

SOCIAL NETWORKING: Join the GOOD NEWS Conversation

February 12: **Mix Your Circles (Business and Faith)** (Levi's Party): Mark 2:13-17 (Permeation)

Intro: Many a Christian young person, faithful and sincere, has come to New Orleans and lost her way. Here in the middle of the flesh markets of America with our sex industry and our drug lords, even the finest church-going teenager can be seduced.

Here the businessman from Birmingham who goes to church with his family every Sunday can find a massage parlor or a call girl and step into a world he never would have entered in his home town. Here a college student can disappear into the night life and emerge so changed in heart and spirit that parents wonder who they are.

You have come to the city of excess and decadence, and you are here in the middle of Mardi Gras, the celebration of wine and sex. You can be here, and be an ambassador for Jesus. But you cannot join the good news conversation if you are drunk or high or morally compromised yourself. Your holiness is essential to your witness.

Everything that goes on now is based upon the clear call and mission that Jesus embraced in his baptism and temptation. You have to know who you are before you mix your circles. Otherwise, you will be conformed to the world instead of changing it.

I. Remember where Jesus found you—*he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth* (v14)

A. Levi is not involved in an honorable occupation, according to his countrymen. He is in cahoots with the Romans. He is an agent of Rome, in fact, and he is helping them extract taxes from his own people. He handles the filthy Roman money. He enforces Roman law. And he makes a great living doing it.

B. Jesus found you without hope and without God in the world.

1. We must remember the sinfulness of our sin, how hopelessly lost we were when Jesus found us.

2.

C. If we forget how desperately lost we were, we will not express and extend to others the amazing grace that rescued us.

II. Be authentic and transparent—*While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples* (v15)

A. Levi disguised nothing. He wanted his friends to know that he was following Jesus. Luke tells us that this was a party at Levi's house and that it was intended to introduce Jesus to his friends.

B. Let the office know who you are. This self-disclosure is important for all friendships. Disguising it or minimizing it is not only unfaithfulness to Christ, it is dishonesty toward friends.

C. Authenticity is you being who you are, not pretending, hiding, or putting on airs. We need to do that in our social circles, being who we are. That is truly compelling and interesting to people. We also need to be authentic in our church circles. We have no need for wearing Mardi Gras masks when we come to church.

D. Transparency is you letting people know the real you.

1. Levi is practicing transparency by inviting Jesus to his home along with his many tax-collector friends.

2. Jesus is practicing transparency by going to the party.

3. Your transparency will give others HOPE because they know how they really are and sometimes they are in despair about every getting it together. If you are transparent about your own failures and shortcomings, you will help people see that they can follow Jesus, too, even though they are not perfect.

III. Break bread with sinners and tax collectors: *Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house* (v15).

A. Remember, Jesus is known to be a man of God.

1. He has been baptized and tempted by the devil, and he resisted all efforts to set him on a different course than that of obedience to God. He has publicly announced his intentions to bring the good news everywhere.

2. You are following Jesus into the world of sinners ONLY if you have also announced your intentions in the world, if you have been baptized as a public identification with Jesus and his people, and if you have said NO to the temptations that will surround you all of your days on this earth.

3. Jesus prayed for us in John 17:15-19: *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

4. A key part of Jesus' prayer is that "they may be one" (John 17:11). The unity of the people of God is vital for their effectiveness and their purity and their victory in the world. Nobody maintains faithfulness to Christ as the Lone Ranger. You must be vitally connected to the people of God to do this.

B. Jesus went to weddings, festivals, and parties. He not only appeared in public in his preaching and healing campaigns, but he was part of his community in simple ways. He was among the throng at Passover and in the crowd at the Temple.

C. The Pharisees had a different approach. They avoided tax collectors and "sinners." Sinners were the common people living ordinary lives who could not measure up to the religious regimen required by the Pharisees.

D. People today who seek to avoid contact with sinners are following in the footsteps of the Pharisees, not of Jesus.

E. Jesus' style in the world was to be "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:19). Levi was so impressed with this way of being in the world that he included this phrase in his gospel when he wrote it. In fact, I think Matthew, also called Levi, would insist that this style of Jesus in the world is what won him over. He was startled and overwhelmed by the love of Christ for a tax collector, just as Zaccheus was when Jesus went to his house in Jericho.

F. Follow the style of Jesus and be present in loving ways with sinners in your world. Do not fear the interaction with publicans and sinners. Go to the social events as an ambassador of the love of Christ. See people for who they really are—individuals in great need of the forgiveness of Christ. They need just what Jesus gave to you. So you are the ambassador of GOOD NEWS to all the sinners around you. And God may use you to say the the Levi in your life, "Follow Jesus, and he will give you a new beginning!"

IV. Invite others to social events that highlight the Savior: *The teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" (v16).*

A. The Pharisees are watching Jesus, just as they will be watching you all the time. They are interested to see if you are going to favor the unsavory people in the world.

1. No one is harder to reach with the truth of the gospel than a Pharisee. Jesus noted this when he told them, "The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of you" (Matthew 21:31). Matthew alone records this statement of Jesus.

2. The single reason that it is so hard to reach a Pharisee—someone ensconced in their self-made righteousness—is that they see no need of God's grace and forgiveness in their lives. That is by far the hardest person to reach with a gospel that centers on the sin question. People who do not think they have a real problem with sin do not need Jesus dying on the cross for them.

B. Part of JOINING THE GOOD NEWS CONVERSATION is illustrating God's love by hanging out with these sinners.

1. This is as surprising today among the religious elite as it was in the days of Jesus. There are still many people in the world laboring under the false notion that they have made themselves righteous, prosperous, and part of the "good people" in the world.

2. Your presence among the sick, the hurting, the left out and passed over, the "sinners" of our own day will be an announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God.

C. Your presence among the sinners will only be like that of Jesus if you are clearly identified as God's herald. You are not to be a "secret believer." Only by deliberate witness will your presence in the world be connected to Jesus and his church.

V. Use the objections from Pharisees to Announce the Kingdom: *Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? (v16).*

A. Self-righteous people think they got that way on their own steam and in their own strength and moral goodness. Therefore, they judge and condemn people who haven't made it their own lofty standard of moral conduct and lifestyle. In their eyes, these people are not worthy of our time and energy.

B. It confuses them to see a godly person spending time with the tax collectors and sinners. They really, truly don't get it. Those kind of people need to be in prison, not in church.

C. Our presence among the sinners is an announcement:

1. That Jesus brings abounding grace and forgiveness to all who call upon his name.

2. That we see ourselves as among the poor and needy of the world, not the rich who "have need of

nothing.” The church in Laodicea said, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing” (Revelation 3:17). The angel of God told that church, “You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

3. God help us to remain among the poor so that we may be the presence of Christ Jesus in our world.

D. We are in the world as Jesus was in the world: *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners* (Mark 2:17).

Conclusion: Let me give a shout out to any Pharisee in the room who feels that your standing with God is self-made. I will tell you, the prostitutes go into the kingdom of heaven before you.