

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Mark 2:13-17 “Jesus, Friend of Sinners”

Intro. Last Sunday we learned about Jesus’ authority to forgive sin. He proved His authority to forgive sin by healing a paralyzed man. Soon after that event Jesus’ ability to forgive was put to the test again. You see, if Jesus Christ can forgive and change the lives of the greatest of sinners, then Jesus Christ can forgive and change the life of anyone. Well in our story today, Jesus brings forgiveness and a new life to a man named Levi, who also came to be known as Matthew. From a tax collector he became an apostle, and a writer of the first book in the New Testament, which is now known all over the world. Thus, we ought never to despair entirely of anyone’s salvation. He who called Levi still lives and still works. Just as Jesus reached those who were perceived to be the worst of sinners in Jewish society, He can save the worst sinner you may know.

I want to give you some background for this message. Because of the opposition of the religious leaders, Jesus was getting fewer invitations to teach in the synagogues. So we read in v.13 that Jesus went forth to the seaside. The verse implies that He taught there on a regular basis. Probably on His way back from the seashore, Jesus saw a tax collector named Levi. In the time of Christ, the tax-collector was considered to be one of the greatest types of sinners. *Jewish* tax collectors were considered traitors against their own people, since they collected taxes for their enemy, the Roman Empire. Also, they had a reputation for charging far more taxes than was actually required, and thus most were extortionists. For example, they would charge a tax on everything they could think of, bridge tax, road tax, harbor tax, tax on axles, pack-animals, etc. They would send to the government what was required of them, and then pocket the rest. In light of this, you can see how Jesus shocked many people by taking a tax-collector known as Matthew and making him one of His disciples. He offered His friendship to the man whom all others would have scorned to call friend. But Matthew did not remain a great sinner. Christ changed him into a dedicated Christian saint.

My friend, one reason why I know that Jesus Christ is alive today is because He is still changing lives dramatically. Over 100 years ago Christ converted a foul-mouthed baseball player named Billy Sunday through the ministry of the Pacific Garden Mission. And Christ turned him into one of the greatest preachers of all time. More recently God got a hold of a rough gang leader named Nicky Cruz and tremendously changed his life and put him into His service. If I had the time I could multiply such conversion stories for you, but I want to use my text in Mark to help you see some important lessons. I want you to see how these verses address 3 groups of people. First of all, I want you to see:

I. GOD’S APPEAL TO THE SINNER

Now when I say “sinner”, I am using it in the same way that it is used in v.15, where it says that “many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus.” There the term “sinners” did not refer only to those who were obviously immoral, but to anyone who did not subject himself to the Pharisaic interpretation of how to be right with God, which would include obeying their religious traditions. So such people would not have been considered religious. They probably did not attend synagogue, just like there are many in our community who never or rarely attend church.

Now there may be very few sinners, in that sense of the word, in my congregation today. But the fact is we are all sinners. The Bible says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). So I am broadening the term to all sinners. You see, God has an important word for you. Paul said in 1 Tim. 1:15, “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.” Now there are several truths that I want you to know based on this text of Scripture:

A. God Loves You and Knows Who You Are – In v.14 we read, “As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office....” Notice that Jesus “saw” Matthew. Many people would look away from a tax collector. But Jesus looked at Matthew, no doubt with love in His eyes.

Right now Christ sees you, notices you, and cares about you! He knows you by name. He is interested in you.

B. God Calls the Sinner - Notice the use of the word “call” in the last of v.17. Without a divine call no one can be saved. We are all so sunk in sin, and so wedded to the world, that we should never turn to God and seek salvation unless He first called us by His grace. Someone is in this service, or watching by television, by divine appointment. He is calling out to you right now. What does He call upon the sinner to do? First of all:

1. Recognize Your Need – In v.17 Jesus linked His saving work to that of a physician healing the sick. A doctor can’t bring healing to your body until you first acknowledge that you are sick.

Even so, the first step toward spiritual healing is to recognize your sickness. To feel our sins and know our spiritual sickness is the beginning of real Christianity. Until our soul is healed & cleansed, we are stricken with the plague of sin. And the good news is that no sin-sick soul is too far gone for Him. Have you ever felt your spiritual sickness and applied to Christ for relief? You will never be right in the sight of God until you do. And if you come to Dr. Jesus with your need, seeking His cure, the good news is He will not give you a bill for the cure! It was paid in full at Calvary!

2. Repent of Your Sins – He said in the last of v.17 that He had come to call “sinners to repentance.” The word “repentance” is not found here in Mark in some of your newer translations, but it *is* found in all translations of Luke’s account of this incident (5:32). The word “repent” means “a change of mind.” You need to change your mind about sin, and turn from it. Isa. 55:7 says, “Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts....”

It’s like a person who goes to the doctor with heart disease. He pinpoints one of the causes: smoking. He says, “You’ve got to give up those cigarettes, or you’re going to have a major heart attack.” So you decide to repent of smoking, and give it up. Even so, you must be willing to give up your sin. Turn from it. Change your attitude about it. Abhor it.

Once you have obeyed the command to repent of sin, then you can obey the other command of Jesus, which is found in the last of v.14. Jesus said to Levi:

3. Follow Christ! – The meaning of the call “Follow Me” is clearer in the Greek. “Follow” is a present tense, “start following me, and continue as a habit of life to follow me.” Too many follow Jesus only for a while. But the true Christian disciple follows Jesus their whole life. Furthermore, following Jesus implies regular association & companionship. The Pharisees kept their distance from such people, but Jesus welcomed repentant sinners into His circle of

companions. When you follow Jesus, you need to understand that you should have daily fellowship with Jesus through prayer, Bible reading, and Christian service.

Matthew was blessed with the opportunity of being called directly by the mouth of Jesus. But today, God calls people through His Word, & by His Spirit. God is speaking to someone through this gospel preacher, calling upon you to repent of sin, and follow Jesus. Will you respond to His call? Well that leads to my next point:

C. You Should Respond to the Call of God - When Christ calls you to leave your sin and follow Him, what should you do? Don't ignore the call of God. Instead, Matthew gives a good example of what you should do. In the case of Matthew notice:

1. You Should Give a Positive Response – He agreed to follow Jesus. Even so, you should say “yes” to Christ. Have you said “yes” to Jesus?

2. You Should Respond without Delay - One of the other gospels talks about the immediacy of it. He did not stay around to gather up his money first. Too many people never get saved because they keep putting off a decision to accept Christ as their personal Savior.

Oh, when you sense that God is calling you to repent, and follow Jesus, don't say in your heart, “Not now. I'll do it later.” For too many sinners, “later” never comes. Hebrews 3:15 says, “Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts....” Say yes to Christ without delay.

3. Your Response Should Be Complete - Luke 5:28 informs us that Matthew “forsook all.” That was tough to do. He left his lucrative business. Tax collectors were some of the wealthiest people. Matthew must have been the richest of the apostles. The love of money is a powerful principle, but the call of Christ is even more powerful.

We should not miss the quiet heroism & total commitment involved in this. If following Jesus had not worked out for the fishermen, they could have returned to their trade without difficulty. But when Levi walked out of his job, he was through. They would probably not take back a man who had simply abandoned his tax office. His following of Jesus was a final commitment. He knew that he was putting his hand to the plough, and would not look back.

How can such a response be explained? Up until Jesus came to Capernaum, Matthew probably had no use for the self-righteous religion of his fellow Jews. But I'm sure that he started noticing that the whole city of Capernaum was flooded with our Lord's fame and reputation. He must have listened on the outskirts of the crowds to His message. He could have noticed that Jesus did not repel sinners, but rather He attracted sinners. Long before this eventful day it is quite possible that Matthew had, in heart, become a disciple of Jesus. Only he dared not, could not, have hoped for any personal recognition. So when the call came, and Jesus fixed on him that look of love, Matthew needed not a moment's thought or consideration.

I wonder how many in my audience are secret disciples?

II. GOD'S REBUKE TO THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS

Here we address those who are religious, but also self-righteous. They do their best to live by the rules of their religion, and because they outwardly appear to do so, they consider themselves righteous. But just because you outwardly do a good job of living by religious rules and practices, that does not make you righteous in the eyes of God. Isaiah 64:6 says, "But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags...." Don't be among those who are self-righteous. Look to Jesus, who died for your sins on the cross. By faith in Him, you can trade your unrighteousness for His righteousness.

Now I want to show you some of the problems of being like the self-righteous people that we read about in this passage of Scripture. First of all:

A. The Self-righteous Separate Themselves from People Who Need God - In v.16 we read of the objection of the scribes and Pharisees to Jesus eating with sinners, such as Matthew's fellow tax collectors. They always sought to keep separate from social contact with "sinners". In fact, the word "Pharisee" means "separated one" and they sought to live up to their name.

Now the Bible does teach that we should separate ourselves from participating in the *sins* of unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-17). And when sinners tempt us to do wrong, then we are to withdraw from them. However, the Bible does not teach that we should be separated from the *sinners* of this world (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-10; cf. Jn. 17:15-17). We should maintain contact with lost people so that we can be a witness to them. We can & should have social contact with unbelievers, if they will let us.

B. Self-Righteousness Leads to Pride - The scribes, Pharisees, and orthodox "good" people of the day looked at the tax collectors and sinners with bleak condemnation and with arrogant superiority. Thus, such self-righteousness leads to pride, which is actually one of the worst of sins.

We should never relate to lost people with a prideful "holier than thou" attitude. Such a self-righteous attitude is repulsive to unbelievers.

C. Self-righteousness Will Keep You from Jesus - Since they saw themselves as righteous, they did not sense a need for the forgiveness that Jesus Christ offers. So they did not become disciples of Christ. This problem is addressed in v.17, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." There are many people who are walking around with some disease, but they don't want to acknowledge it, and so they won't go to the doctor, who could help heal them. And there are too many people who think that they are good enough without believing in Christ, and so they never come to Christ. But friend, one sin is enough to keep you from being righteous in the eyes of God. In Gal. 3:10 Paul quoted from the Old Testament saying, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them."

In light of these problems, I want to help you see if you are among those who are self-righteous. Some day you are going to die. Hebrews 9:27 says "it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Suppose at the judgment, you stand before Christ & He asks you, "Why should I let you into heaven?" What would you say? Would you say, "Because I am a good person." Or would you say, "Because I have kept the 10 Commandments most of the time." Or would you say, "Because I have gone to church all my life." If you would answer that question in such fashion, I would dare say that you are among those who are self-righteous. So honestly evaluate your heart. If you realize that you have been trusting in your own goodness & righteousness, then do what the apostle Paul did. He was a self-righteous Pharisee at one time. But

he learned to cast off such self-righteousness (Phil. 3:9). He humbly acknowledged in 1 Tim. 1:15 that he was the chief of sinners. Repent of self-righteousness, and trust in the only true righteousness you may obtain, that which comes from Christ as a gift of grace.

III. GOD'S COMMAND TO HIS CHURCH

Based on this text of Scripture, I want to show you that we need to do more to reach the unchurched. Jesus reached out to the “unchurched” of His day. He reached out to those who most Jews called “sinners,” even including those who were openly immoral. They are the ones who can be reached, for they at least acknowledge that they are sinners, unlike many who are self-righteous.

I am afraid that the vast majority of churches are not reaching out to “sinners” in the sense that we are talking about today. We mainly try to go after “church people.” The fact is the most people are not church goers. If all we do is build a church building, & put out a sign inviting people to come, how many of the unchurched will actually come? Very few! So what should we do?

A. We Should Go to the Lost – In v.13 we see that Jesus went to the shore of the Sea of Galilee & taught the people there in a public location. In v.14 we see that Jesus came in contact with Levi “as He passed by.” Levi would not have been found in the synagogue. So how would a man like Matthew have been won to Christ? It was necessary that Jesus get out and teach in places like the sea shore.

Furthermore, Jesus went to Matthew's house and reclined at his table and had company with his friends. In so doing, He was defying the orthodox opinion of His day. But why did He do this? The orthodox Jew was afraid of the contagion of the sinner. They were like a doctor who would refuse to attend a case of infectious illness lest he himself contracted it. But Jesus did not shy away from such as these. Nor did He condone their manner of life. Instead, as v.17 indicates, He regarded these as spiritually sick in need of a physician. He said they needed to repent. It is not that He enjoyed that kind of company, but He was concerned about their need. His righteous, sensitive soul shrank back from it. But He was there to reach their souls for salvation. When He associates on intimate terms with people of low reputation, He does not do this as a comrade in evil, but as a physician.¹

Even so, we should have compassion upon the lost, and help bring them to Jesus, who can heal their sin-sick souls. We need to go to where people are, and not share the gospel only if they come to us at church. Be involved in community organizations. Go visit someone who needs Christ and share your testimony & the Gospel with them. Or at least invite them to church, or to watch our TV program. Next month we are having a health fair & block party. Go to the unchurched people & invite them. When we issue a call to go door to door to distribute fliers, I hope you will agree to go with us.

B. We Should Gather the Lost – This is what Matthew did. Very naturally, having discovered Jesus for himself, he wished his friends to share this great new discovery. So notice what the first part of v.15 says, “Now it happened, as He was dining in *Levi's*² house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples....” Since Matthew was a social

¹ In Matthew's account (9:13), He also said to His critics, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’.”

² It is literally “his house.” Lk. 5:29 makes it clear that this refers to the house of Matthew. Jesus did not have a house of his own (Luke 9:58).

outcast, the only friends he could invite would be other social outcasts, such as other tax collectors and sinners. I can imagine that at some point in the meal Matthew might have said, “Friends, I have come to know someone who is different from the Pharisees and other religious leaders. He has brought forgiveness to my soul, and changed my life. Listen to what this man has to say....”

So one thing you could do is invite your unsaved friends over for a big meal and get together. Sinners will come to your house much quicker than come to your church. Speak to them about the Lord or invite someone else to do it, like Matthew did. I will be happy to come to a meal at your house! Or perhaps invite them to watch a Christian movie with you.

In a 2007 survey of the unchurched, 50% strongly agreed with the statement, “If someone wanted to tell me what she or he believed about Christianity, I would be willing to listen.” Another 28% somewhat agreed.³ Most unchurched people are willing to listen, especially from someone who has reached out to them.

C. We Should Welcome the Lost – Notice what it says in the last of v.15, “they followed Him.” Many tax collectors & sinners followed Him because He did not shun them, but rather welcomed them into His presence. How is the sinner to be reached for salvation? All religions know of no welcome to the sinner until, by some means, he ceases to be a sinner and becomes penitent. They would first make him a penitent, and then bid him welcome to God; but, Christ welcomes him, and so makes him a penitent. Cold hostility toward sinners will not win them to Christ. Rom. 2:4 says, “the goodness of God leads you to repentance.” Without an attitude of acceptance, sinners will stay away from us and our church and they will not have the opportunity to be won to Christ by hearing the Word of God. Do our churches have the attitude of the Pharisees, “Repent, get your life cleaned up, become like us, and *then* we will welcome you?” Should not we accept sinners just as God receives them, “Just as they are”?

Hugh Redwood tells of a woman in the dock district in London who came to a women’s meeting. She had been living with a Chinese man and with him she had a half-caste baby, and she brought the baby with her. She liked the meeting and she came back again. Then the victor came to her. “I must ask you,” he said, “not to come to this meeting again”. The woman looked puzzled. “The other women say that they will stop coming if you continue to come.” She looked at him with a poignant wistfulness. “Sir”, she replied, “I know I’m a sinner, but isn’t there anywhere a sinner can go?” Fortunately the Salvation Army found that woman and she was reclaimed for Christ.

Conclusion: Jesus reveals Himself as the Friend of sinners. I there someone here today who recognizes that you need to be forgiven? Perhaps until today you thought that you were good enough on your own. Now you know that you’re not. Is God calling you to be saved? If so, repent of your sin, trust in Christ as Savior, and begin to follow Him. Matthew’s decision to follow Christ was a public decision. Likewise, we should be willing to follow Jesus publicly, starting with a profession of faith, and following Him in baptism.

I believe the church needs to change in light of this Scripture passage. Will you reach out to the lost in our community? Will you go to the lost? Will you open your home, inviting the unchurched for a meal? May we make a commitment today to be more like Jesus!

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository*

³ Thom Rainer research.

Thoughts on the Gospels (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). McGee read, but nothing added.

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