

## Sermon Series: *The Gospel of Mark*



# "Supper with Sinners?"

"I Came Not to Call the Righteous, But Sinners"

### Mark 2:13-17, (ESV)

<sup>13</sup> He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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?" <sup>17</sup> 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.*"

As Mark relates the story of Jesus' life, he appears to constantly be on the move. These early days of the public ministry of this young rabbi are filled with events, gatherings, and breathtaking activity. Last week we were left with the crowds standing in awe of Jesus as they said, "We have never seen anything like this" (Mk 2:12). Jesus had not only healed a paralyzed

man who had to be brought to him carried on a stretcher by four men, but far more shocking than this, was *Jesus' unbelievable claim to have been granted authority by God to forgive people of their sins!* This is an astounding claim and utterly unprecedented among the religious leaders of his day or of any day since, including ours. *No one else has ever made such a claim.*

## Moving Out for More Room to Teach

Before we can even catch our breath, Mark keeps moving. After leaving the house in which the healing had taken place, which most likely was Peter's house—and given Jesus' background in carpentry, he had probably at least done a little consulting on the roof repair—Jesus went out looking for a venue with more room for teaching. He needed more space to accommodate all the people. The house had been utterly packed with no room whatsoever (Mk 2:2).

And lest they start removing walls to hear what he was saying, Jesus headed out for the beautiful shoreline of the sea of Galilee.

### Mark 2:13, (ESV)

<sup>13</sup> *He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was **teaching** them.*



## Teaching Is Why Jesus Came

This is now the fifth time that Mark has mentioned that Jesus has been teaching or preaching.<sup>1</sup> This is *the* defining characteristic of Jesus' ministry thus far. *Teaching is primarily what Jesus is about, not performing miracles.* Recall what Jesus said when the disciples came looking for him early the morning after he spent the previous night healing many and casting out demons (Mk 1:34).

### Mark 1:38 (ESV)

<sup>38</sup> *And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."*

*Jesus' primary objective in his public ministry is teaching, not working miracles.* Why? Because healing the body is not the primary concern, but healing the soul is. Bodily healing is only of temporary benefit, while spiritual healing is of eternal benefit. The ministry of miracles is supportive and subordinate to his ministry of teaching because it is through the ministry of teaching that faith is born and salvation effected. We saw this illustrated when Jesus healed the paralytic. The truth that Jesus wanted to teach and make known was that he had been

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<sup>1</sup> See Mk 1:14, 21-22, 39, 45(implied); 2:2.

given authority by God to forgive sins. He then demonstrated the proof of his claim by healing the paralyzed man. The validity and authority of his teaching was confirmed by the miraculous healing he performed, but the miracles themselves were not the main point. The content of the teaching was the main point. If we get too caught up in focusing on the healing miracles, then we will miss the main point Mark is illustrating by recording the healing of the paralytic.

**Mark 2:10-12, (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> *"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—*

This is the message that Jesus was teaching & the following miracle served to affirm that Jesus' claim was true.

*he said to the paralytic—<sup>11</sup> "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."<sup>12</sup> And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God..."*

And in Matthew's account of this same event, he adds,

**Matthew 9:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> *...who had given such authority to men."*

Mark wants his readers to know that Jesus came to teach and preach the good news. The central theme of Jesus' teaching was that he had been granted authority to forgive sins.<sup>2</sup> This is why his teaching was such good news! ***Jesus was God's official representative on earth who had been authorized by him to wipe away sins!*** This was the message that was drawing such crowds and this is what Jesus was teaching them. And this message was intended for anyone who had ears to hear. This is a message for all ages and all times.

## Jesus Practiced What He Preached

Not only was Jesus *teaching* this message, he was *living* this message out in an incredibly radical way. He demonstrated the truth of that saving message by the disciples he chose and even in such mundane decisions as with whom he chose to have supper. First, we see this message lived out by Jesus in whom he chose to be disciples.

**Mark 2:14, (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> *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.*

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<sup>2</sup> A more detailed account of the content of Jesus' teaching at this point in his ministry is found in Matthew chapters 5-7.

## The Cultural Backdrop

The calling of this tax-collector to be a disciple and the supper that took place afterward was evidently a rather significant event in Jesus' ministry. Both Matthew and Luke also record the events of this day. What happened on this day is recorded in all three synoptic gospels.

To understand the full significance of what Jesus is doing here, we must properly translate 'tax collector' into today's vernacular. A first-century Jewish tax-collector would be to his fellow Jewish neighbors, something like the mixture of a 'loan-shark'<sup>3</sup> and a national traitor/spy would be to us today.

Tax collectors were usually greedy, dishonest and immoral. Worse still, to a Jew, they were ceremonially unclean through mixing continually with non-Jewish people.<sup>4</sup>

Levi was sitting at the toll-gate on the Great West Road from Damascus to the Mediterranean. This was also the customs office at Capernaum, the landing place for the many ships that traversed the Sea of Galilee or coasted from town to town. He was a tax collector who collected toll for Herod Antipas. Being in the employ of the Roman government which bled its subjects for taxes, these tax collectors were hated and despised by the Jews, and classed with sinners. "At" is *epi* (ἐπι), "on." He was sitting on the elevated platform or bench which was the principal feature of the toll-office. Here was a Jew who loved money more than the good regard of and fellowship with his countrymen.<sup>5</sup>

Given that most tax-collectors were intensely hated by the people, often disowned by their families, viewed as traitors, thieves, and extortioners, it is absolutely amazing that Jesus would call such a person to be one of his disciples.

## A Band of Brothers?

This particular tax-collector's tax booth was located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. At this point, Jesus had called four other men to be his disciples—brothers Peter and Andrew and brothers, James and John (Mk 1:18-20). All four of these men were fishermen who fished the Sea of Galilee. In the normal course of their fishing business, they would have had regular contact as they paid tax to this tax-collector. One cannot help but wonder what Peter, Andrew, James, and John thought of Jesus' invitation to Levi to join there Band of Brothers. I'm pretty certain their eyebrows were raised and their skin crawled. They most assuredly were not jumping for joy, but cautiously watching everything Jesus was doing.

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 954.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Mk 2:14.

## Levi, Son of Alphaeus

Mark tells us that this tax-collector's name was *Levi, son of Alphaeus*. Luke also refers to this tax-collector as Levi (Lk 5:27ff.). However, in Matthew's account of this same event (Mt 9:9), we are told that his name was Matthew. The most likely explanation is that he was known by two names, Levi Matthew, much like Simon Peter. Evidently Matthew was his preferred name since that is what he calls himself when he wrote the Gospel of Matthew. This tax collector would one day author his own gospel account of Jesus' life. All the other disciples picked upon on his preference for Matthew, since in all the lists of the Twelve disciples, Matthew is the name used and Levi is not. It may be that, just as Jesus gave Simon the new name Peter (Jn 1:42) to indicate a new direction in life, perhaps Jesus did the same to Levi calling him instead, Matthew, which means "gift of God."<sup>6</sup>

## Follow Me

As Jesus walked by Matthew sitting at his tax booth, busy at work, he said only two words to him, "**Follow me**" (v.14). Possibly the only thing more amazing than Jesus calling a tax-collector to follow him, was the fact that this tax-collector obeyed him and actually did follow him—Levi (a.k.a. Matthew) "**rose and followed him.**" Given Mark's frequent use of the word "immediately," I actually expected it to appear here. Luke tells us, "**leaving everything, he rose and followed him**" (Lk 5:28).

This is amazing.

## Leave Career And Follow Jesus???

What would cause a man, hearing an invitation from a traveling preacher, saying, "*Follow me,*" to immediately stand up from his lucrative job, his cash cow, and leave it all behind? What would cause a man to walk away from his career? And it's not as though he could return to this if things went south. Tax-collector posts went to the highest bidder. These positions were highly sought after among those who loved money more than a good reputation. When there was a vacancy, it was filled immediately, and those who had these positions rarely let go of them. If he walks away, he will most certainly very rapidly and very permanently lose this job.

This is not like fishing. If things don't go well with Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James, and John can all jump back in the boat and start fishing again. Matthew does not have that option. Once he walks away from this tax booth, he will never return to it again. Yet, that is exactly what he did. He left everything lying on the table—the money, the power, all of it—and he got up and started following Jesus. Why would he do this?

The answer clearly must be that he had heard Jesus' message and he liked what he heard. Jesus was all the buzz. Crowds were following him everywhere listening to his teaching (Mk

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<sup>6</sup> Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 634.

1:28, 33, 37, 39, 46; 2:2). Matthew has heard this message that Jesus has been preaching—that he had authority to forgive sins. And in a moment, he made his mind up, deciding that he would leave his lifestyle and follow Jesus. He would walk away from his dishonesty, deception, and extortion and follow Jesus. In a moment he decided that he would rather have forgiveness of his sins, than a lavish career and a lucrative job. He *left it all* and followed Jesus.

## Supper With Sinners?

And his first impulse with his new-found joy? It is the natural instinct of every new-born believer when he first finds Christ—he invites all of his friends over for supper so they too could meet Jesus and hear the life-changing message he was preaching. However, there was a rather significant problem.

The only friends that Matthew had were the kind of friends that pious Jews, like Jesus appeared to be, did not spend time with—other tax collectors. His only friends were those whom the Pharisees would have called ‘sinners.’ Would Jesus have supper with tax collectors and sinners?

### Mark 2:15 (ESV)

<sup>15</sup> *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.*

Imagine the conversation between Jesus and Matthew. Imagine the joy on his face as he expressed his desire to host Jesus for supper. How happy he would have been that someone like Jesus would have invited him to follow him! Imagine how that fresh excitement would naturally have overflowed into a desire for all of his friends to come to his house to celebrate with him and his new-found rabbi-friend.

Yet, imagine the potential awkwardness and perhaps sadness as reality sank down upon Matthew’s joy like a wet blanket as this tax collector realized that his closest friends were the fieriest enemies of righteous Jews. This holy man would never have supper with unholy sinners. Rabbis and acolytes do not eat with *tax collectors and sinners*. But that’s the only kind of friends he had. When you are an outcast, the only people who will hang out with you are other outcasts. But Jesus was OK with his guest list.

## God At Work Over A Meal

Once again we find God at work over a meal. Do not miss this. Over the past few months I have been astounded at how many times in my daily Bible reading the Lord has brought before me an instance of when something of spiritual significance happened over a meal (footnote?). Here is yet another. Sharing a meal together is a simple but valuable opportunity to make personal and spiritual connections.

In the ancient Near East sharing a meal together was not the casual, thoughtless event as it tends to be in our culture today. It was a special event because “only parties who were at peace [with each other] could dine together.”<sup>7</sup> Sharing a meal together was a sign of “trust and fellowship,”<sup>8</sup> as well as, “friendship and acceptance.”<sup>9</sup> One did not eat with just anyone in ancient Near Eastern culture. In fact, from the point of view of the pious Jew, it was better to go hungry than to eat with someone who was considered unclean. Tax collectors and sinners were unclean! The fact that Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners is scandalous - on par with Chris Christie’s bridagate and Miley Cyrus’ recent behavior.

Recall for a moment that it was scandalous, even forbidden, for a Jew to even enter the house of a Gentile<sup>10</sup> much less to eat with a Gentile. This is what the initial charge against Peter went he went to the home of Cornelius, the centurion (Acts 10). The Jews said to Peter, “*You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them?*”<sup>11</sup>

Tax collectors and Gentiles were members of the same club in the Jewish mind (see Mt 5:46-47; 18:17). So for Jesus to sit down and share a meal with, not just one tax collector, but a whole room full of tax collector, co-conspirators all peppered about with “sinners” to boot? This is too much to take in. This scene, in the mind of pious Jews, would have been the same as if they were watching a holy man sitting down with a herd of swine and having dinner together! This is what was utterly confounding and absolutely breathtaking. And so the scribes of the Pharisees naturally must ask a question.

**Mark 2:16 (ESV)**

*<sup>16</sup> 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?”*

It’s not hard to understand their question. All you have to do is read the book of Leviticus just once and you’ll have a pretty clear understanding that God takes holiness and cleanliness very seriously. In the Mosaic law there is command after command after command regarding how to keep ones’ self clean and how to be purified after one has become unclean.

Reading Leviticus will also help you understand God’s reasoning behind such commands, it’s because he himself is holy (even holy, holy, holy!) and desires to dwell in the midst of his people yet he cannot dwell in the midst of an unholy people. So if communion with God is to

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<sup>7</sup> Found in the devotional “The Covenant Meal” available at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/covenant-meal/> accessed 22 Feb 2014.

<sup>8</sup> John D. Grassmick, “Mark,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 113.

<sup>9</sup> Robert James Dr. Utley, *The Gospel According to Peter: Mark and I & II Peter*, vol. Volume 2, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 2000), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 10:28.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 11:3.

be enjoyed, then holiness must be the standard. So, let's give the scribes and Pharisees some slack. They're asking the right question. But how will they respond to the answer Jesus gave.

Notice that they don't have the courage to ask Jesus himself. Instead they asked his disciples. They're not joining in the meal. They are observing. They were not eating. So they are present at this supper with sinners but they were not participating. However, they do not ask this question so quietly that Jesus is not able to hear it. Jesus does hear and he quickly responds.

**Mark 2:17 (ESV)**

*<sup>17</sup> 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."*

Jesus uses an analogy that everyone is able to understand—it's the sick people, not the well, who have need of a doctor. Jesus likens himself to a physician who has come to meet the needs of sick people. He very plainly says, "*I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners.*" The message that Jesus is teaching and preaching is aimed at those who are sinners, not at those who are righteous. This is the reason why Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. They were the ones who needed to hear this message that their sins could be forgiven.

But do you think Jesus ever mentioned 'sins' over the meal?

Why was he eating with them?

Jesus had the reputation of being a "friend of sinners and tax collectors." He was even called a "glutton & a drunkard" (Lk 7:34). Does this mean that Jesus is a friend of sinners<sup>12</sup> in such a way that he continues to be friendly with those who continue in their sin? Does Jesus eating with sinners mean that Jesus was accepting of the sinful behaviors of those with whom he sat? Does Jesus eating with tax collectors mean that Jesus was OK with stealing and extortion?

Why was Jesus sharing supper with them?

To affirm them in their sin? Or was it to *personally* share with them a message that they no longer need be enslaved by their sins?

## Tax Collectors & Sinners: Excluded From Synagogue

Remember *these were people who were not allowed to participate in the corporate worship.* These tax collectors and sinners are people who would have been excluded from the intimate

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 7:34.



worship within the synagogue.<sup>13</sup> They were outcast who were unwelcome. Yet Jesus came personally to them to share the good news that their sins could be forgiven. They could have heard this message when was preaching and teaching to the crowds, but it is doubtful that they would have believed that such a wonderful message would have actually been aimed at them. Jesus came to them in person, to ensure they knew that he meant it for them—all of those who were least deserving. Jesus wanted them to hear from his own lips that he came for them, the ones who were sick of their sin.

What would Jesus have said in the private context of that supper? Jesus was a man of impeccable integrity. He would have said in private what he preached in public, which Mark tells us was this;

**Mark 1:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; **repent and believe the gospel.**"*

Jesus would have called them to repentance of their sins. Matthew understood this. He *left everything* and walked away from his old way of living. Matthew knew he could not continue being a thieving tax collector and follow Jesus too. Jesus would have said something like he said the woman caught in adultery, *"Go and sin no more"* (Jn 8:11).

## Conclusion

1. **Teaching was the primary goal of Jesus' ministry.** He came teaching and preaching a gospel message. That message includes a call for repentance from sins. The good news of the gospel message is that through personal faith in Jesus, all your sins can be forgiven.
2. **Jesus calls to himself all kinds of people.** He receives those whom most people would reject. No one is too sinful to come to Jesus in faith.
3. **Jesus expects to be followed.** Those whom Jesus calls to himself, are expected to walk in the way in which he walked. He does not say, "Follow me only if you're comfortable with it." He simply say, "Follow me." The followers of Jesus are to be people who are not only *willing*, but actually *do* sit down and have supper with sinners. The disciples of Jesus must take his message of forgiveness to those who need to hear it.
4. **Jesus provides healing for the sickness of sin.** Jesus likens sinners as those who are sick and in need of a physician. We are the sinners and Jesus is the physician. Jesus describes himself as one who has the cure for the disease of sin.
5. **Jesus sat long enough with sinners to have supper with them.** Do we? Do we sit long enough with sinners to hear their story? Does any good doctor upon first meeting with his

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Mk 2:15.

patient immediately begin pouring medicine down the throat? Do good doctors immediately begin writing prescriptions or do good doctors first sit with their patients and first listen and ask questions in order to understand exactly what their condition is?

How many of us make it a point to intentionally spend *any* time with unbelievers? Jesus did. If we would live our lives like Jesus then we too must be willing to have supper with sinners, and skeptics, and doubters, and even accusers. And we are given you the perfect opportunity to do just this. We'll even provide the dinner. For the next seven Tuesday evenings, in this very room, we will set up tables and serve great food, and offer you the perfect opportunity to do exactly what Jesus did—to sit down with our friends who are not yet convinced about Jesus or who want to learn more about him or those who just need a safe place to ask questions about him or about anything the Jesus taught and simply share meal and listen to one another's stories and watch a DVD which gives an overview of Jesus' life.

Pray for us.

Pray for these Tuesday nights.

Invite someone to come.

Bring a friend. Bring an enemy. Bring anyone whose hungry to know more about Jesus.