



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Friend of Sinners

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Mark 2:13-17

Clint Pressley

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

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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?" ¹⁷ 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."

(Pastor prays)

The old song says, "you've never had a friend like Jesus." You have never had a friend who knows you thoroughly, who loves you completely, and who receives you gladly. All of us here have friends and acquaintances of all kinds. Some people, you know, when they call or when they text you and you see their name pop up on your phone, there's immediately a gladness you feel. You're glad to hear from that person. You look forward to reading that text, or you're really glad to talk on the phone to him because you know that you're going to hear something encouraging. Or, you just really enjoy being with that person. There are other people, however, when their names pop up on your phone, your eyes roll back in your head as far as you can get them to go.

But you never had a friend like Jesus. A friend like Jesus, whose affection is so strong, whose love is so real, whose purpose for your life is so clear. You have never had a friend who shows up in your presence and you rejoice every time. This friend, you see, saw you at your worst, dug you out of the hole, called you for His own, and a whole lot of you, God is using you for His own glory.

Jesus is the friend of sinners. He is the Savior of souls. Jesus is the one who did what we should have done. We were supposed to be in fellowship with God and live close to God. He did what we should have done and then took the punishment that we actually deserve so that you and I can be forgiven. So that we can be reconciled to God.

Now I came out pretty strong this morning because this story is so beautiful. The story in front of us is filled with the Gospel that's filled with love. If you've ever wondered if you were good enough to be a Christian. If you've ever wondered if you were really forgiven or if you had the residual of guilt — maybe you really did believe that your sins are forgiven but there's this residual guilt that lingers back there. If you ever wondered if you actually were *really* made right with God, then this morning, when we go to this text, I want you to drink in this story. It's filled with light and hope and joy and forgiveness. I love this story because it points to the joyful Jesus, who's in stark contrast to the dead religion. We don't want dead religion. Jesus is in stark contrast to the dead religion of his day. This story reminds me of the pure power of God to save people and to use people just like you and me. So take heart, and turn to Jesus because...

Jesus is the True Friend of Sinners

If that's the case, if Jesus is the true friend of sinners, what do we learn from this passage? Let's go there and find out what are the things that we are to do in light of the fact that Jesus is the true friend of sinners. Here's the first one. Number one, we are to

Yield to the gravity of Jesus

Jesus is the powerful force that pulls people. Join me there in verse 13. Let's go to the story. Jesus is on the move. The text says in verse 13 that He went out again. He's always going out again. That's what He does. He goes out, He seeks and saves the lost. Again and again, over and over, Jesus goes out. Jesus goes to the hurt and the depressed and the abused. Jesus goes where the people are. And when He goes where people are, people are drawn. You see in verse 13 people are coming. The text says, ¹³ *He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.*

When He goes out, people come. When the true Jesus is present, when the unveiled Jesus is present, let us never be a church that puts blocks in the way, that makes people stumble on the way to Jesus. When the true Jesus is shown, people come to Him. All too often there are hurdles there. We make regulations, we make requirements in order to actually get to Jesus. And Jesus just shows up. The unfettered Jesus draws people to Himself. You see His love and His gravity, His mercy, His forgiveness, His service. Let us not forget what the Bible says. It's the kindness of God that draws us to repentance. Jesus is the friend of sinners. Just be careful how we use that. Often you'll say and hear people talk about how Jesus prefers to be around sinners. Or maybe you hear Christians say, "I'd rather hang out with lost people." Be careful walking that line because Jesus is the friend of sinners but Jesus never sanctions sin. He removes sin. He never condones sin. He crucified sin.

You see the pure Gospel of God found in Jesus. The pure Gospel of God, found in Jesus, does indeed take the wrath of God seriously. We understand that people are born in sin and are under the condemnation of God. We are not born neutral. We are born already sinners and it's an act of grace, it's the pure Gospel of God that takes the wrath of God. But we also take the mercy of God wholeheartedly. So that's why we go to the cross. We point people to the cross. Why do we do that? Because at the cross, the wrath of God meets the mercy of God in the person of Jesus. And the love of God is given to anyone who will believe. Because there at the cross of Jesus, the hope and healing and joy are found in the wounds of Jesus. We point people to the

cross of Jesus, where healing flows from the wounds of Jesus. What did Jesus himself say in John Chapter 12:32, Jesus said. ³² *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.* He's talking about the crucifixion. When I am lifted up, I will draw people to Myself.

Not too long ago, a phenomenon happened in the United States called the Super Bowl. Super Bowl Sunday is a big day for the United States of America. People gather with families and friends to watch a game that's fairly inconsequential. Often, there is a halftime show that people rave about or hate; one or the other. What they really like is the commercials. This last year, there was a commercial that came through as sponsored, I think with good intent. I think the will and desire is right to reintroduce Jesus. The campaign is "He gets us." And the press is to say that Jesus understands. And yes, He does. That's an entryway truth. But that's not where we stop. You see, in this passage, we just get a taste of the truth to come. The truth to come is that where Jesus is, people will follow Him. I will pause and say, maybe you need to come to Jesus to be reconciled to God. Maybe you need to put your faith in Jesus, the one who is the friend of sinners. There is such gravity when Jesus is near and you read it there in verse 13. We find out that people are following Him. I guess it's some sort of ambulatory teaching. He is walking and teaching. People are with Him.

He's by the sea and what does Jesus teach? Well, we know from past experience that Jesus teaches primarily three things. He teaches the word "repent" since the very first word of the Gospel is "repentance." That's not coming out of some Baptist preacher's mouth; that is what Jesus taught. He taught us to turn away from who you were and turn to Him. We're going to see that in Levi. He teaches on repentance. The second thing He teaches is the scripture. We see that from the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. He walked with the disciples, opened up the Bible, and said "this is about me." But Jesus not just teaches repentance and the scripture. Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God is found in one person, Christ.

Look, you and I, we can't let anything get in the way of Jesus. I've been in church a long time and I've talked to several people who have been hurt in church. There are people, many of you, hurt in church. I don't know why people will say or act a certain way in church, why people would be mean in church, be off-putting in church. There are people who have quit coming to church because their feelings got hurt in some capacity and by a legitimate affront. It is a terrible thing. We need to make sure that we do everything we can to keep that from happening. We don't put hurdles up. We knock hurdles down. Maybe you've had your feelings hurt, don't let that keep you from the body of Christ, from the congregation.

Often I've heard people leave a church or go to a church because of the style of music. The music is important, it helps us sing songs of the faith to get us ready to open the Book. People go to church or leave the church because of the style or because the preacher wears a tie or doesn't wear a tie. Let me tell you why I wear a suit. The biggest reason is that I'm terrible with fashion. A suit is easy, it's right here. I put on a jacket, a blue shirt and a tie in the middle, I'm done. A 54-year-old man can make one of two mistakes. You can dress like you're 30 and everybody thinks you're foolish. Or you cannot and everybody thinks you're foolish. So just put on the suit. You can't let style be something that either attracts or offends. What we understand is that when Jesus shows up, there's a certain gravity, that pull of the Holy Spirit that brings you into real and vibrant fellowship with God and with His people. I want you to yield to the gravity of Jesus. There's something else, though in verse 14, there's the...

Grace of Jesus

Here's the second point. Let's rejoice in the grace of Jesus. Let's rejoice. We have lots to rejoice about. Let me show it to verse 14. Here the story takes a beautiful turn. It's an unexpected turn. Let's read it and then marvel at the grace of Jesus in verse 14. Join me there. ¹⁴ *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.*

Let's just walk through verse 14 and look at the grace. Let's talk first about Levi. From the other gospels, we know that this is actually Matthew. We also know from this one right here that Levi, whose name is Matthew, is a tax collector. He sits at his toll booth. When you catch fish, you have to pay a tax on that fish. He sits there conducting his business. Now, it's probably helpful that we spend a little bit of time talking about the chosen occupation of this otherwise well-named man Levi. By the way, his name, Levi, is a strong Jewish name. It gives evidence of his heritage. He is from a proud people that reaches all the way back to the tribe of Levi. The Levites were those who were supposed to make God's people close to God. Not this guy. He's a tax collector and is considered to be a traitor to his own people. The Roman government has overrun that part of the world, and if you're the conqueror, you have people pay you as the conqueror tribute.

You can't do it all alone, though. If you're the Roman government, you have to have people over it. Herod is employed by Rome and then he sells the franchise to certain people so that they can set up their franchise and get paid a percentage of what they collect. They can get as much money as they want. He's an extortionist. He's a well-paid, dressed up thief. If you know World War Two history, he's like the Vichy when Germany invaded France and overran France. There was the Free French who kept on fighting the Germans, the Nazis, but there's something called the Vichy French that capitulated to the Nazis. They remained French, but they just did whatever the Nazis wanted them to do. This man is Jewish but he's a traitor to his people. He sold his soul to Rome. He's rich, but he's hated. He gave up his soul to have money. And tax collectors didn't just have a little bit of money. He's not just a little bit upper crust. He is rolling in money. Often, if you're rolling in money, you are living in sin. He's living in sin. He has the best wine, the finest foods. He has a profligate life. Tax collectors, they weren't allowed in the synagogue, they couldn't go and worship God. They were so bad that the rules of the day were that if you were Jewish, you had to follow The Ten Commandments, but you had a little caveat. You could lie to the tax collector. Since the tax collector couldn't worship God, he had filled his life with stuff and sex and riches. And

verse 14 is a scandal. Jesus walked by Levi, who had obviously either heard Jesus or heard of Jesus, and Jesus says to him, “follow me.” And he got up and followed Him. Of all the people in that Galilean village that day who could have been saved, Levi was the very last one. And to think that this man, Levi called Matthew, would follow Jesus for three years. And then after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, he would write it down in the stories in the Gospel of Matthew that we would have up to this very day. It is astounding.

Let's pause here and say, you can never give up. You can never stop praying, you can never stop inviting, you can never stop calling. You can never stop loving the person that you think is so lost. If Jesus will save Levi, then there's always hope. There are a couple of things we can learn about becoming a Christian; or at least about conversion from this story. There are three things I'll point out in this brief account about conversion. Here's the first one. Number one.

There is power in the Gospel. There is power in the call of God. There's power there. The way the Gospel works is that Jesus creates what He commands. The call of Jesus is a sovereign call. You've felt it. You have been made aware of your sin. You turned and put your faith in Christ. Levi, you see, had everything he ever wanted in life. Except, that day he was made aware that he had a great big hole right in his heart and Jesus filled it. The way Luke tells the story in Luke Chapter 5:28, he gives us a little more detail. Everybody gives a little more detail than Mark. He tells us that Levi got up, he left everything and he followed Jesus. It was a decisive act. He was burning the ships. When Julius Caesar was ready to invade Rome, there was one more barrier to cross. And if he crosses that barrier, he is illegal and he can't stop. It's called the Rubicon. He crossed the Rubicon. This is what Levi did. He crossed it. He made a clean and eternal break with the past. Everybody in that little town of Capernaum would have known that Levi is the most unacceptable person to ever be a follower of Jesus. He gave up everything. He left money and friends and promotions. Here is radical discipleship. Here is following Jesus. There is something else to learn about this and that is...

There is mercy in conversion. When you're converted, there's mercy. The whole point of Jesus saving Levi is to show that Jesus only saves people that don't deserve it. Sometimes I think we have in our mind that Jesus looked at you down from Heaven and saw your life and He saw the great potential that you have and how you could be the great addition to the Kingdom. And it would be worth it. So He goes after you because He knows there's gonna be a return on your life. You have such great potential that He's going to save you. That's not how the Bible explains mercy. Mercy and Grace are God looking from Heaven and seeing the foulness of our sin, how we've rebelled and deserved to go to Hell, how we stand against His will and His word and His law and His ways, and yet, God, in nothing but love, nothing but grace, reaches down to people who don't deserve it. That's why He saves people like Levi. That's why He saves people like me and you. It's to show that there is mercy in conversion. The whole point of the Cross of Jesus is to show us we deserve punishment, but we receive love. This is a story of mercy here. Verse 14 tells us something else about conversion. That is that there is obedience.

Obedience is the proof. When you're called and saved, obedience is immediate. If Levi, after hearing Jesus say follow me, if Levi would have said yes, Lord, I'll follow you but stayed put and kept collecting money. that's not obedience. Verse 14 tells us that Levi did a very public and radical thing. He got up by the mercy of God. He came out of his former life and he followed Jesus from that day forward. From that day forward, he would be known as a follower of Jesus, who used to be a tax collector. He heard the Master's preaching, he witnessed the miracles, he heard the call of repentance and he heard the promise of a coming Kingdom. Now came the definitive invitation. Follow me. His response was immediate. It was open for the world to see the power of God transform a despised tax collector into an apostle and writer of a gospel. It's the picture of the remarkable, amazing grace of Jesus. I want you to know that grace. I want you to hear the explicit gospel.

I want you to know that God is a holy God who created all of us in His image. The image of God in you has been disfigured by sin, separating you from God. And when we are separated from God, we all deserve condemnation. That's

the judgment of God. But God is not just a judge. God also loves to the degree that He gave His only son, Jesus, who lived like we should have. He lived in perfect fellowship with God and our place. We couldn't as men and women but He did. And then Jesus takes the punishment we deserve. As a man, He takes all of the punishment that men and women deserve on the cross. That's why the cross is so important for Christianity. There Jesus takes the wrath of God for anyone who believes that He did that for you. He gives you the righteousness, you are covered, that you become a child of God. I want you to respond to the gravity of Jesus. I want you to rejoice in the grace of Jesus. The story gets even better in verse 15. There we find graciousness. So let's use that word. Number 3. I want you to...

Imitate the graciousness of Jesus

Look with me at the gracious of the Lord Jesus in verse 15. Just read it. ¹⁵ *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.* Stay with me now. Levi is a brand-new convert. He has a new-found love for Christ. He's following Jesus. As an act of gratitude, he decides to have a formal banquet for Jesus, to show his appreciation to Jesus. He doesn't have any friends yet who are Christians, so he invites all of his friends. These are the only people he knows: tax collectors and sinners. So he throws a banquet for Jesus and he invites them.

Jesus comes with His disciples so there's a mixing of disciples and those who are sinners and tax collectors. By the way, let me pause here. There is joy in bringing your friends to Jesus. There is joy when you've been transformed and changed, and you know this is the best thing you have, so you find a way, even if it's clumsy, to bring your friends to Jesus. Of course, in verse 16 we find out that the scribes in the Pharisees are going to hate it.

Jesus is reclining at the table with a great celebration with sinners and tax collectors. Andy Davis is the pastor at First Baptist Church in Durham, N.C. He's an MIT graduate. He's a brilliant man. He's memorized almost all of the Bible. That's amazing to me. He wrote a couple of books and one that we

have in our bookstore is called *The Infinite Journey*. It's about walking with Christ. It's really something. When he looked at this passage, he gave a good illustration. When he talks about a physician, a doctor, what does a doctor do? A doctor goes into a room where patients are sick, not because that doctor likes sickness, not because he wants to be around disease, not because he even wants to hang out with those who are sick,. The doctor goes into the room where the patient is sick so that the doctor might relieve and cure and save the patient. Brothers and sisters, Jesus is the friend of sinners, but Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Lost people, those without Christ, are not our enemies. They are our mission. I do believe that we are in some sort of culture war and there are things that you and I have to stand on and press against and ways that we've got to live and rights that we must fight for. But brothers and sisters, don't get so caught up in a culture war that you lose sight of the mission. If you do, it's possible to miss the whole goal of Jesus. The goal of Jesus is in verse 17. I want you to...

Join the goal of Jesus

Let me read the end. That's where the punch line always is. Verse 16-17.

¹⁶ 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?" ¹⁷ 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." By the way, this is the first place in the Gospel of Mark where the word "disciples" is used.

The first problem the Pharisees had with Jesus was that He claimed to have the power to actually forgive sins. The second problem that they had with Jesus was His attitude toward sinners. Why would Jesus mix with such disreputable company? In verse 17, Jesus gives a glorious common sense answer, and as He does, He speaks with irony and with truth. What is the irony? In verse 17, Jesus said, "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." For the people who think they are okay or well, I actually have nothing to say, nothing to offer. I can't meet a need that you

won't admit is there. In essence, I can't help those who don't think they need it. And then He gives us the truth. The truth is always at the bottom. Verse 17, the truth. *I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*" I came not to call the self-righteous who think they're OK. I came to call those who are aware. I have one call and that is the sinners.

This story here is early on in Jesus' ministry. And I can't help but wonder that later on in Luke Chapter 18, when Jesus is telling parables, one of the parables He tells sounds a lot like this story right here. It's in Luke Chapter 18:9, Luke tells us. ⁹ *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:* Here's the parable and I think it's based on this scripture right here. *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."* Jesus steps back and says, "now I tell you, this man, that tax collector, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other."

Ask God to show you the depth of your sin. Ask God to show you your sickness. Ask God to show you the heart of pride. Ask God to show you the selfish ways. Ask God to show you the lustful tendencies. Ask God to show that to you and then cry out to Jesus and He'll save you. It's Jesus. He's the true friend of sinners. You've come to Him today. Come to this one who will receive you, save you and forgive you in Jesus. Join me as we pray together with heads bowed this morning.

(Pastor prays)