

## **Mark 2:13-17 — Jesus Loves Sinners.**

**November 18, 2018**

Take out your Bibles and turn to Mark 2. While you are doing that, I have a few questions.

- How many relationships do you have with people outside the church?
- Are involved in a YMCA class or local community service organization where you rub shoulders with people that don't know Jesus?
- Do you participate in local sports club or 4-H so you hang out with people that don't know Jesus?
- When was the last time you had a neighbor that doesn't know Jesus over to your home for a meal?

The honest truth is that after we become Christians, it is easy to stop rubbing shoulders with people that don't know Jesus. Many times, we are grateful when that happens. When there are fewer non-Christians in our lives there are fewer people with problems, there are fewer people telling you their marital struggles, there are fewer temptations to avoid, and there is less office drama to hear. Sometimes we say, "I am so thankful I am a Christian and I got rid of my non-Christian friends."

Of course, if we are struggling with temptations to sin and follow our friends' sinful lifestyle, we do need to avoid people and situations that tempt us away from Christ. Does that mean we should always live in a bubble, insulating ourselves from all people that don't know Jesus?

If Jesus was on earth today, many of us would be uncomfortable with him. We would be annoyed because his standard of separation from sinners would be

too low. In our estimation, we would grumble at Jesus for spending too much time with sinful people and not enough time with church people. That was one of the major problems the Jews had with Jesus. They called him a friend of sinners. That was meant as a cut down. Jesus took it as a compliment.

The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” Luke 7:34 (ESV)

Jesus went to parties where people served hot wings, little smokies, pretzels, pepperoni sticks and beer. Most of us wouldn't like the company Jesus kept and the parties he attended. This doesn't mean Jesus was a glutton. He wasn't. He ate in moderation but he spent time with people that were gluttons. This doesn't mean Jesus was a drunk. The Jews assumed Jesus was drunk because he spent time at parties with people that were drunk.

Jesus didn't go to this kind of parties because he was bored and looking for fun on a Friday night. He went to these kinds of parties because he was on mission.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Luke 19:10 (ESV)

The only way to save the lost is to go where you find the lost. When Jesus extended friendship to sinners, he didn't condone their sin or participate in their sin but he extended friendship to rescue them of their sin. The Pharisees, the religious people of Jesus' day, separated themselves from the sinful people around them while Jesus intentionally went out of his way to spend time and build friendships with the sinful people. This is one of the reasons the Jews had a hard time believing Jesus' claims to be God. Instead of separating himself from

those struggling with sin he went out of his way to love and help people struggling with sin.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them. Luke 15:1–2 (ESV)

Luke tells us a lot of sinners began spending time with Jesus. They loved Jesus because he loved them. He didn't shun them and separate himself from them. Notice it wasn't just sinners that wanted to be with Jesus. It was also the tax collectors. Who are tax collectors? Why are they associated with sinners? Those are the questions we will answer this morning as we continue our study in the Gospel of Mark.

**Read Mark 2:13-17**

Last week, when Jesus healed the paralytic, we learned that Jesus doesn't just have the authority to heal. He also had the authority to forgive sin. Today, we will learn whose sins he forgives.

In short, we will discover it doesn't matter how far from God you have gone. It doesn't matter what you have done. When you repent of your sin and trust in Jesus you will find complete forgiveness and a new life because Jesus loves sinners. He even loves great sinners like tax collectors.

As we study our way through this passage, we will look at it under four headings. First, we will see the call of Levi. Second, we will see a strategic party to mix sinners and the saved. Third, we will see the contempt of the self-righteous. Fourth, we will see how Jesus came to save sinners, not pander to the saints. Let's jump into the study.

## Jesus called Levi.

He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. Mark 2:13–14 (ESV)

**He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him...** Let's remember where we left off last week. Jesus returned to Capernaum after his preaching tour around the Sea of Galilee. He came back to Capernaum undercover. It was stealth Jesus, low-profile Jesus. He was trying to not attract crowds. He most likely stayed in Peter's home in Capernaum. Even though Jesus was low-profile, it didn't take long for word to get around town that Jesus was back, and people started knocking on Peter's door asking to see Jesus. So many showed up at Peter's house that it was packed like a can of sardines. Jesus used that opportunity to teach them. Then Jesus had an unexpected guest drop in. That was the paralytic that came through the roof to be healed by Jesus. Jesus surprised everyone because he didn't just heal him, Jesus forgave his sin, which is even better than being healed. Healing negates the consequences of sin on creation for a few short years of bodily restoration. Forgiveness negates the consequences of sin on your relationship with God and leads to restoring your relationship with God that lasts forever. Forgiving sin is better than healing a broken body.

You can imagine what the paralytic did after he was healed. He ran around town telling everybody the good news. The crowds already packed Peter's house. They tore a hole in his roof to get to Jesus. With more people on the way,

Jesus decided to prevent more property damage. He left the house and headed to the shore on the Sea of Galilee.

Remember the Sea of Galilee was not a saltwater sea. It is simply a large inland lake similar to Big Spirit Lake but bigger. So Jesus went to the lakeshore, but people were still coming to him from everywhere around Capernaum. He used this opportunity to teach.

**He was teaching them.** Notice what Jesus was doing. He was teaching them. Did he do a few more healings and cast out a few more demons by the lakeshore? It wouldn't surprise me if he did. Notice the emphasis was not on Jesus' healings but on his teaching. The healings and casting out of demons were like the whipped cream on top of an ice cream sundae. Jesus' teaching was the substance of his ministry. Jesus' healings supported and proved the truth of his teaching. They didn't replace the substance of his teaching.

What did he teach? We learned that earlier in the Gospel of Mark.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, Mark 1:14 (ESV)

Jesus taught about salvation and forgiveness of sin by faith in him. Jesus was having an outdoor revival meeting by the lake where he was telling people about their sin. He called people to repent of their sin and trust in him to forgive their sin. Essentially, Jesus was having Billy Graham revival meetings before Billy Graham.

Now as the seashore revival meeting subsided, and the crowd thinned, because everybody was heading for a meal, Jesus also left the lake and headed back into the town. This is what we read.

**And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.**

This doesn't strike us as significant but it is shocking. No self-respecting person of any kind wanted to be friends with a tax collector. Tax collectors were the scum of the earth, the refuse of society. Jesus just asked a tax collector to be part of his inner group of friends!

### **What is a tax collector?**

In Rome, there were two different kinds of taxes. There were general taxes such as property taxes, income taxes and state taxes. The income tax was 1 percent. The land tax was 10 percent of all grain and 20 percent of all wine and fruit. The people that collected those taxes were called the *gabbai* tax collectors. There was not much corruption in these taxes because things were straightforward and highly regulated.

There were also taxes levied on the transportation of goods, the use of roads, the crossing of bridges, import and export of products and other miscellaneous activity. The people who collected these taxes were called the *mokhes* tax collectors. They were unregulated so they were famous for corruption.

The easiest way to understand these taxes is to think about toll roads in Chicago. Did you ever subconsciously calculate how much money was being paid in a toll booth and feel you were getting ripped off? That is the same feeling they had in the ancient world when the *mokhes* tax collectors taxed their carts and horses to use a Roman highway, just as the toll you pay on a toll road today

depends upon the number of axles on your truck and the weight you are hauling. In a similar way, the *mokhes* tax collector charged you a toll to enter a Roman highway based on the number of wheels on your cart and the number of animals used to pull the cart. This means the Budweiser beer truck pulled by the Clydesdale horses that we see each Christmas would be a heavily-taxed vehicle in the ancient world. There is literally too much horsepower.

While state taxes were regulated, these road taxes for import and export were not regulated. This allowed these tax collectors to set their own tax rates. This led to a lot of greed and corruption as these tax collectors inflated their prices.

Earlier in our study of Mark we learned that Capernaum was the largest town on the Sea of Galilee. It had two major roads through it — one was a Roman highway called the Via Maris. Remember the Sea of Galilee was filled with fish, and Capernaum was the largest harbor. Fishermen caught their fish, docked at Capernaum, then exported their catch of fish around the ancient world using these Roman highways. Before you got on the highway, you passed through Levi's tax collecting booth.

The way it worked for these tax collectors is Herod Antipas was the ruler in this part of the world. To get the job of tax collecting for this highway, you bid to Herod how much money you could provide him in a year. If your bid was accepted, that was the amount of money you agreed to pay to Herod. It didn't matter how many people used the road. You agreed to provide a certain amount of revenue for the road. If you were short on collecting needed revenue, you

raised your prices. If you collected money beyond your agreed-upon revenue, that was all yours to keep. This allowed these tax collectors to set their own prices and to many of them becoming filthy rich.

As you can guess, these tax collectors were notorious for corruption. They had thugs and enforcers working for them. If you didn't have the road tax, they loaned it to you at an exorbitant interest rate. The best way to think about this is to realize that Levi was part of the Galilean mafia. You didn't want to get on Levi's bad side.

### **How did the Jews treat tax collectors?**

Tax collectors were so hated because of their corruption that the Jews barred them from the synagogue. They were considered liars and robbers. Their witness was disallowed in court because it was assumed they would lie. The touch of a tax collector rendered you ritually unclean. The presence of a tax collector in your house rendered it unclean. The Jewish Mishnah, which was written later, said it was acceptable to lie to a tax collector because it was assumed he was lying to you.

To make matters worse, Levi was a Jewish tax collector. This meant other Jews viewed Levi as a traitor. They viewed him as someone that committed treason against his own people because he collected taxes for the Romans. They would have thought of him as selling his soul to the Devil for the sake of money. The Jews would consider Levi making a handsome profit by taxing his own people for the Romans as an act of treason. Tax collectors were usually



wealthy. They were also lonely because they were socially ostracized. Many were disowned by their families because of their job.

This is the picture we have of Levi. He was a criminal. He had thugs and enforcers working for him. He was part of the local mafia. No Jews talked with him. Everybody hated him and feared him but Jesus called him to be one of his friends and part of his group.

Before we continue in this story, let me pause to give some hope to the people treated like tax collectors among us. This story of Jesus calling Levi is not just told in the Gospel of Mark. It is also told in the Gospel of Luke as well as the Gospel of Matthew. The difference is that in Matthew, the name of the tax collector is Matthew, not Levi. Since the earliest of times, people have surmised that Levi and Matthew are the same person. Why the different name? It is probably because Levi changed his name to alter his identity after he left his tax collecting profession to follow Jesus. Levi started out life with a very dark, mafia-like beginning as a tax collector. Jesus called him and changed him. Jesus took Levi's life and used it in a huge way to have an impact for Christ and his kingdom. The Gospel of Matthew, the first book in our New Testament, was written by Matthew. It is written by this guy.

I say this because many of us look at our sinful pasts and wonder if God can do anything good with the broken pieces we call our lives. God loves to work with broken people and do something great for his kingdom with their lives. If God can use a former mafia tax collector to write one of the Gospels, he can use you.

Then Jesus did the unthinkable. He turned to Levi and said “Follow me.” Levi rose and followed him. This seems strange. There was no explanation. There was no discussion. Levi just dropped everything in his tax station and followed Jesus. Why did he do this? Let me read between the lines. Apparently Levi had heard Jesus teaching about sin, repentance, and faith in Jesus to forgive our sin. Levi responded in his heart with repentance and faith in Jesus although he had not gone public with his new-found faith.

Last week, we learned Jesus could read the minds of the religious leaders. I think he read Levi’s mind. Jesus knew Levi had repented and placed his faith in Jesus. Jesus knew all this when he walked by Levi’s tax collecting booth and commanded Levi to follow him and be his disciple. This was Jesus commanding Levi to go public with the change that had taken place privately in his heart.

Realize the cost of Levi going public with his newfound faith in Jesus. When James, John, Peter, and Andrew left the fishing business, they left it with their father. They could always go back to their career. Not Levi. As soon as he left his tax booth and his tax career, others in the Galilean mafia would swoop in to take his position. He would never get it back. His relationship with Herod Antipas would be broken forever. It was an all-or-nothing proposition for Levi to follow Jesus. It meant he burned the bridge of going back.

Sometimes, this is the way Jesus calls us. When we see our sin and we trust in Jesus as our savior, we soon realize Jesus isn’t just calling us to change

what we believe about him in our heads. He is calling us to change the way we live our lives. We need to turn our backs on the sin in our lives and walk away.

Doing that can be risky. It can be costly. It may mean we take a huge financial hit, just like Levi did when he walked away from his corrupt tax collecting business.

This is what Jesus commands us to do when we follow him. We turn our back on our lives of sin. We embrace the risk and the cost and trust God to take care of us as we follow him not just with the belief in our heads but the way we live our lives.

**Levi had a strategic party to introduce his friends to Jesus and to his new Christian friends.**

And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. Mark 2:15 (ESV)

As soon as Levi left it all behind, he immediately had a change of heart. He went from a greedy man to a generous man. He wanted all his friends to know about their sin and the good news of complete forgiveness that is found in Jesus so he decided to throw a party. Luke said it this way:

And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. Luke 5:29 (ESV)

Notice a few things it tells us about this party. It tells us **they reclined at table**. When we eat in a hurry, we stand up to eat. When we slow down to enjoy our food, we sit at a table. In this culture, when they wanted to have a lengthy enjoyable meal like a Thanksgiving dinner, they ate reclined. The food was in the center. Everybody laid on a couch with their heads in the center by the food and their feet away from the food so they could talk. A reclining meal was the way you

served a big meal that provided lots of time for people to talk at the meal. Levi set up a lengthy reclining meal that gave people lots of time to talk.

Levi invited other tax collectors and sinners to his big house for this massive feast. This means other extortioners and crooks all came to Levi's house for dinner. The thugs were there. The prostitutes were there. Remember, Levi had no good respectable friends because all of them separated themselves from him. All Levi had was a corrupt refuse of society as his friends. Levi threw this party so Jesus and his disciples could meet Levi's corrupt, sinful friends. They would both enjoy a lengthy meal where they could rub shoulders, tell their stories and his new Christian friends could tell his non-Christian friends the good news of Jesus. Remember this wasn't a party just to party. It was a party with a purpose. The purpose was evangelistic so Jesus and his disciples could rub shoulders with people who needed to hear the good news of Jesus.

Here is a point of application. Jesus hung out with sinners so they could hear the good news of Jesus. Jesus held parties and went to parties to mix with lost people. That was Jesus' evangelistic strategy in that day and it still works today. Too often, as Christians, we keep ourselves away from people that need Jesus. We need to throw more Levi parties, so we can rub shoulders with people that need to hear about Jesus. We need to be around the tax collectors of this world, not just the Christians in this world. Don't worry about being contaminated by them. Be more concerned with the gospel rescuing and transforming them.

If we do this, somebody will track dirt in the house. They will spill something on the carpet. It will cost money. We will need to pick up the clothes

on the floor in the bedroom. We might even need to vacuum. That is OK. It is all about people hearing the good news of Jesus.

When was the last time you had a strategic Matthew party where you invited your friends that don't know Jesus to your house? For New Year's Eve, we are not having a church party to welcome in the New Year. I am challenging you to have a Levi party at your house. Invite over Christian friends and some of your neighbors who don't know Jesus. Have lots of food we shouldn't eat then let your Christian and non-Christian friends talk together. That is evangelism.

**The religious elite didn't like the company Jesus kept.**

And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Mark 2:16 (ESV)

We learned about the Pharisees last week. They are the strictest sect of Judaism. There were about 6,000 Pharisees in existence at this time. They were obsessed with holiness and separation from anything or anyone sinful. They not only adhered to the Old Testament laws but they had added many additional laws to keep what they called a fence around the law to keep you even further from violating God's law. Today, we look at them as hypocrites but at the time of Jesus, they were admired for their piety and fastidious observances.

This text is talking about the scribes of the Pharisees. These were the scholars, the academics of the group. The way it worked is if you were a scribe, you were a leader of the Pharisees and you had students under you. You only let the best and the brightest students around you because that raised your social position.

Eating in that day was not just for food. Who you ate with determined your social pecking order. Eating with someone meant friendship, acceptance and welcome. The scribes of the Pharisees were very careful who ate with them because they only ate with the best, the brightest and the most gifted people to raise themselves as high as possible on the social ladder. If you ate with common people, you lowered your social ranking. The scribes of the Pharisees were going bananas to see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. It totally messed with their heads.

Jesus was a highly revered rabbi. He should have learned to limit himself to eating with only the best and the brightest, just like the scribes of the Pharisees. Instead, Jesus was eating with prostitutes, gang members, crime bosses, people in the mafia and every other wing nut and nut job of society.

In this particular instance, Jesus was invited to Levi's house for a party with these kinds of people. Jesus wasn't always the one invited to these kinds of mixer parties. Sometimes he created these mixer parties. Remember Zacchaeus? He was a chief tax collector. He climbed a fig tree so he could see Jesus pass by. What did Jesus say to him?

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." Luke 19:5 (ESV)

Jesus schedule a mixer lunch at a tax collector's home. Look how the Jews responded to Jesus eating with Zacchaeus.

And when they saw it, they all *grumbled*, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." Luke 19:7 (ESV)

The Jews grumbled.

When Luke described Jesus' dinner with Levi, he said the Jews grumbled about that dinner too.

And the Pharisees and their scribes *grumbled* at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Luke 5:30 (ESV)

This word grumbling means to complain under your voice. It means to talk bad about someone behind his or her back. Jesus was eating with the wrong people. He ate with sinners.

Let's ask the tough question. We may not believe what the Pharisees believed. Do we act like the Pharisees act? Have we become practical Pharisees? Have we build a wall around us cutting off all the people who need to hear the good news of Jesus? We go to a hundred percent Christian Bible studies. We go to a hundred percent Christian meetings. Our golf buddies are Christians. Our doctors and plumbers are all Christians. Even our garbage man is a Christian. Do we ever intentionally rub shoulders with people who desperately need to hear about God's love, like Jesus did? If not, we are no different than the Pharisees. We need to repent.

**Jesus came to save the lost, not pander the saints.**

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Mark 2:17 (ESV)

I love Jesus' response. First he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick." Doctors are doctors so they can help sick people. If doctors only hung out with other doctors, they would be no good to anyone. All of their doctor education and all of the good they could do would be a

complete waste if they weren't willing to spend time with sick people. Each of us is grateful to have doctors that help us and heal us when we are sick.

In this passage, Jesus was the doctor. He needed to hang out with sick people because the only way to cure the disease of sin is to bring the gospel message to sinners. If Jesus followed the lifestyle of the scribes of the Pharisees, none of us would be a Christian today.

Nothing has changed. Folks, today we are the doctors. We have the cure of the gospel message. If we just hang out with other doctors at church, nobody will be healed. Nobody will be born again. The gospel will not go forth and it is our fault because we didn't follow in the footsteps of Jesus and rub shoulders with sinners. We follow in the footsteps of the Pharisees and separated ourselves from everyone that desperately needs the healing that only the gospel can provide.

Jesus also said this, "I came not to call the righteous, but the sinners." The gospel message is not for those who think they have their acts together. It is for broken people who know they don't have their acts together. If any of us think we have our acts together, the gospel message will not work for us.

Every single one of us began far from God but because somebody cared enough to get out of their little religious cocoon and share the good news of Jesus with us, we were born again. Let us be people who continue to do the same. We must be like Jesus and get out of our little religious cocoons and get involved with people that need to know Jesus.



## Application

1. **Jesus loves sinners, no matter how far they have run from God.** No matter how far you have wandered from God, Jesus loves you and promises to forgive you. If Jesus forgives a tax collector, he can forgive you.
2. **Jesus ate with sinners.** Jesus intentionally rubbed shoulders with those far from God in this world. He accepted invitations from people like Levi, to have dinner at his house. He made invitations with people like Zacchaeus to eat at his house. Have we gone out of our way to cut sinners out of our lives and become practical Pharisees? If we have, God calls us to repent of our selfishness and start loving the people Jesus loves, the people that need to know him. To do that, I have two challenges for you.
  - a. Make sure you are involved in a community activity where you rub shoulders with people who are not Christians. Get involved in sports, YMCA, 4-H and other community organizations. Use those rubbing shoulder opportunities to tell people how much Jesus loves and forgives.
  - b. This holiday season, plan a Levi party. Have Christians who know Jesus over to your home with people that don't know Jesus so they can meet. One of the most strategic places to do this is New Year's Eve. Don't have a party that night so you can have a party. Let's be good doctors and spend time with the sick who need the cure to sin only Jesus can bring.



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