

The Scandal Over Sinners

Mark 2:13-17

A friend of mine began his ministry quite well. He had some good early successes. He was a really strong teacher – he had a way of bringing God's word to life, explaining it in fresh ways, which people could relate to. Maybe you've experienced some of those moments, when a teacher opens the Bible to a place that you've heard and studied and thought you'd figured out, but then this teacher shows you something there that is so simple and obvious and so different from what you thought it meant. My friend was one of those kinds of teachers, and people responded really well. There was some good fruit. He was also really gifted at caring for people – you know, would have just the right thing to say to people in need that would be encouraging and uplifting. Again, some good fruit.

But, as happens so often, there was another side to my friend. Some leaders heard a rumor about some of the ways he was spending his time. Someone had heard that he'd been seen at a party with the wrong kind of people. Someone else thought they'd seen him surrounded by a group of people that a minister shouldn't hang around, laughing and joining in with them. I heard he even provided the wine at one party. Even more scandalous, one leader invited him for dinner, and a prostitute walked up to my friend and it was really obvious that they knew each other. She was even openly affectionate toward him and it didn't even seem to bother him. When this leader asked him what on earth this meant, my friend was abrasive in response.

What do you think should be done? Take a moment to think about how you might respond to this situation. What should be done with a minister like that? I'll venture a guess that your ideas range from the quick "get rid of him", to a more measured "sit him down and talk to him about building healthy friendships with people that can be a good influence on him", perhaps even to a "find out why he has been hanging around with these types of people and go from there". I wonder how many of us, though, thought that the best thing to do in this situation would be to encourage him to keep this up, spend more time with these people, and even take some others with him.

Did I mention, my friend's name is Jesus? And these are true stories. Mark records one of them in chapter 2 starting in verse 13:

13 Then He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them.

14 As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him.

15 Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him.

16 And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, "How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?"

17 When Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Had I begun with this story instead of the story about my friend, we probably would have missed how radical and scandalous this story really is. The problem is that many of us are so familiar with these Bible stories that we jump immediately to condemning those judgmental Pharisees, and agree with Jesus that He is in the right place. After all, He is Jesus, He must be right. But here is the kicker: in all my years of going to church, and in all my theological training – I don't recall many times being told that to be like Jesus means that I should be going to parties like this one at Levi's house. That just didn't happen very much... We'll come back to that in a moment, but let's spend a little more time looking at this story in Mark.

Background:

Sometimes really understanding the Bible begins with understanding the culture in which the story takes place. Verse 1 of chapter 2 tells us that Jesus has returned to Capernaum, in the northern part of Israel on the sea of Galilee. Even in this area, far away from Jerusalem, there is a strong religious presence. Their religion is what kept the Jewish people together.

So Mark simply tells us in verse 13, **"He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them."** Jesus often preached and taught the people outdoors, because the crowds were so large that came to hear Him.

Then in verse 14 Mark tells us, **"As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, 'Follow Me.' So he arose and followed Him."** There is a lot of information in that verse – the name "Levi" shows he is definitely a Jew. "... **sitting at the tax office**" tells us his occupation. Now, even today most of us do not like paying taxes, and the IRS is not on our list of favorite organizations.

But in Jesus' day it was even worse. The title 'tax collector' became a euphemism for the scum of the earth. Although from this story we know that Jesus did not see tax collector that way, even the Lord Jesus understood how people viewed tax collectors in His day. In Matthew 18, when He addresses His disciples concerning church discipline, He says in verse 17: **"And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."** Jesus understood that a tax collector was seen as an outcast of society, but why were these so despised?

Well, one reason was that in the Roman Empire they collected taxes through a system that was called 'tax farming'. The Roman government would have given a district a fixed tax figure, and then they would have sold the right to collect those taxes to the highest bidder. So the buyer was to hand over the assessed figures that the Roman government set every year, but they were allowed to keep anything that they had collected over and above that assessed, fixed figure.

Many of these tax collectors were trained extortionists, and you can imagine how they attracted a criminal element. Most tax collectors were thugs. Now a great illustration of the dishonesty of tax collectors is found in the character of Zaccheus in Luke 19. He was a chief tax collector. He was a boss with other tax collectors below him. Again we find Jesus going to eat at this tax collector's house. While there, Zaccheus is converted, and in his statement to Jesus of repentance he basically admits to the crimes he was involved in. Luke 19:8 says, **"Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold."**

So we can see why they were despised. First of all most were dishonest individuals. They collected far more than they were required to pay the Romans. For a Jew to be a tax collector in Palestine was to be a traitor, to be a defector, a turncoat, a collaborator with the occupier. So a Jewish tax collector was not only siding with the enemy, the Romans, but further oppressing his own people by lining his pockets in the process of helping the enemy. They were seen as lackeys of the Romans, much as the French hated Nazi collaborators during WWII. So the rabbis taught, in their religious interpretation of the laws of Judaism, that you should not talk, walk, and above all you should not eat with a tax collector.

We don't really know Levi's character. Perhaps he was the lone honest tax collector. But not likely because of the way the religious leaders reacted to Jesus eating with him. Levi was hated by the good people, the religious people. He and his friends were outcasts. Yet Jesus called him, saying the same thing to him that he had said to the other apostles, **"Follow Me."**

The meaning of that is, **"Follow with me."** Jesus was calling Levi to be with Him. To walk where He walked, to do what He did. And Levi's response was immediate, **"So he arose and followed Him."** Luke tells us that Levi **"left all, rose up, and followed Him."** He had an immediate, radical, conversion. He left his luxury, his affluence, his sin, all those things that he was accustomed to, to walk the road that Jesus walked - a road of suffering, of holiness, of separation and self-sacrifice. Now here is the salient point: Jesus has come to save sinners, but Jesus calls sinners to repentance. They have to leave their sin, and leave those selfish things that keep them from Christ. Levi left them immediately.

Jesus doesn't just communicate love to Matthew – he calls him to something better. Those simple words "follow me" are so loaded – "leave your sin and corruption and treason behind and follow me."

This tax collector goes from being Levi, a traitor to the Jews, to being Matthew who wrote the Gospel account that is directed to the Jews! "God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that way, he wants you to be ... just like Jesus" – Max Lucado.

I once saw someone wearing t-shirt that said "I'LL LOVE YOU WHEN YOU ARE MORE LIKE ME"

That's often how we do it – once people get their life straight, then we will love them. That is not how Jesus did it. The church has often got this wrong – we have called people into redemption by judging them rather than by loving them. Jesus calls most people into redemption by loving them – the only people he passes judgment on are the leaders who think that they are not in need of redemption.

Verse 15 says, **"Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him."** Now, knowing the status of these people as outcasts, we can imagine what this dinner party was like. This was not polite society, not a "black tie" dinner, not an ordered, clean, proper sit-down meal with table linens and three different forks. This was a party with a bunch of outcasts in an already rough part of the country. And Jesus, the preacher, teacher, and miracle worker – the one who we know is the Son of God – He is the guest of honor.

Now I hope you can understand the significance of what we read in verse 16, that **"when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors**

and sinners, they said to His disciples, 'How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?'" They could not understand Jesus.

If you picture Jesus as constant do-gooder with clean fingernails and a permanent smile, who would never be caught even close to sin, this story doesn't fit into your picture. If Jesus was like some religious people are today, and He went to this party and sat in the corner with His arms crossed and a look of disgust on His face, condemning the sin and excess and remaining aloof, first of all He would not have been loved and followed by these people. And second He would not have been condemned by the self-righteous Pharisees. This is a different Jesus, perfectly at home with these people, joining in, participating, embracing, being accepted, all without ever sinning.

We are familiar with the reaction from the established religious leaders, and I particularly like the NLT paraphrase of the verse: "Why does he eat with such scum?" I think the translation well captures the scorn, derision, and implied superiority that the Pharisees felt. But I'd like to flip the question around this morning: if we believe that our goal as maturing Christians is to be like Jesus, and to be always growing more like Jesus, then maybe the question is "why don't we eat with such scum"?

Remember from the bigger context of the entire life of Jesus that this was not an isolated incident. It wasn't a brief, well planned, strategic evangelistic foray into "enemy" territory, like Jonah going to Ninevah. This was how Jesus lived. He did this all the time. The established religious leaders labeled him "a glutton and a drunkard" (Luke 7:34), because he hung around with the gluttons and the drunkards, shared their lives and their tables, stayed at their homes, and perhaps most significantly of all, was completely welcomed and accepted by them. All without ever sinning.

Where would Jesus likely be found today if he came to Grand Junction? I suppose He could be found occasionally at church teaching or preaching. But more often than not I think we might find Him at the homeless shelter, or down at the park with the drug addicts and drunks. Or He might be in the home of someone who is homosexual, eating with them and enjoying their friends. Does that shock you? It certainly shocked the Pharisees. Maybe we are a little more like the Pharisees at times than we would like to admit.

Now the response that Jesus gives is the core of the truth that the Holy Spirit wants us to get in this account. In verse 17, after perceiving what the Pharisees think about the situation, Jesus says: **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."** What was His answer? Jesus is come to be a Savior to sinners. Now if you hear nothing else that I say to you this morning, hear that: Jesus has come to be a Savior to sinners. So therefore His point is: 'Who else would you expect me to be with?'

In verse 17 Jesus identifies two types of people: the well and the sick. He is says the well don't need a doctor, do they? But the sick do! Doctors exist to help sick folk, so you should not be surprised to find a doctor surrounded by sick people. The Pharisees considered themselves to be the righteous ones. They were whole, they were well, in other words they were without need of any help and assistance. Jesus is not talking about people who are genuinely good, but people who think they are good because of their self-righteousness.

Also of course the Pharisees considered the tax collectors sinners, they were the sick ones. The tax collectors probably considered themselves to be the sick ones. Here's the vital point: the Pharisees considered themselves well, when

really they were sick. The sinners considered themselves sick, so Jesus made them well, because - here it is - Jesus has come to be a Savior to, what? Hello? Sinners. If you don't think you are a sinner, Jesus cannot help you.

Let me leave a question rolling around in your head and heart this morning: do you really want to be like Jesus? Do you really want to be like the Jesus who spent His life touching the lepers, going to the parties held by the sinners, letting His feet be anointed by the prostitute who washed them with her tears and dried them with her hair and kissed them with her lips and then wasted an expensive jar of perfume on some feet? Do we really want to be like the untamed Jesus we find in the Gospels? If the answer is yes, we begin to follow a road that is not safe, not clean, and certainly not boring. Certainly not insignificant. Certainly not trivial or unimportant. In fact, it is a road, it is a story, which invites us to live in the reality that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and the Kingdom of God transforms the world.

Jesus reached his hand out to Levi, a sinner, an outcast, a tax collector, and said "Follow me and be my disciple". Levi did. And he was transformed – not from a rugged, vulgar outcast into a socially acceptable rabbi. But from a man without an overall mission or purpose beyond his own life and comfort, into a man who would and did participate in the coming of the Kingdom of God, the transformation of the world, and a man who, I am quite sure, would never want to return to his safe, predictable, stable, prosperous little tax collector booth back in Capernaum. Jesus invited, Levi accepted.

This same Jesus reaches out his hand to you and to me, with the same invitation: "Follow me and be my disciple."

Conclusion: Maybe you are here today, and you feel like you are an outcast, maybe even a disappointment, and you have done some things you are ashamed of. Maybe you feel like there is little or no hope for you, that you are destined to stay as you are, that nothing ever changes. Well, I am here to tell you that Jesus loves you and that He came to call sinners to repentance, that He does business with people just like you. He will save you today, if you just turn to Him. Jesus is in the sinner-saving business, and someday in the future the Lord Jesus will host a supper for sinners, which is referred to as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and you could be there, you are invited to come. But you must turn from sin and trust Him.

Maybe you are here today and you think of yourself as a pretty good person, and maybe you are, compared to others or me, but you are not good enough. Brother Rex used to ask people, "How good do you have to be to go to heaven?" And he would answer, "As good as God, or accounted so." Are you willing to say today, I am a sinner, I need Jesus, the Great Physician for my sin-sickness.