

## **Jesus: The Friend of Sinners**

### **Mark 2:13-17**

#### **Introduction:**

- Question: are you a friend of sinners? Do you spend time with persons who do not know Christ, whose lives may be offensive to you, and whose reputation among “good people like us” is an embarrassment and even a scandal?
- Do you love sinners, care for sinners, reach out to sinners and serve sinners? Are you, am I, a friend of sinners? Are you, am I, like Jesus?!
- This text, what one Bible teacher called “the scandal of grace,” brought great conviction to my heart? Why?
  - 1) I do not spend much time with sinners except on the international mission field.
  - 2) All too often I find myself thinking like a modern day Pharisee, like one who in Luke 18:11 said, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” No, I am a super saint and you are fortunate to have me on your team. “I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get” (18:12). How much better would it be for me , for you, to pray like the tax collector in vs. 13 who “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!”
- No, I need to realize I am a sinner in desperate need of the mercy of God. And, I am a forgiven sinner only thru “the scandal of amazing grace.” That should lead me, like Jesus, to be a friend of sinners.

### **Transition:**

In this text, we see Jesus the friend of sinners as He reaches out to 3 particular groups of peoples:

1) the unlikely, 2) the undesirable and 3) the spiritually unhealthy. Look carefully at all the characters in the story and ask these 2 questions: 1) With whom do I most identify? 2) Am I loving and serving sinners like Jesus?

#### **I. Jesus calls the unlikely to follow Him.     2:13-14**

- Jesus is again (cf. 1:16) out beside the sea doing what He loved doing: 1) teaching the Word and 2) calling disciples to follow Him. He left the small house for a large open area where the crowds could get to Him and hear Him.
- Mark notes the crowd kept coming (imperfect tense) to Him and He kept on teaching (*didasko*; imperfect tense).
- Jesus is out among the people. He is not home locked away in hiding but He is out there with those who need His touch and His teaching. To reach the lost you have to be with the lost. And, you must share with them the gospel.
- 15 times in Mark he summarizes Jesus' activity by the word "teaching" (Edwards, 81). In Mark, our Lord is a teaching and preaching machine!
- Verse 14: Jesus is on the move again and He crosses paths (purposefully) with a tax collector named Levi. This is almost certainly the man we know as Matthew (cf. Matt 9:9). His name means "gift of God." The one who had been a thief will now receive a gift from God and become a gift of God to the people he had taken advantage of. What a transformation! Now, why would I call him a thief?

- Tax-collectors were notorious in that day and hated by the Jewish people as traitors and abusers of their own flesh and blood. They were a mafia like organization in the first century that exploited others.
  - They served Rome, the Gentile occupying power of Israel.
  - They were dishonest IRS agents who overcharged the people for their own profit.
  - The Jewish writings known as the *Mishnah* and *Talmud* set them beside thieves and murderers they were so despised and loathed.
  - They were expelled and banned from the synagogue.
  - They were an embarrassment and disgrace to their families.
  - The touch of a tax collector rendered a house unclean.
  - Jews could lie to a tax collector without impunity.
  - Merciless extortioners, these lackeys of Rome and the Herods were to quote Kent Hughes, “despicable vermon...the lowest of the low” (Hughes, 68-69).
  - With money as his god, Levi was a “social leper” who was spiritually bankrupt having sold his soul to sin and self. His was a soul in need of a touch from Jesus.
- With amazing brevity a shocking scene unfolds.
  - Jesus sees this man named Levi.
  - Levi is a tax collector (IRS agent)
  - He says to Levi, “Follow Me” (imp.)
  - Levi gets up and follows Him.
- By calling Levi to follow Him Jesus once more commits a scandalous and unthinkable act. It would rival His touching a leper. In neither situation does He

- yield to social pressure or expectation. He came to call sinners to Himself and call sinners He would!
- Luke 5:28 informs us Levi left everything and followed Jesus. Levi counted the cost, took the risk and followed Jesus! This was a decisive act! A radical decision! He gave up his lucrative business and all of his stuff and there was no going back! He turned his back on his former way of life for a completely new one.
  - Levi saw something in Jesus and Jesus saw something in Levi that he could and would become. Jesus saw a sinner in need of salvation not a low-life deserving condemnation! Jesus saw not the wicked life of a tax-collector and extortioner but the changed life of a disciple, evangelist, apostle and gospel writer.
  - Jesus looked past what Levi was to what he would become! That's the scandal of grace! Jesus sees in us, the unlikely, what no one else can see, all made possible by scandalous grace and the fact He is the friend of sinners.

**Transition:** Jesus calls the unlikely! I'm so glad He does!!!

## **II. Jesus calls the undesirable to follow Him. 2:15**

- The day of salvation should be a day of celebration. It rightly should be the time to throw a party.
- Verse 15 changes scene. Now we find ourselves in a house, probably Levi's, sharing a meal and having a good time.
- Levi had invited a large number of friends and acquaintances over to the house to eat and meet Jesus. Luke 5:29 says it was "a great feast" or banquet. Levi must have owned a large home.
  - Perhaps it was a farewell party.

- Perhaps it was to celebrate his new life and calling.
- No doubt it was to honor Jesus.
- No doubt it was to share Jesus with his friends.
- Interestingly, though it is probably the home of Levi, and a rather large home at that (note “many tax collectors and sinners...”), it is Jesus who serves as the host. Those present “were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.”
- The term “sinners” may be a technical term for the common people who did not live by the rigid and legalistic rules of the Pharisees. It means the alienated and rejected, those who needed God’s grace and knew it. They were no doubt stunned that the young famous rabbi would share table fellowship with them and “hang out” with them. They were amazed and the religious hypocrites were angered.

**Application:** Bigotry of whatever sort is always sad, ugly and pathetic. It is a further evidence of our sinful and depraved hearts that desperately need the scandal of grace in our own lives.

**Illustration:** The manner in which I saw a black woman treated by white church people in Moss Bluff, LA was a tragic display of the sinful heart that sees itself as better than others. She may have been seen as an undesirable guest at the fellowship meal by the white racist and bigots, but she would be a welcomed guest and member of the family of God by the Lord Jesus.

- Jesus, in this event, tells us Messiah calls and eats with sinners, extending forgiveness to all who would follow Him. The meal itself, was something of a foreshadowing and anticipation of the great Messianic banquet at the end of the age where we will celebrate what Revelation 19:9 calls “the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.” There

persons from every tribe, tongue, people and nation, the unlikely and the undesirable, who have experienced this scandalous grace, will recline with King Jesus at a great banquet that will never end.

### **III. Jesus calls the unhealthy to follow Him. 2:16-17**

- In verse 16 we are introduced to a group that is not happy with what Jesus is doing and who will consistently oppose Jesus throughout His ministry all the way to the cross. Mark calls them “the scribes of the Pharisees.” Not all Pharisees were scribes, though most were. Most likely they were outside the home looking through the windows and open door. They did not like what they heard or saw.
- They interrogate the disciples of Jesus (probably the 4: Simon and Andrew, James and John) as to why He would stoop and lower Himself to eat, to have “table fellowship” with undesirables like tax collectors and common sinners who do not follow the religious tradition, rules and regulations as they do. Before we see the answer Jesus gives, there is another question begging an answer: “just who are the Pharisees and why was Jesus always in conflict with them?”

#### **Who are the Pharisees?**

The Pharisees were the pious Jews who rigorously followed the Law of Moses and opposed Greek influence on Jewish culture and religion. Josephus claims they numbered about six thousand in Jesus’ day. While the Sadducees were mostly upper-class aristocrats and priests, the Pharisees appear to have been primarily middle-class laypeople, perhaps craftsmen and merchants. The Sadducees had greater political power, but the Pharisees had broader support among the people. They were more involved in the synagogue communities.

The most distinctive characteristic of the Pharisees was their strict adherence to the Law of Moses, the Torah; and not only the written law but also the oral law, a body of extra-biblical traditions which expanded and elaborated on the Old Testament law (e.g., the “tradition of the elders,” Mark 7:3). The Pharisees’ goals were twofold: (1) to apply Torah’s mandates to everyday life, and (2) to “build a fence” around Torah to guard against any possible violation. Hands and utensils had to be properly washed. Food had to be properly grown, tithed, and prepared. Only certain clothing could be worn. Since ritual purity was so important, the Pharisees refused to share table fellowship with those who ignored these matters. The common “people of the land” were often shunned. Gentiles were clearly on their “outcast” hit list!

The term Pharisee is probably derived from a Hebrew word for “separatists” and was applied to them because of the dietary and purity laws which restricted table fellowship with the common people and with non-Jews.

In contrast to the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:8) and steered a middle road between the Sadducees’ belief in free will and the predestination (determinism) of the Essenes. They also cultivated a strong hope in the coming of the Messiah, the Son of David, who would deliver them from foreign oppression. This made them anti-Roman but with less inclination to active resistance than the Zealots and other revolutionaries.

Jesus came into frequent conflict with the Pharisees. He condemned them for raising their traditions to the level of Scripture and for focusing on the outward requirements of the law, while ignoring matters of the heart. For their part, the separatist Pharisees opposed and attacked Jesus’ association with tax collectors and sinners and the way he placed himself above Sabbath regulations. Despite these differences, Jesus was much closer theologically to the Pharisees than to the Sadducees, sharing similar beliefs in the authority of Scripture, the future resurrection, and

the coming of the Messiah. His frequent conflicts arose because he challenged them on their own turf and because he was viewed as a threat to their leadership and influence over the people.

Today the term Pharisee is often equated with hypocrisy and a legalistic spirit, but this would not have been the view of most people in first-century Israel. They generally respected the Pharisees for their piety and devotion to the law and held them in high esteem. Indeed, the Pharisees' fundamental goal was a noble one: to maintain a life of purity and obedience to God's law.

The Old Testament law forbids work on the Sabbath, but it gives few details (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15). The rabbis therefore specify and discuss thirty-nine categories of forbidden activities. So, while knot-tying is unlawful, certain knots, like those which can be untied with one hand, are allowed. A bucket may be tied over a well on the Sabbath, but only with a belt, not a rope. While such minutiae may seem odd and arbitrary to us, the Pharisee's goal was not to be legalistic but to please God through obedience to his law. (Today it is unlawful to push an elevator button on the Sabbath, but you may walk up all the stairs if necessary!)

Jesus criticized the Pharisees not for their goals of purity and obedience but for their hypocrisy. He accused them of saying one thing but doing another, of raising their interpretations (mere "traditions of men") to the level of God's commandments (Mark 7:8), and of becoming obsessed with externals while neglecting the more important things: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. They "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:23-24). Amazingly, in their religious zeal, they had separated themselves both from others and from God!

Of course such hypocrisy is not unique to the Pharisees but is common in all religious traditions, including ours! It is easy to follow the form or religion and miss its substance. (Mark Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*, 132-33).



- Jesus hears the questions (and implied criticism) of the Pharisees (v. 16-17a). He responds with a well known proverb as well as a statement that explains His mission and justifies His actions:
  - 1) “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”
  - 2) “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”
- Jesus uses a common sense proverb even his opponents would agree with and in the process uses irony to expose the hypocrisy of His detractors.
- The Pharisees, the religiously moral and upright, were just as needy of a spiritual doctor, healing and medicine as the tax collectors and wicked. Sadly, they did not recognize they too had a spiritually terminal disease that only the “Great Physician” named Jesus could heal.
- In essence Jesus says, “to those who think they are righteous I have nothing to say. To those who know they are sinners in need of salvation, these I have come to heal and call to myself.”
- You must see yourself as lost before you can be saved. You must know you are spiritually sick before you can be spiritually healed. You must know that you are spiritually dead in sin before you can be made spiritually alive by a Savior!

### **5 Questions We Always Ask of Every Text**

**1) What does this teach me about God?**

He sent Jesus to save sinners of all types. God sent Jesus on a mission to call sinners to salvation.

**2) What does this text teach me about sinful humanity?**

We are easily seduced by legalism and self-righteousness.

**3) What does this text teach me about Jesus Christ?**

- He loves sinners.
- He calls sinners.
- He saves sinners.

**4) What does God want me to know?**

- No one is too bad to be saved.
- No one is so good that they do not need to be saved.
- Unless I realize I am a sin-sick sinner I cannot be saved.

**5) What does God want me to do?**

- Love sinners like He does.
- Befriend sinners and spend time with them.

**Conclusion:**

Jesus was a friend of sinners. He reached out to the undesirable, called the unlikely and healed the spiritually unhealthy. He cared for them, He spent time with them, and He loved them. If this is true of our Master, then it should also be true of us.

**Jesus! What A Friend for Sinners**

Jesus! What a Friend for sinner! Jesus! Lover of my soul!  
Friends may fail me, foes assail me, He, my Savior, makes me whole.

Jesus! What a Strength in weakness! Let me hide myself in Him;  
Tempted, tried, and sometimes failing, He, my Strength, my vict'ry wins.

Jesus! What a Help in sorrow! While the billows o'er me roll,  
Even when my heart is breaking, He, my Comfort, helps my soul.

Jesus! What a Guide and Keeper! While the tempest still is high,  
Storms about me, night o'ertakes me, He, my Pilot, hears my cry.

Jesus! I do now receive Him, More than all in Him I find,  
He hath granted me forgiveness, I am His, and He is mine.

Refrain: Hallelujah! What a Savior! Hallelujah! What a Friend!  
Saving, helping, keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.

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