

For Sinners Only

Mark 2:13-17

A man returns from a foreign vacation feeling very ill. Multiple tests are ordered. When the man wakes up after the tests, he shuffles to the door and finds he is locked in a private quarantined suite. Just then the phone by his bed rings.

“This is your doctor. We’ve found that you have a very nasty virus. So far, we have been completely helpless to destroy it or even slow it down!”

“Oh my goodness,” cries the man, “What are you going to do, doctor?”

“We’re going to start by putting you on a diet of pizzas, pancakes, tortillas & pita bread.”

“Do you think the high carbs are the key to getting me better?” asked the man.

“No... “answered the doctor, “... but it’s the only food we can get under the door!”

That’s one way of addressing the disease of others. It’s probably a good approach, at least until the healers have a handle on what they are dealing with. But, this low-touch approach is no way to address the maladies that torment the human spirit. God did not choose to save sinners from a distance. He became a Man in the Person of Jesus. We were broken due to sin, but God saw our redemptive value, and Jesus came to make us right. We were broken, but God still valued us.

The Bible describes a dual assessment of our humanity. From the vantage point of creation – the earth, the universe, linear time - we are very small. We are dust and ashes. What is more, we are sinners, hopelessly estranged from God. In the eyes of cold, hard justice, we are unworthy of any consideration from God. But, from the vantage point of eternity and the Creator Himself, we are the crown of God’s creation, fashioned in His own image. Seen through the filter of God’s love, we have a value that validates His desire to redeem us. From the foundations of the world, God initiated a plan to save us. And, from the foundation of the world, Jesus, in the words of one songwriter, was the sacrificial “Lamb of Glory,” the “heart of God’s redemption of man.” Our text encapsulates in a few verses this mission of Jesus to seek and to save sinners.

I. Jesus Called the Poster Boy of Capernaum’s Sinners (verses 13, 14)

¹³Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

A. Jesus Was Guarded in His Public Self-disclosures as Messiah

Sometimes, when Jesus changed a person’s life, He swore him or her to secrecy. He did not at this early stage want people to know that He was *Messiah*. In Mark 1, He silenced a demon that identified Him as “the Holy One of God” (1:24, 25). He cast out many demons, “but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was” (1:34). When the crowds became too exuberant about miracles and too inattentive to content, He would withdraw to solitary places or to other villages. He would command Peter, James and John to tell no one what they saw at the *Transfiguration*. When He healed the daughter of Jairus, Jesus forbade her parents from uttering a word. Had this synagogue ruler concluded that Jesus was *Messiah*, he might have spilled the beans before Jesus was ready to publicly make this truth known. Jesus wanted to keep His identity as the long-awaited *Messiah* of the Jewish nation under wraps for now.

There needed to be some time to develop what kind of a *messiah* Jesus was before He confronted people with the truth of His identity. Otherwise, they might push for Him to be the kind of *messiah* they were coveting. They might push for an uprising against Rome, sacrificing many lives and accomplishing nothing of what Heaven had in mind. They might jump on the Jesus bandwagon only to abandon Him later as they discovered that He was not the warrior king popularly anticipated. When people named Jesus as *Messiah*, they would need to know the character behind the title. What would it mean for this *messiah* to be God's *Messiah*?

There were other times when it seemed that Jesus wanted all of creation to know what He was up to. His kindness, His words, His power over sickness, His dominion over demons – all these things were well-known and well-publicized. Chapter 1 closes with the words: "... the people still came out to Him from everywhere" (1:45). Jesus had just healed a paralyzed man in a house so crowded that the man's friends tore the roof apart to lower him into Jesus' presence. Perhaps, Jesus was pursuing a little air when He ventured out to the lake, but His celebrity made it impossible for Him to find any respite on this heavily commercial beach. A crowd gathered, and Jesus began to teach them as they strolled along. When He came upon a certain tax collector, a significant crowd was on hand to witness how Jesus might react to this fellow.

B. Jesus Saw in Levi What "Religious Folk" Could Never See

Levi was an unlikely specimen to command the attention of a popular rabbi, at least, any positive attention. Tax collectors in the Roman Empire were citizens of the occupied territories who were charged by Rome to raise a specific amount of revenue for their province. Whatever they could collect over and beyond that amount was theirs to keep. It is not difficult to see how this system lent itself to corruption. As a tax collector, Levi was considered by his countrymen to be a traitor and an extortionist. Levi's booth may have been on the beach, where he could tax the fishermen on their catch-of-the-day even as they dragged them onto the beach. He may have had a booth on the Great Road that connected Damascus to the northeast with Egypt to the southwest. Either way, Levi's gig was a very lucrative one, but Levi was as despised as any man in Capernaum.

Levi is known elsewhere as Matthew. Levi was probably his given name. Matthew may have been a name given to him by Jesus, much in the same way that Jesus dubbed Simon the fisherman, "Peter." Matthew means "gift of *JEHOVAH*." To a man no one else wanted, Jesus brought the precious gift of Himself. When Jesus said, "Follow me," Levi walked away from the wealth and power he had accrued to become a disciple of this fascinating new Rabbi.

This was not a "cold call." Levi did not "up and follow" a man about whom he knew nothing. He was a citizen of a community abuzz with enthusiasm about Jesus. Levi may even have been longing to be noticed. There may have been a yearning in him that Jesus recognized. Yearning is often the condition of a heart that has tasted many worldly pleasures, but has grown weary of the futility and meaninglessness of a life steeped in sin. But, what could Levi do? He was Public Enemy #1 at the synagogue. In the eyes of Capernaum's holy men, the Pharisees and the scribes, he was hated more than the most despicable gentile. Levi had no venue to ease the torment of his soul. No amount of wealth can heal that. Levi was truly at the mercy of God.

Levi left more than the other Twelve Apostles in order to follow Jesus. There are always more fish in the sea. Peter, Andrew, James and John could conceivably return to the fishing business if this whole matter of Jesus being *Messiah* did not work out. In fact, after the crucifixion, they did briefly return to the lake. But, for Levi, there was no turning back. These cushy tax-collecting positions were bid for in a highly competitive fashion. Levi burned his bridges with the local king, Herod Antipas, and with his bosses in the Roman bureaucracy when he followed Jesus.

Jesus sees not only a man's pain but also his promise. Ironically, the one member of Jesus' band of twelve most hated by his Jewish peers would be the man who would write the gospel account most compelling to Jewish ears. Matthew's record of the life of Jesus the Christ is the most Jewish in flavor and the most detailed in presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish prophecies pertaining to *Messiah*. Perhaps, this also factored into the new name Matthew. One who was despised by the people of God became a "gift of *JEHOVAH*" to the people of God.

II. Jesus Collected a Potpourri of Capernaum's Sinners (verses 15, 16)

¹⁵While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

A. Jesus Was the Center of Attention at this Banquet

It is sometimes speculated that Levi hosted this gathering as a farewell party for himself as he bid "adieu" to his fellow tax collectors. As cute as that is, the precise language of the Greek text makes it clear that these "tax collectors and 'sinners'" were here to eat with Jesus. They too were drawn to Him. Clearly, Jesus was the honored guest, but He seems to have been more. Shortly, Jesus will say to His critics, "I have come not to call the righteous but sinners." "Call" is the word an ancient might use to invite people to a setting like this one. Mark's language describes Jesus as the Host and Initiator of this gathering even though the setting is at the house of Levi.

If this was the case, it would not be the only time that Jesus sort of took over in this way. Recall His encounter with another tax collector. Zacchaeus of Jericho was the little guy who climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus as He passed by. Jesus saw Zacchaeus and invited Himself to dinner. "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today" (Luke 19:5). And, of course, what ensued was another feast with "sinners" that rattled pious cages in that town too.

B. This Was All Just "Too Much" for the Pharisees

Under ordinary circumstances, a Pharisee would never have entered the home of a gentile, a tax collector or a "sinner". A "sinner" in pharisaic lingo was not necessarily a moral failure, but anyone who simply did not keep up with all the legalistic and ritualistic mumbo jumbo that the Pharisees had tacked onto the Law of Moses, which was practically everyone. (Pharisees had a very small circle of people they could hang with.) A sinner could be a prostitute or just someone that did not use the prescribed amount of water to ceremonially wash his hands before a meal.

Among the wealthy, gatherings like this were usually held on an open patio. Pharisees used this arrangement to showcase their hospitality by hosting popular rabbis. This open setting allowed lesser Jews, who were not part of the feast, to look on and be impressed. Luke 7 tells of Jesus as the guest at such a feast in the home of a Pharisee named Simon. This open setting enabled a woman of ill repute to approach Jesus, wash His feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Recall how Simon was horrified that an alleged prophet could let such a woman touch him.

Now, the tables are reversed. The Pharisees are the ones standing around the perimeter of Levi's patio while the "tax collectors and sinners" dine with Jesus. They are forbidden entry, but not by Levi and not by Jesus. Their religious scruples and biases forbade them from being a part of this circus. The Pharisee's criticism of Jesus was more than mere pettiness. They were so thoroughly entrenched in a law approach to righteousness that they truly could not understand how any self-respecting rabbi could tolerate such company. They believed that they had the inside track to God's favor, and that track did not include hanging out with the riff-raff of Capernaum.

III. Jesus Captivates Only Professed Sinners (verse 17)

¹⁷On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

A. If You Like Where You Are, What Can Any Doctor Do for You?

After five years of therapy, a psychiatrist told his formerly delusional patient, "I seldom use the term "cured," but I am pleased to pronounce you completely cured. To his surprise, the patient seemed utterly despondent. He asked, "What's wrong? You should be thrilled to hear you are cured."

The woman replied, "Why would I be thrilled? Five years ago I was Joan of Arc. Now I'm nobody."

If a man likes where he is, or does not see himself in any need of salvation, the notion of a Savior is silly. What is meant here is that if a man really believes that obeying the rituals of law can save him, he will find nothing attractive in Jesus. The Puritan theologian, Thomas Watson, defined repentance as a spiritual medicine made up of six ingredients. "If any one is left out, it loses its virtue."

1) Sight of sin

2) Sorrow for sin

3) Confession of sin

4) Shame for sin

5) Hatred for sin

6) Turning from sin - *The Doctrine of Repentance* (1668)

How could the Pharisees ever appreciate the beauty of Christ? They never even came to grips with ingredient #1. They certainly never acknowledged that sin was a stain so deeply set into the fabric of their souls that good behavior and religious works could never begin to remove it. They did not see themselves as sick, so they saw themselves as in no need of a doctor or a cure.

The truth is we were all sick from sin once whether we admitted it or not. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But, when people think they have no need of help from God, they are in no position to be helped. There is nothing to say, nothing to offer.

B. The Church Is a Community of the Fallen

"I have not come to call righteous, but sinners." It is interesting to me how Jesus does not rant, "Hey! These are my 'buds'. Who are you to call them names? How dare you hypocrites call them 'tax collectors and sinners'"?

Instead, he concedes, “You know what? You’re right! What a bunch of reprobates. They really are a mess now that you mention it. They are sick, hurting, troubled folks. Their own life choices have damaged them as much as anything. They don’t see life rightly. There are some sick puppies in this room. But, they are my friends and I love them. Where else should a doctor be? I’ve come to make sick people well again. Therefore, where they hurt, that’s where you’ll find me.”

A challenge for the modern church is that too few sinners, within the church and without, seem to grasp that a community of faith is a rehab center for sinners. No one within these walls has life perfectly wired. One of the most potentially therapeutic of Bible truths is James 5:16: “... confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed.” Paul adds:

¹Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. ²Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.
- Galatians 6:1-3

As non-Catholics, we are put off by the notion of a confessional booth where a person spills his guts to a faceless priest, who in turn offers absolution. “Only God can give absolution,” we protest, but in the meantime, where do we unburden? We think that between God and ourselves, we can handle everything. What that really means is that we confess our sins, perhaps, only to ourselves and just hope for absolution. In the meantime, we remain unaccountable to others. And, it eludes us that this may be a cause behind our feeble obedience and countless relapses.

God has given us the community of His church as His chief mechanism for helping each of us, through the ministry of one to another, in our battles against sin and temptation. When we fail to see this, we become something like Pharisees, attempting to con one another about our degree of “togetherness” and less like the “tax collectors and ‘sinners’” who simply discovered the joy of divine forgiveness that can enter into any person’s life who will drop the act and enjoy Jesus.

We are sinners, you and me. I do not glory in that. In fact, I don’t even like it, but I know that we must see ourselves as sinners, at least in a practical sense, or mutual burden bearing in the church can simply never transpire. Jesus received us when we were at a point of being honest about our struggles. If we will confess our sins, He can continue the work He began in us. But remember, His body is His church. Jesus is the only doctor of His kind in this place, but He chooses to work through His people. Through quality “one to another” relationships, it is still Jesus Who heals us.

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