

## **“The Friend of Sinners”**

Mark 2:13-17

Turn with me in your Bibles to the second chapter of Mark, and in just a minute we will read verses 13-17. In his book, “How to Be Born Again,” Billy Graham told of a time when he was to be interviewed at his home. Knowing the show would air on nationwide television, his wife Ruth took great pains to see that everything looked nice. She vacuumed and dusted and tidied up the whole house and had gone over the living room with a fine tooth comb. So when the film crew arrived with all their lights and cameras, she felt proud that everything in the room was spic and span. Dr. Graham said, “We were in place along with the interviewer when suddenly the television lights were turned on and we saw cobwebs and dust where we had never seen them before. In the words of my wife, ‘The room was festooned with dust and cobwebs which simply did not show up under ordinary light.’” And so it is with the light of God’s holiness. No matter how well you and I may clean up our lives and think we have them in order, when we see ourselves in the light of God’s holiness, all the cobwebs are exposed. Sin exists within every human heart, and yet none are so blind to it as those who are self-righteous. And that’s a word that pretty much sums up the spiritual condition of the religious Pharisees in Jesus’ day. They understood salvation to be something which is earned and deserved, which led them to look down upon and condemn others who were not as committed to God as they were. When Jesus stepped onto the scene, light shone into the darkness, thereby exposing the need for redemptive grace.

And so not long after He begins His ministry, the religious leaders began to develop a hatred for Jesus. The motive was that He was not religious enough by their standards. In fact, they even surmised that He did what He did by the

power of Satan. Out of spite, they called Jesus ‘the friend of sinners.’ That was the worst thing they could say about Him. It was the greatest insult they could come up with. Yet it is now the greatest truth in the world. Jesus Christ is indeed the ‘Friend’ of sinners! And that’s wonderful news, because were He not, we would have no hope. So for the next few minutes, we’re going to take a look at what that means from these verses in Mark 2. (Read)

In the previous passage, Mark gave us the account of the paralytic who was healed. His friends lowered him through the roof and dropped him down into the house where Jesus was teaching. Jesus heals the man and, more importantly, Jesus forgives his sins. Jesus says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” And it threw the Jewish leaders into an outrage because only God can forgive sin. Jesus proved He was God by doing what only God can do, thereby proving His authority on earth to forgive sin. Which meant they should have affirmed that He in fact was God and did what He had the right to do. Instead, they will conspire against Him. So Mark shows us how the ‘storm clouds’ begin to gather.

Jesus forgives sin, and now we see how He welcomes the sinner. As the Friend of sinners, He openly invites sinners to follow Him. He even sits down to eat with them, which was something that a proud Pharisee would never do. So this is a text that tells us whose sins Jesus forgives. Jesus forgives the sins of those who recognize they are sinners. He says in verse 17 that He came not to call the righteous, but sinners. The essence of believing in Christ is believing that you are a sinner, and are not saved by any of your own effort or attempts at self-righteousness.

I want us to look at these verses under two main headings, the first one being:

### **1—An unlikely DISCIPLE (2:13-15)**

*“He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to Him, and He was teaching them. 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. 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.”*

Keep in mind that Jesus is in Capernaum at this point, near the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Whether He is in the house or the synagogue or by the sea, crowds of people are coming to Him. And He is preaching the gospel to them, healing the sick, and casting out demons. On His way out of town, verse 14 says that He sees Levi sitting in the tax booth and He says to him, “Follow Me.” And he got up and followed Him. Now, this is shocking. This is really shocking because this man is a tax collector. Because no self-respecting teacher of any kind would want anything to do with a tax collector. It would literally be the biggest stain on one’s career to have a follower and close associate who is a tax collector. It was the worst of the worst, the dregs of human society in Israel. Levi is an ‘unlikely’ disciple.

### Levi’s background

Mark tells us in verse 14 that he is the son of Alphaeus, and the name ‘Levi’ is his Jewish name. You and I know him by the more familiar name ‘Matthew’ and I’ll say more about that in a minute. But Levi was his Jewish name. It was just about as religious a name as it gets. He is more than likely a descendant of the tribe of Levi, which was the priestly class in Israel. According to the Old Testament law, the only men who could mediate between God and people were the Levitical priests. So based on his name, we have every indication to believe that Levi came from religious stock. Perhaps his parents had religious hopes for

their son. But somewhere along the way, he chose to go down a different path. Greed became his god, and he sold out by becoming a tax collector who worked for the Roman authorities.

In the mind of the first century religious Jew, tax collectors were lumped together in the same category with murderers and thieves and murderers. The touch of a tax collector rendered a house unclean. Now, this is the kind of man that Levi is. He's sitting in the tax booth working as a sell-out to the Roman government. Let's just say that he works for the IRS—he's an agent of the 'Immoral Roman System.' Rome had a complex system of taxes, much like today. There were general taxes, such as land tax, income tax, estate tax, and the kinds of things we're familiar with. But then there were other taxes, commercial taxes. Things like property tax, the temple tax, or business taxes. Those who collected these in first century Judaism were called the 'gabbai.' It's an appropriate name because that's exactly where your money went—G'bye!

Rome determined an amount of money every year that had to come to them. Whatever you collected beyond that, you could keep for yourself. In many ways, it was a license to take money from the people. It was a profession of crime, extortion, and exploitation of the worst. That's why the tax collectors were kept from entering the synagogues as they were considered unclean. They couldn't even testify in a Jewish court of law. And so that's the kind of life that Levi had been living.

How does someone with the name 'Levi' end up that way?

Levi's very name carried strong religious associations, but he was living a life that had become morally compromised and spiritually distant from God. His name connected him to covenant privilege, yet his life did not reflect the spiritual

heritage his name suggested. I think about how the same thing can happen today with our children raised in religious homes. They may grow up with Christian language, with biblical knowledge, with church attendance, and even a respected family name in the church. Yet those outward associations do not guarantee inward transformation. A person can carry the identity of being a 'pastor's kid' or a church member, raised in a Christian family while privately living in spiritual indifference. Like Levi, they may possess the name of religion without the heart of repentance. This reminds us that spiritual heritage is a blessing, but it is not a substitute for personal conversion. Every person must respond to Christ for himself. God has no grandchildren—He only has children by faith!

### Levi's response

Jesus says to him, "Follow Me." Verse 14 says, "And he rose and followed Him." This man has been a high-profile resident of Capernaum. He has heard Jesus preach. He's well aware of His power and message. And now He says to him, "Follow Me." And Levi must have been shocked that Jesus invited him. And the response? He followed Him. Luke 5:28 says, "He forsook everything." Howard Marshall points out Luke's use of the Greek language that emphasizes Levi's decisive break from his old life and a new life of discipleship. He walks away from it to follow Jesus. Like the invitation song, "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back!"

Now, if he had been a fisherman, he could always go back to fishing. But the moment he walked away from his tax booth, there was nothing to fall back on. Levi leaves it all behind to follow Jesus. It was a life changing moment.

I wonder if Jesus has passed by you in a similar way? Can you point to a time in your own life when you clearly heard the voice of the Master calling? Jesus says to us, "Follow Me!" And to do so requires turning our back on sin and the ways of the world. But what we gain in Christ is far greater than what we give up. And it is significant that in the book that he wrote, Levi refers to himself as 'Matthew.' And only he refers to himself by that name. But do you know what it means? It means "Gift of God." Perhaps Jesus gave him that name, just like He changed Simon's name to Peter, or how He referred to James and John as the sons of thunder. It could be that Matthew himself now chose to go by that name after having met the Lord. It is an indication that his life has changed, and how he gained much more in Christ than that which he left behind at the tax booth.

Friend, we come to Jesus and receive a brand new name!

**Revelation 2:17—“To the one who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except him who receives it.”**

**Revelation 3:12—“I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, and My own new name.”**

**Isaiah 62:2—“You shall be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord will name.”**

In other words, believer's are given a new identity and a new sense of personal belonging in Christ. There is this pattern in the Bible where God gives a new name and a new identity to His redeemed people. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, and the new has come." Grace brings us a new identity. God takes Abram and calls him Abraham, he takes Jacob and calls him Israel, he takes Simon and calls him

Peter, and Levi is now Matthew. It beautifully illustrates God's transforming work and purpose for our lives.

### Levi's circle

When Jesus passes by the tax booth, Matthew is never the same. Verse 15 says, "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." He is filled with gratitude about what the Lord has done in his life, and he makes a feast to honor Jesus. He calls all his tax collector friends to come over as Jesus is the guest of honor. All the dishonorable, despised rejects of Galilee, everybody in the tax world. And there's a revival breaking out because it says there were 'tax collectors and sinners' who were all there, and there were many of them, and they were following Him.

**"Sinners"** — *the Greek adjective is ἁμαρτωλοὶ*

The Mishnah describes them as gamblers, money lenders, Sabbath violators, violent shepherds, tax collectors, thieves, drunks, prostitutes, the 'am ha'aretz,' people of the dirt, people who would never make it to heaven.

They were all in there eating with Jesus and His disciples, and this is the first use of the word 'disciples' in Mark. And it is an outrageous thing to the Pharisees that Jesus would associate with such a notorious bunch. And that brings us to the second heading:

### **2—An important DISTINCTION (2:16-17)**

*"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?' 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.”*

The Pharisees were just shocked beyond words that Jesus would eat with sinners. Eating was symbolic of acceptance and welcome. They wouldn't eat with anybody who was a sinner. They were far too separated to do such a thing, for it was beneath them. Why would Jesus do such a thing?

The distinction made by Jesus in these verses is clear, and it is a distinction between grace and self-righteous religion.

### Grace invites, while religion inspects

Levi and his tax collector friends were in need of God and His grace. However, they had been kept at arms length by the Pharisees and their ilk who liked to play the game of comparison. Who, instead of recognizing their own need of grace, saw themselves as God's MVP's. You can just hear the contempt in their words in verse 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?'" To eat with them is descriptive of table fellowship. And so they scoff at the fact that Jesus would dine with the detestable.

Grace invites because it begins with the initiative of Christ rather than the qualifications of the sinner. Jesus walks by Levi's tax booth and simply says, "Follow Me." Levi is not praying in the temple, cleaning up his reputation, or proving himself worthy. In fact, he is sitting in the very place that represented his compromise and sin. But Jesus meets him where he is and calls him there. Grace does not wait for us to become acceptable before it extends the invitation. No, it reaches into the mess of where we are and lifts us up out of it. The Bible says:

**Romans 5:8—“But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

Religion, on the other hand, inspects before it invites. It asks whether someone is respectable enough, or moral enough, or religious enough to belong. The Pharisees would have looked at Levi and seen disqualification, not discipleship. Religion says, “Show me you deserve it,” while grace says, “Come to the table.” Grace welcomes the sinner so transformation can begin. Religion withholds acceptance until transformation is already visible. That is why grace produces humility and gratitude, while religion produces pride and comparison.

#### Grace embraces, while religion excludes

In grace, Jesus is moving toward people rather than away from them. In Mark 2, Jesus does not simply call Levi and leave him at a distance. He goes into Levi’s house, sits at his table, and eats a meal with tax collectors and sinners. In that culture, sitting down to eat with someone was a sign of acceptance, relationship, and welcome. He is showing that His mission was not to remain separated from broken people, but to bring them near. Religion, however, often excludes by building walls of distance and judgment. The Pharisees stood outside questioning why Jesus would associate with such people because they believed holiness meant separation from sinners rather than compassion for them. Their focus was on protecting their own image and maintaining religious boundaries. Grace says, “There is room at the cross for you,” while religion says, “You do not belong here.” Grace opens the door to the outsider, while religion can leave people feeling like they must earn their place at the table before they are welcomed.

#### Grace transforms, while religion performs

In verse 17, look at how Jesus response to their critical questions, “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.’” I like how Matthew’s account says it:

**Matthew 9:12-13—“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

He’s quoting from Hosea 6. Instead of showy displays of religion, God says He desires for His people to show mercy to their fellow man. He is not rejecting sacrifice itself, since God commanded sacrifices under the Old Testament law. Rather, He is rebuking people who were outwardly religious while their hearts were far from Him. They were offering rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices, but they lacked mercy, love, faithfulness, and obedience from the heart. He values faithfulness and compassion more than empty religious performance. Sacrifice without mercy became hypocrisy. It was possible for people to be meticulous in worship while being cold, proud, and unjust in daily life.

Jesus once told a parable to the religious scribes about a man who had two sons. He went to the first one and said, “Son, go work today in the vineyard.” He answered, “I will not,” but afterward he changed his mind and went. The man went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, “I go, sir,” but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? The first one. Then Jesus made this application:

**Matthew 21:31—“Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the**

**prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.”**

In other words, they believed the message that John the Baptist preached, and though they had lived sinful lives, they recognized their need for grace and repented. And yet the Pharisees who honored God with their lips, they refused to acknowledge their own need.

Now, let's bring this to some final application as we close:

- **First, compassion for the sinner does not condone sin.**

There is a cautionary word that we need to keep in mind. And what I mean by this is that Jesus does not condone sin. He did not move among sinners for any other reason than to save them. Jesus is identifying with people in their need, not in their sin. It is important to remember that. The reason He is going to where people are is so that He can save them from sin. To say that He is the Friend of sinners is not to say that He is the Friend of sin. Far from it!

- **Second, holiness is never an excuse for not cultivating unbelieving friends.**

We ought not to use a desire for holiness as an excuse for the non-cultivation of unbelieving friends. The Lord Jesus does not remove us from the world, but leaves us within it for the sake of mission to it. Involvement, not isolation. I think we should ask ourselves, “How many purposeful and intentional relationships am I cultivating with those who are lost?”

- **Third, the church is for those who are spiritual sick.**

It is a hospital, not a hotel. But Pharisees turn it into an insider's club. When people come into the church and they sense the tone that we think we've got it together. We can give off the vibe, “We're great. And we've love you to know

how great we are.” Or the pastor’s sermon gives off the vibe, “I’m great.” The only thing people should hear and see in us is this—“Jesus is great!” And that means the church is a company of saved sinners. We do not have it all together. You’ve heard the song, “I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God!” Perhaps it would be better to sing, “I’m surprised that you’re part of the family of God!” We should all be.

In this story, you have two groups of people represented. There are those who assume they’re so bad that they are beyond the reach of grace. And then are those who think they’re so good that they don’t need it. But the gospel is for both people. To the one who thinks they’re without any hope, the gospel lifts them up. But it also humbles the one who is filled with religious pride. The great Physician came not for the righteous, but for those who are sick. But all of us fall into that category, my friend. For there is none who are righteous, no not one. We don’t know what Levi, as a boy, wanted to be when he grew up. Maybe a rabbi, or a priest at the big temple in the big city of Jerusalem. I doubt very seriously that he wanted to be a tax collector. But, through one bad decision after another, he found himself out of fellowship with God and His people. That is until the day that Jesus passed by his way and offered him a fresh start. For He is the One who will forgive our sin and welcome us with wide open arms to His table of grace. But it begins with recognizing your own need for Him.

One of the greatest painters in European history was a Dutch artist by the name of Rembrandt who was born in 1606. He was known for his self-portraits and biblical scenes. When I was in college, I took an art class and we once made a trip to Bob Jones University where there is a museum and gallery that houses a number of Rembrandt’s works. It is one of the finest in the world. One of his most famous pieces is a painting of the crucifixion and is simply called, “The

Three Crosses.” And if you were to see it for yourself, your attention would be drawn first to the center cross on which Jesus died. Then, as you look at the crowd gathered around the foot of that cross, you will notice the various facial expressions and actions of the people who are involved in the awful act of crucifying the Son of God. Finally, your eyes would drift to the edge of the painting and catch sight of another figure, almost hidden in the shadows with a hammer in his hand. And it is Rembrandt himself, for he had recognized that by his sins, he helped nail Jesus to the cross. My friend, a Christian is someone who doesn’t primarily see other people responsible for the death of Jesus, but sees himself as the one who holds the hammer. The Bible says:

**Isaiah 53:6—“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”**

You may very well think to yourself, “I’m not that bad!” Or you may be like the Pharisee—“I’m better than other people!” Or some of you this morning may be living under the heavy burden of a guilty conscience. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus is the Friend of sinners. Hebrews 9:27 says, “For it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment.” And on that day, you will need a Friend. On that day, the only righteousness that will matter is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The gospel is wonderful news that the Savior’s righteousness can be given to you today—if you will only receive it by faith.