the crowds as they go past, turn or burn, or maybe an angry minister in a pulpit thumping it, calling sinners to repentance.

But what does calling sinners to repentance really look like? Well, Jesus says it looks like a doctor caring for his patients.

[7 : 49] To call sinners to repentance looks like a doctor on his ward round. It's not shouting, it's not anger, it's healing, it's helping, it's caring, it's restoring.

And so, I'm going to take this little while just to think about how Jesus calls the sinners in this story, these men with all their need, and how he brings them into a new life.

what's it like to watch the doctor do his ward round? Well, the first thing I want to say is this, that when we see Jesus on his ward round, when we see him calling sinners to repentance, we see how much he loves his patients.

He loves his patients. So, in the first bed on the ward round of Jesus, we've got the leper. And it's obvious, once you dig into the story a little bit, that Jesus loves the leper, doesn't he?

The story tells us, the passage tells us, in verse 12, the man was covered with leprosy, absolutely full of it.

[9 : 12] The disease had taken hold of him in the most terrible way. And because leprosy was an infectious skin disease that manifested itself and sores and boils and nerve endings damaged.

And, you know, he probably looked pretty disfigured by his illness, but he was also socially and spiritually disfigured by it. This man is the ultimate social reject.

Because of his leprosy, any skin disease at that time in Israel, the person had to be absolutely and completely quarantined, permanent quarantine from family and friends and from society.

Food would have been left for him somewhere by his family for him to go and pick it up, but he would have lived outside a town on his own or perhaps in a leper colony.

Now, I read that story many, many times, but I think as I read it this last couple of weeks, it kind of struck me in a new way because for the first time in my life, I know a little bit of what it's like to be in quarantine, of what it's like to be in lockdown, not allowed to be with family and friends the way I want to be, not allowed to touch my mother, to hug her, to say hello.

[10 : 40] Those kind of restrictions now, we get a little bit of the misery that this man was going through, but for him it was permanent. Leprosy at the time was said to be a living death.

And so for this man who is living a living death, there's a huge amount at stake here, isn't there? There's so much tension in him, desperation and urgency as he comes covered in his leprosy and throws himself at the feet of Jesus.

And what does he say to Jesus? Do you want to heal me? Do you want to heal me? Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean. There's no question in his mind that Jesus can do it.

You can make me clean. The question mark in his head is, does Jesus want to do you? It's not the power of Jesus that is under scrutiny, it's the heart of Jesus.

What kind of heart does this saviour have? Does Jesus really want to help us? Does Jesus really care about us?

[11 : 53] That's a question echoing around in this man's head and heart and it's maybe the question that you carry around with you burdened by it? Does God really care?

Does Jesus really care? Does he want to help someone like me? How does Jesus answer? Is he willing?

Yeah. And he does something so loving and compassionate. As he reaches out and lays his hand in this hand and touches him.

First human touch, the first human contact this leper would have had in so many years. There's a famous picture of Princess Dai touching AIDS patients who were treated in a very similar terrible way when AIDS first became prevalent and people were so afraid of AIDS patients and there was a symbolic moment where Princess Dai touches.

And this is a huge moment in this man's life. It's a huge moment for everybody who sees it if they see it. Jesus touches a leper. Normally that would make Jesus diseased and unclean but because of who Jesus is the reverse process happens.

[13 : 16] The man is healed and made clean. This lonely hurting man feels the tender loving care of Jesus Christ.

And then Jesus sends him to the priest, the health inspector of that day who over the period of a week would verify that the man was clean, healed and able to be reintegrated with family, friends and society.

So that's the first patient. The second patient is a man who's paralyzed. So in the second bed in the ward round that Jesus does is this paralyzed man and Jesus loves him as well.

Like the drama in the house. They're in a town in Galilee. The streets are narrow and they're packed with people. There's no way to get into the house through the crowds.

So they take the side stare up to the roof of the house where people would have sat out and enjoyed the views and the sunshine and the evening. And they go onto that roof and they start smashing their way through the roof, taking away the tiles and the mud and everything that the roof was made with to create a hole.

[14 : 33] And there's Jesus looking up, feeling the dirt falling from the roof onto his head. And I reckon these guys were probably fishermen or builders. They knew how to rig the ropes and lower the man safely.

And Jesus is looking up, watching the man coming down. And he's looking to see the knots well tied. Is this going to hold? And what does Jesus do?

Does he object to this act of vandalism? No. He responds with love and compassion. And again, he helps and heals and restores this man so that he will leave both forgiven and healthy from that house.

the person so much more important than the property because Jesus has love for people. And the third bed in the ward is Levi.

I don't know, maybe Levi's depressed. He's one of the most hated men in Galilee. We find tax collectors just a job that people do. But in Palestine and Israel in the first century, it meant that you worked for the Roman occupation.

[15 : 46] It meant that you spent a lot of time with Gentiles who were religiously unclean and totally despised. and it meant that you were involved in extorting money from your fellow Jew.

So you were despised as well. So that's Levi sitting there. And Jesus, Jesus sees them. We're told in verse 27, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi.

The word saw there, just kind of, it means like Jesus gazed on this man. He noticed him and he fixed his laser-like attention on Levi, thinking about him, thinking about his life, thinking about who he is, thinking about what he does, thinking about what he needs.

And he reaches out to Levi as well and says, come and follow me. So in each of these instances, as Jesus the great physician, the doctor goes around, there's this love in the heart of Jesus for the people that he's dealing with.

And I think that says something to us, really glorious and good about God. I was reading this book over the last week, again, Gentle and Lowly.

[17:14] There's a chapter about Exodus 34. Exodus 34 is the place where in the Old Testament God clearly tells us who he is.

Moses, as Fergus was explaining to us, is taken by God and hidden in the gap or the cleft in the rock and God passes by to tell Moses, this is who I am.

This is who I really am. The Lord came down and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Who am I, God says? I am the God, the Lord, who is compassionate, and gracious, full of mercy.

That's what we see in this story too with Jesus. As Jesus reveals to us more of who God truly is, we see the same truth. That God's glory is not just seen in his greatness, it's seen in his goodness.

[18:30] It's seen in his mercy. God's heartbeat is a heartbeat of mercy and compassion. God breathes love.

God is love. God has the deepest compassion possible for you. Whatever your situation, whatever ails you in life, he has compassion.

More compassion than you can ever begin to imagine. He is tender-hearted towards you, and he is reaching out to bring his help.

He moves towards you this morning as we speak. He moves towards you to bless you, to heal you. You can't begin to imagine this morning how much God loves and cares about you.

If you doubt it, go back to the Bible, back to these stories, discover, maybe the first time or may we discover again the true heart of Jesus.

[19:39] So, there's this great love that Jesus has for his patients, and because of that, Jesus heals them body and soul. I'm going to blast through this bit of the sermon as quickly as I can, but I just wanted to say that leprosy not only had the physical component to it, but in that culture it had a spiritual religious component to you.

It made you ritually, religiously, an outcast. You could not be part of the community of God and his people. You could not join in worship with them.

You couldn't go to the temple, you couldn't go to the synagogue. And leprosy and sin were often identified together in the Old Testament. And so what does Jesus say this man needs?

He needs cleansing. He needs cleansing of body and soul. And that's what happens. So Jesus restores him both physically and spiritually.

He deals with the whole person. He heals the leper, body and soul. And then what happens with the man in the house, the paralyzed man?

[20:50] Well, again, he's healed in body and in soul, the whole person. The leper needed cleansing. this man needs forgiveness.

And so Jesus comes and forgives. We're told that Jesus speaks with such power and works with great power.

Verse 17 says, the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. in verse 24, Jesus says, know this, when they question him forgiving the man, he says, know this, the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

And then he tells the paralyzed man to get up and walk as a demonstration of the reality of his power and authority. 25 times in the gospel of Luke, Jesus describes himself as the son of man. And it's the favorite way for Jesus to talk about himself in this gospel. And it comes from Daniel chapter seven, where the son of man is this outstanding great figure who has the full authority and all the power of God, the ancient of days behind him.

[22:08] So Jesus says, the power of God, the authority of God is mine and I forgive. up to that point people needed temples and animals and sacrifices and rituals to seek forgiveness.

But now the forgiver comes seeking them and he forgives completely and fully because he becomes the sacrifice. He bears the cost of forgiveness on himself.

And so the paralyzed man not only walks home, but he walks home forgiven. So Jesus heals his patients body and soul.

He loves them and so he deals with every dimension of their being. What does Levi need? Well, he needs a new beginning. He needs repentance.

That's what Jesus says. I've come to call sinners to repentance. He's referring to what's happened between him and Levi and why he's hanging out with all these dodgy people at Levi's house having a party.

[23 : 19] And he says, that's why I'm here. Calling them to repentance, to a new beginning, to turn their lives around, to leave as Levi did so literally. He left one thing to do another.

One way of living, which is a life without God, is left behind for a new way of living, which is life with God. And so Levi leaves everything to follow Jesus.

He repents. And I want to say that that's at the heart of what it means to become a Christian if you're not a Christian. It's to be willing to leave everything to follow Jesus.

Sometimes we will not follow Jesus because there's things that we want to cling to. Kind of things that Levi might have had, like money and influence. things that stop you from following Jesus, perhaps, because you're clinging on to them.

But what Levi teaches us is that actually there's nothing worth holding on to in preference to Jesus. We should be willing to leave everything, give up everything, to follow him.

[24 : 28] So here's this great doctor, this great physician, Jesus, doing his ward rounds, showing such love for his patients, healing them body and soul.

And then finally I just want to say that what Jesus does is he allows those that he meets with, those he heals, those he restores, he allows them to live with joy.

He allows them to live with joy. Isn't that amazing? Look at the paralyzed man going home. So verse 25, immediately he stood up in front of everybody, took what he'd been lying on and went home, praising God, glorifying God.

And it's just a great picture, isn't it, of this man. Imagine him walking back through the door of his house, forgiven, healed, restored, laughing, talking to his family saying, look what Jesus did for me. Can you believe it? Just incredible. Verse 26 says, everyone was amazed. Now, the root word for amazed there in the Greek is ecstasis.

[25 : 47] ecstasy. And we know what that means, don't we? An ecstasy. I looked it up, it says, a displacement of the mind from its ordinary state and self-possession.

The displacement of the mind from its ordinary state means what? Mind blown. These people, their minds are blown. They have certain expectations of the kingdom of God and Jesus is reshaping them all and bringing them to bear in the love and the goodness of his own person.

And so they too go home praising God, filled with us, saying, we have seen remarkable things.

When we come round Jesus, we begin to see remarkable things happening in our lives and in the lives of other people.

and the joy is also seen, of course, in verse 29, when Levi, you know, the tax booth is sitting empty as if Levi's been abducted by aliens.

So where is he? He's back home, he's got the music blasting, the party's happening, Clint Eastwood is walking through the streets of the town and he hears a party because it's Levi's house and he's gathered all the most dodgy, disreputable people in town, the other tax collectors, prostitutes, people who were seen as utter social outcasts, they're there having a great party and they're having a great party because of Jesus.

[27 : 26] There is a great banquet and a large crowd of tax collectors and others are eating with Jesus. A feast is a great thing, isn't it? A feast is grace and kindness and love and generosity in action.

A feast is about extravagance and enjoyment and delight and celebration. It's about conviviality and warmth and friendship and that's how Jesus loves to do mission.

We read of 10 occasions in the gospel of Luke where Jesus eats with people, enjoying these social occasions of sheer pleasure and happiness and enjoyment.

The kindness of the table shared. Over the last few weeks on Sunday afternoons, different people from Cornerstone have been telling their story of how God's worked in their lives.

And Elora, a couple of weeks ago, and then Lizette last week, both of them talked about how important it was for them when people who were Christians invited them into their homes just to share meals and be part of what was going on in that home.

[28 : 45] Hospitality, kindness, the shared table is a beautiful thing, a kind thing, a really great way to build relationships with people. And that's what Jesus did all the time.

That's what we should be doing when we're allowed to. And of course, the feast is pointing forward to the messianic feast, the great banquet in the new coming kingdom of God, when we will feast forever in his presence.

Again, the sense of joy and delight and happiness. And so there's joy. When Jesus comes, when you are impacted by his love, there's joy.

There's wholeness, there's forgiveness, there's new beginnings, there's cleansing, and there is joy. That's a great, great bit of news for all of us today. There's joy in Jesus Christ for us. So who are you in this story?

[29 : 51] That's kind of where I want to end. Who are you in this story? You might say in your own head, I'm the righteous. Well, if you think you're righteous, bad news.

Jesus did not come to call the righteous, did he? And it's bad news because it's fake news. The Bible actually says there is no one righteous, not even one. You know, we're all conceited, aren't we?

We all want to tell ourselves that we're better than we really are, that we're smarter than we really are, that we're wiser and gooder and so on. And Jesus tears away the facade and says, nah, there's no one righteous, not one.

So if you think you're the righteous, well, you need to undo that because if you think you're righteous, you won't repent. That's what Jesus wants to say here.

and then maybe you're actually the Pharisee, the angry person in this story, the one who's always grumbling and miserable, who sits in the judgment seat criticizing everyone else.

[30 : 54] You've got a set of rules in your head and everybody's always failing. Nobody lives up to your standards. And so you've got a bitter, resentful heart. That might be you.

Some of us maybe think we're the Messiah, that we're the good person, the hero, the hero of the story, that we're going to manage somehow to save ourselves and maybe even save some others. But do you know who we really are in this story? Hopefully we can see ourselves this way. We're the leper. We're the paralyzed man. We're Levi.

We come needy, lost, sad, isolated, cut off, cut off from God, who is our true source of life and joy. Jesus reaches through that, says, I'm your life, I'm your joy, I'm your righteousness. The Apostle Paul said this, or saw this, I was reading Philippians 3 over the last week, and I'm just going to have a look.

[32 : 08] I've got pages of notes here. You're glad I haven't read them all. But I'm trying to find Philippians 3 in my notes, and hopefully it's going to show up somewhere. If not, I'll look it up in my Bible. Philippians 3.

This is how Paul saw it. It sounds so like Levi, doesn't it? Whatever was gained to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What's more, I consider everything a loss because it's a surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them to be garbage that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Jesus comes like a doctor on his wardrobe. ground to meet you well, with a heart moved by love and a desire to meet you whole.

So thank him, praise him, receive him, follow him. Let me say a short prayer and then I'm going to hand back to Fergus for a great psalm of repentance.

[33 : 24] Lord, help us to hear the good words of Jesus. Help us not only to hear them but to receive them. that he, like a doctor coming to the sick, has come to call sinners like us to repentance.

Lord, may we know the goodness of your love and the depth of your love and the transforming power of your joy in us this morning. Help us not to turn away from you but to turn to you. in Jesus' name, Amen.