

Chosen for Grace

Exodus 19:5-6; Luke 5:12-32; 1st Peter 2:9-10



“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” The words sound comforting to us. We like to know that God has chosen us as a special people—a people of faith. Who are the people to whom these words referred? Who did Peter have in mind? If we look at Jesus’ ministry, who are those that Jesus transformed into a people, fashioning them into a priestly, holy nation?

We are not the only ones who claimed those words as describing themselves. The Jews looked back to the passage from Exodus as describing themselves. *Yahweh* had taken them out of Egypt as a rag-tag bunch of slaves and fashioned them into a sovereign nation. God had given them a land under Joshua and the judges, then later a king like the surrounding nations. They were proud of their heritage—a history in which they could see the hand of *Yahweh* transforming them into something of importance before the eyes of the nations round about.

Then Jesus came along. Nazareth and Capernaum had their issues with Jesus. They wanted Jesus to adapt to their reality, their bidding, their plans, dreams, and ideals. Jews of all stripes had difficulty with him. He just did not abide by their rules and expectations. The crowds flocked to hear his teaching and witness miraculous healings, yet some must have turned out for a sense of the shocking spectacle. It seems that invariably Jesus would say or do something that caused a stir in its clash against normal life.

Look at the people Jesus chose to receive the grace of God’s blessing! The first he called as disciples were dirty, uncouth fishermen! Why waste his time with the likes of these? There were whole crowds of people yearning to follow him. Certainly, there were more promising young men from whom to choose his disciples. Shouldn’t he have concerned himself with the upstanding, stable young men with positions of influence? If you want to start a movement, isn’t that the way to do it? There is just no reason to focus on the scum of society. What a waste!

Leprosy was a fearsome disease. There was no cure to be had. Any disorder that turned the skin white was treated as leprosy as a precaution against the dreaded disease. Lepers must live outside the towns. They had to ring bells and shout “Unclean!” to warn of their approach. No one wanted to be around them for fear of infection and being cast aside from human society. It was such a dreaded disease that one could only assume it to be a form of divine judgment for one’s sin.

Jesus was going around and healing people of all sorts of maladies. It was only to be expected that a leper would seek Jesus’ help as a last resort. On the other hand, why bother with such a worthless life as that of a leper? When the leper approached and asked to be healed, Jesus went so far as to touch him, accepting the risk that he might become infected, too! This man knew his station. He knew better than to touch Jesus. Why would Jesus go out of his way to touch this man covered with this dreaded disease? Could he not just as easily have healed him without physical contact?

Jesus sets aside concerns with the leprous state of the man. His attention is not focused on the man’s problems and the concerns of the society in dread of the disease. Jesus gives his attention to the man’s need. His touch conveys what words alone might not do—that he cares for this man despite his condition. Jesus’ touch steps beyond the barriers of propriety, by treating this leper as though already

under the banner of God's grace. Jesus upholds the law, but extends God's grace beyond the touch of others. Compassion reaches out to touch the one in need, ignoring taboos established to protect oneself.

The paralytic had little recourse or standing among the people. His condition would be seen by many as punishment for sin. It didn't seem to bother Jesus much, if any. Jesus appeared much more concerned with the man's position before God. He seems at first to ignore the issue of paralysis, giving attention to the man's need for forgiveness. Luke tells the story as though Jesus looked on the man's sin as being a greater burden in his life than the paralysis. This man's healing seems an afterthought. We are left with the impression that Jesus only healed the man to demonstrate his authority to forgive sin!

Jesus ignores the fact that the friends destroy someone's roof. He ignores the fact that he was not asked to forgive the man's sin. He ignores the question of the others present who are in need of forgiveness. He looks at this man in distress and takes care of his greatest need. This man appeared to be under God's judgment, yet Jesus writes off his sin as though forgiveness were a simple matter to resolve. Then he heals him of the paralysis against all expectations.

They might have expected a healing before Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness. After such words, however, it would have appeared impossible for Jesus to claim God's power to heal. No one knew how to respond to such a display of grace. This healing was spectacular, but as a demonstration of Jesus' authority to forgive without the need of sacrifice was unparalleled. Sure, God could forgive, but to throw around forgiveness to one in such apparent judgment as this paralytic as though it were such a simply matter? Jesus' response all but invalidates the whole sacrificial system designed to gain God's attention and plead for mercy and forgiveness.

A Jewish family did not dream that a son might grow up to be a tax collector. Sure, one could become rich in such a profession, but no one cared for tax collectors. They were seen as traitors who worked for occupation government. Collecting taxes for Rome added to the economic oppression of the people. They were viewed as extortionists and turncoats. If Jesus had turned heads by touching a leper and forgiving a paralytic, calling a tax collector out of his collection office was just as astounding.

Jesus just did not seem to understand what was fitting and proper! Did he not know there were people who were simply not worthy of his attention? He was wasting his time, energy, and efforts on people who were simply not worthy. He should have been focusing on the upstanding backbone of God's people—those who would make a difference and had some influence upon others. He should have gone to those who were leaders, movers, and shakers in society. After all, they were the leaders among God's chosen people. They were the ones who should have been the focus of Jesus' attention.

Jesus did not seem to think so. His perspective on the focus of his ministry and God's grace was radically different from the standard definitions of the people, even those who claimed to be the chosen people of God. Sure, they had been called as a royal priesthood and a holy nation. Jesus was just more concerned with those God was still sought to include under the umbrella of grace.

Where do we focus our attention and efforts? Are we concerned with meeting the needs of people like us, or do we look for those Jesus would single out to receive God's grace? Jesus sought out those who were unimportant and unworthy in the world's eyes. They are the one's Jesus chose for God's grace. Will we extend God's grace to those Jesus would choose to become his holy, priestly people?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*