

Jesus, Friend of Sinners

Eric C. Coher

Mark 2:13-22

“You’re sick!” Those were the words of the doctor as he stepped into the examining room. The patient, who had come in for a routine check-up, thought that he was in excellent health. It was simply time for a periodic exam. But the doctor had come into the room with a look of concern on his face. He was viewing some paperwork, the results of the patient’s lab tests. The doctor looked up and said bluntly, “You’re sick.” The patient, a bit perturbed said, “Well, I’d like a second opinion!” The doctor obligingly added, “Okay... you’re not a very good dresser either!”

We don’t like negative evaluations of ourselves, whether it’s our health, our appearance, our job performance, our character, or our spiritual well-being. But Mark 2:13ff is a story about negative evaluations. The religious leaders suggest that Jesus is in error because He spends time with tax collectors and sinners – the outcasts. Jesus doesn't negate the fact that His new-found friends are indeed sick and in need of His doctoring. But they aren’t the only ones who are sick. The scribes and Pharisees, despite their presumption of being righteous, are likewise ailing sinners who need to be healed.¹

The four clear lessons in our text this morning:

1. Jesus came as a friend of sinners.
2. Jesus came as an enemy of the self-righteous.
3. Jesus came to bring joy and gladness, not mourning and sadness.
4. Jesus came to introduce the new, not patch up the old.

Let’s turn our attention to our text. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

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. 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

¹ Dr. N. Clayton Croy, *A Reflection on Mark 2:13-17*.

those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.” Mark 2:13–22

Brothers and sisters, the grass withers and the flowers falls, but the Word of our God stands forever.

I. JESUS CAME AS A FRIEND OF SINNERS (v.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.

Our text opens this morning with Jesus doing what He found doing most often – teaching and preaching. Strolling dialogue was one of the most common ways for a Rabbi to teach. As Jewish Rabbis walked the roads from one place to another, their disciples gathered around them and listened as they taught. Jesus taught formally, in synagogues, much less often than He taught informally as His ministry crisscrossed back and forth around the region of Galilee. Mark again highlights the fact that there is a crowd following in Jesus’ shadow, but the crowd isn’t the main focus of the text. As Jesus strolled along the Sea of Galilee, He fixed His eyes on one man – Levi the local tax collector.

Levi was evidently Matthew, the gospel writer and apostle’s, given name. Matthew uses his own name in his account of the story. He writes, “As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him” Matthew 9:9. It is likely that Jesus is the one who changed Levi’s name to Matthew. Jesus renamed several of His disciples. He said to Simon, “You shall be called Peter,” the “rock” (cf. Matthew 16:17-18). He nicknamed James and John, the sons of Zebedee, “sons of thunder” (cf. Mark 3:17). Although Scripture doesn’t tell us for certain, it’s very likely that it was Jesus who changed Levi’s name to Matthew, which means “gift of God.” Perhaps that is how Jesus thought of Levi. But that certainly isn’t how most would have thought of him.

Levi was a tax collector. His booth would have sat right on the main thoroughfare into Capernaum and there he would have extracted taxes from the locals, fishermen as they came into port, and those who were traveling through the area. The taxes Levi collected would have included: export and import fees, sales tax, custom taxes, and other various tolls. Unlike our current system, the Roman government didn't collect taxes directly. They used a system known as tax farming where the job of tax collecting was sold to the highest bidder. It was essentially setup like a franchise model. The Roman government, under Herod Antipas, would assess a bottom line tax amount that was due for a particular district but the tax collector had to get his original investment back plus a profit. This model of tax collecting, coupled with the disease of sin in the human heart, lent itself to dishonesty and corruption. Here is a snapshot of a tax collector:

Dishonest. There was a tax for almost everything. It would have been nearly impossible for the common folks to understand the elaborate list of taxes and their ever-changing rates. As a result, this profession attracted enterprising individuals with a thirst for greed. Tax collectors were known to overcharge people and skim off the top. They took bribes from the rich and extorted the poor. And when someone couldn't pay their taxes, they were offered high-interest loans that were very difficult to repay.

Disqualified. Tax collectors were not allowed to give testimony as witnesses because no one trusted them. Their tithes weren't even accepted in the synagogue.

Disloyal. Though Levi was Jewish, he would have been considered a traitor by his people because he worked for the despised Roman government. In the eyes of his fellow Jews, Levi had turned his back on his family, his nation, and his God.

Detested. Tax collectors were classed with murderers and robbers, only they were considered the worst. Jewish people despised them more than Roman officials or soldiers. Sometimes children would spit at tax collectors, encouraged to do so by their parents.

This is the portrait of the unsuspecting character Jesus fixes His attention on. We should note this is not likely Levi's first encounter with Jesus. Remember, Jesus has been ministering very actively in and around Capernaum. It's also probable that the brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John, who were fishermen, all knew Levi, because they had to pay taxes on their fishing business. It is to this man that Jesus says, "Follow me." We should note that the call of Christ is stronger than the love of money. The call of Christ is stronger than the love of any sin. We are all sunk in sin and so wedded to the world that we would never turn to God and seek salvation unless He first called us by His grace. As a magnet attracts iron and the south winds soften the frozen ground, so does Christ's calling draw sinners out of the world and melt the hardest heart.²

² J.C. Ryle, *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 25.

THE CALL: FOLLOW ME

The word “follow” means to walk the same road, to join with one as an attendant or disciple, to side with one’s cause, and to follow after the one who precedes the way. All of these realities were implied in Jesus’ call for Levi to follow Him. But it’s interesting to note that the literal Greek that Jesus uses is “follow with me.” Levi was a business partner to Rome. He collected taxes, but he was a shareholder of the profits. Implicit in Jesus’ call to follow Him was the reality that Levi was to change partners and become Jesus’ partner in His spiritual enterprise.³

How does Levi respond to Jesus’ call? Luke provides some additional insight for us. He writes, “And leaving everything, he rose and followed him” Luke 5:28. In the original, this sentence reads this way: “And he left all, rose up, and followed him.” His response was wholehearted. He totally made a complete break with his tax business. He didn’t stick around to gather any shekels or spend additional time tidying up his books. He got up, left it all behind, and followed Christ. In an instant, without hesitation, He walked out on his business, cut all ties to Roman influence, and left behind the power that money can buy. The four fishermen that Jesus called earlier could go back to fishing (and they did) but for Levi, his work as a tax collector was over, forever. When Levi followed Jesus, he burned all the bridges to his profession in the process – He had become a new creation! Friends, following Jesus doesn’t mean you try to make your old life compatible with Christianity. It means turning your back on your old life and making haste to follow and obey Jesus, whatever the cost.

Has the call to follow Jesus Christ superseded every other loyalty and priority in your life? Does Christ have complete control of your time, vocation, money, retirement, friends, house, family, social life, and even your personal reputation? The command to follow Christ means that you entrust him with everything. The story has been told of a chicken and a pig that were walking down the road together. As they passed a sign for a local diner they notice that it said - breakfast special: Ham and Eggs – \$2.95! The chicken said, “That’s our whole contribution to society: breakfast food!” The pig replied, “For you, it may be a contribution, but for me it’s a total commitment.”

JESUS GOES WHERE THE NEED IS GREATEST

Look at verse 15. Mark writes, “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.” Luke adds some additional detail saying, “And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a *large company* of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them” Luke 5:29. What is taking place here? Levi’s conversion was such a momentous event in his life that he celebrated by throwing a party. And he invited Jesus, along with all of his non-Christian friends to join in the

³ H. Hobbs, 45.

celebration. Jesus certainly understands the celebration of a saved life. He described the prodigal's father as saying, "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." Luke 15:32

Levi probably has several agendas behind his party. He wants to say goodbye to the old crowd; he wants to explain why he's getting out of the tax business; and he definitely wants to introduce his friends to Jesus, who has offered him unconditional love. Some of the most effective evangelists are brand new Christians. They still have lots of "sinners" in their life and they can't stop talking about what Jesus has done for them. Unfortunately, over time, zeal can wane, and relationships with non-Christians are replaced with Christian friendships. In one sense, this is good and healthy. Some of us would do well to sever unhealthy relationships. But on the other hand, we need to make sure we don't insulate ourselves from the very people Jesus wants us to reach.

Notice who's in attendance. Mark notes that there are many tax collectors and "sinners" present. The word "sinners" here is a technical term that describes a class of people who were considered inferior by the Pharisees because they were generally indifferent to Jewish religious traditions and customs. These people were dismissed as inconsequential because they didn't live their lives according to certain religious standards. They didn't eat their food in a state of ceremonial cleanliness, or tithe.⁴ The designation "sinners" is roughly equivalent to "outcasts," and these are just the people Jesus pursued and spent time with. We cannot have a spiritual impact on the lost apart from contact with them. Consider the leper in Mark 1:40-45, the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, and the woman caught in adultery in John 8:2-11.

JESUS, FRIEND OF SINNERS

C.T. Studd once said, "Some like to dwell within the sound of church and chapel bell. But I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell." Spurgeon made a similar statement. He said, "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for." This was the way Jesus operated.

Friends, mark it down, there is not a single sinner who is outside the reach of God's sovereign grace. There isn't anyone too vile, corrupt, loathsome, disgraceful, monstrous, deplorable, wicked, reprehensible, or depraved that Christ cannot save. The same voice that called Levi out of the tax booth, saying, "Follow me," can call the chief of sinners home. This gives us great hope as we pray for and share the gospel with the lost around us. If Jesus can save you and me, He can save anyone! Jesus came as a friend of sinners.

⁴ William L. Lane, *NICONT: The Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 103.

II. JESUS CAME AS AN ENEMY OF THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS (v.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 problem, in a nutshell, is that Jesus is eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors, rather than fasting and praying with righteous people. Mark doesn't say Jesus is teaching, preaching, or sharing his faith at this party (though He may be). Verse 15 says that he is reclining at the table, and verse 16 says he is eating and drinking with these sinners, social outcasts, and tax collectors. In that Middle-Eastern, first-century setting, to eat with a person was to accept him or her. It was a commitment to intimacy. Jesus eats and drinks with outcasts as if they were his friends, and he doesn't seem to care who knows it. The scribes and Pharisees faulted Jesus for reclining at the table with tax collectors and sinners because they themselves looked down on this less than human group. But Jesus had come for just such a miserable bunch. Jesus came as a physician to the sick and needy.

Jesus turns the question back on the Pharisees in the last phrase in verse 17. He is saying repentance is impossible for self-righteous, respectable, spiritually self-sufficient people. You see, the gospel has nothing to say to people who really believe they have it all together spiritually. Jesus is suggesting that tax collectors and sinners are much more open to truth. They know their need better than the well-trained professional religionists.

Let me pause for a moment and ask: what do we know ourselves of this special office of Christ? Have you ever felt your spiritual sickness of sin and applied to Christ for relief? To feel our sins and to know our sickness is the beginning of real Christianity. To be sensible of our corruption and abhor our own transgressions is the first symptom of spiritual health. Happy indeed are they who have found their soul's disease. Jesus Christ is the very physician you require.⁵

Jesus is the perfect doctor to heal us of our sin.

- He is always available.
- He always makes a perfect diagnosis.
- He provides a complete cure.
- He even pays the bill.

Here is a sobering thought: Is it possible that we, at times, are just like the Pharisees in our text? Is it possible that, at times, while we would never subscribe to the ideology of the Pharisees lock, stock, and barrel, we actually live as practical Pharisees? Kent Hughes notes, "We come to Christ, and in our desire to be godly we seek out people who are "just like us." The constant tug that we

⁵J.C. Ryle, 27.

must daily resist is to arrange our lives so that we are with nonbelievers as little as possible. This certainly couldn't have been said of Jesus. We attend Bible studies that are 100 percent Christian, a Sunday School class that is 100 percent Christian, and prayer meetings that are 100 percent Christian. We play tennis with Christians and eat dinner with Christians. We have Christian doctors, Christian dentists, Christian plumbers, and Christian veterinarians. The result is, we pass by hundreds without ever noticing them or positively influencing them for Christ. You see, we aren't Pharisees philosophically, but we may be practically.⁶

We need to stop and look around. There are "Levi's" all around us. Look at your calendar. Do you only spend time with believers? Take ten seconds and think of just one person who doesn't know Jesus. Write their name in the margin of your notes. What is one thing can you do this week to spend time with that person? Maybe, just maybe, you can have supper with a sinner. Maybe you could go to coffee with an outcast. When Jesus prayed for his followers, He asked His Father, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one" John 17:15.

When Oliver Cromwell ruled England in the mid 1600's, the nation experienced a crisis when they ran out of silver and could not mint any coins. Cromwell sent his soldiers to the nearby Cathedral to see if any silver was available. They reported back that the only silver was in the statues of the saints, to which Cromwell replied, "Melt down the saints and get them back into circulation." Brothers and sisters, let's ask Jesus to melt us down so that we get back into circulation.

III. JESUS CAME TO BRING JOY AND GLADNESS, NOT MOURNING AND SADNESS (v.18-20)

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day."

The first concern of Jesus' critics centered on the company that Jesus kept. The second issue that they seem to raise is that Jesus is conducting Himself in an improper way religiously. The Pharisees note that Jesus isn't austere, formal, cold, stiff, and solemn. Jesus seemed to be enjoying his time around the table with Levi and his fellow tax collectors and sinners. Make no mistake about it, Jesus is not, nor has He ever, condoned sin. Jesus' presence with outcasts and sinners doesn't mean He turns a blind eye to their sinful rebellion. Jesus' critics couldn't understand how Jesus could be having an enjoyable time sharing a meal with such a ragtag bunch. But these are just the people Jesus came to save.

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior Vol.1* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 71.

Why were John's disciples and the Pharisees fasting? We do not know why John the Baptist's disciples were fasting. Perhaps it was because he was then in prison or as an expression of repentance designed to hasten the coming of the kingdom. The Pharisees fasted twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays (cf. Luke 18:12). It's possible that the feast in Levi's house may have occurred on one of these days.

As a result of the legalism imposed by the scribes and Pharisees, the Jewish religion had become a massive burden. Rules upon rules upon rules were added to the law and set before the people to obey. Judaism had become an oppressive religion. In Matthew 23:4 Jesus said of the Scribes and Pharisees, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger." There was no room for delight, only strict duty.

JESUS' RATIONALE: WEDDING FEAST METAPHOR

By using the illustration of a wedding (the bridegroom), Jesus drew on a powerful picture among the Jews. It's interesting to note that during a wedding celebration, which often lasted for a week, rabbis regularly declared that joy was more important than observing religious rituals. During the wedding festivities, the duty of religious rituals were set aside so that the joyous nature of the occasion could be celebrated. Jesus is highlighting the fact that a relationship with Him, like the marriage celebration, brings joy. Love doesn't demand the performance of religious ritual, but rather joyful devotion to the bridegroom.

Religious law demands external piety, but God's love creates internal authenticity. Religious law controls behavior, but God's love changes hearts. When the love of Jesus Christ is what constrains us, then life becomes a beautiful tapestry in which the good and the bad, the difficult and the wonderful, the tears and the laughter, receiving and giving, repentance and celebration are all woven together. There is a balance in all these things in the Christian life. It is absolutely normal and respectable to be spontaneous, because God's amazing, joyful blessings are being poured into our lives.⁷

IV. JESUS CAME TO INTRODUCE THE NEW, NOT TO PATCH UP THE OLD (v.21-22)

The religious leaders around Jesus were likely hoping for some kind of compromise that would allow them to retain their religious traditions with what Jesus had to offer. But Jesus hadn't come to simply be added to their legalistic, man-made, hollow religion. Here is the point: Jesus wants your warm devotion, not your legalistic religion. Jesus uses two parables to illustrate that He is

⁷ Goins.

the new patch and the new wine. He is not an attachment, addition, or appendage to the status quo. He cannot be integrated into or contained by preexisting spiritual traditions.

A. OLD GARMENT vs. NEW GARMENT (v.21)

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.

A “garment” symbolized the covering of man’s sinful condition in Old Testament usage (cf. Genesis 3:21; Isaiah 61:10). The point of Jesus parable is that the Jews were to lay aside “the old garment” of the Mosaic covenant, and put on “the new garment” of the new covenant. Judaism had become rigid and inflexible because of legalistic requirements that had been added to it. In this sense, it was like an old garment. The point Jesus is trying to make is that a new, unshrunk, patch isn't fit for an old garment. The gospel brings the promise of a completely new garment (wedding clothes). Isaiah anticipates the new wedding garments that Jesus adorns His bride with. He writes, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” Isaiah 61:10.

B. OLD WINESKINS vs. NEW WINESKINS (v.22)

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.”

In the Old Testament, “wine” is a symbol of joy. At the final Passover meal, when Jesus celebrated with his disciples, He chose wine as a symbol of this new covenant. This new life that He offers is powerful, dynamic, and exhilarating. It’s like new wine, which is still in the process of fermentation. It is much too volatile, active, and strong to be enclosed in stiff, rigid, old forms of traditional religion (old wineskins). There is a basic incompatibility between the old and the new. The writer of Hebrews contrasts the old and the new covenant in Hebrews 7:18-19. He writes, “For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.” Jesus traded fasting for feasting; sackcloth and ashes for a robe of righteousness; a spirit of heaviness for a garment of praise; mourning for joy; and law for grace.

Hopefully, we’re becoming more and more like Levi. When we follow Jesus like Levi, it leads to celebration. On the other hand, if we reject the gospel and hold on to our old spiritual traditions, we will be just like the Pharisees who stood outside looking in. They had no joy. They were critical, judgmental, and accusatory. Following Jesus leads to a life of increasing freedom and joy while

rejecting Jesus leads to a life that is stiff, rigid, resentful, and resistant to the work of the Spirit. May we all be like Levi!

CLOSING BENEDICTION

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear this benediction from the Captain of our salvation, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" Matthew 11:28–29. And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!