

For Sinners Only

Mark 2:13-17

John Breon

After forgiving and healing the paralyzed man, Jesus again goes out beside the lake. And, again, a large crowd gathers around him and he teaches them. As he walks along, he sees Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth. Levi is like a customs agent or toll collector. As merchants travel through Capernaum, or goods are exported, he collects a percentage as a toll or tax for King Herod and for the Roman government. As a Jew, Levi is despised by his countrymen. Not only does he squeeze all he can from the people to pad his own account, but he works for a foreign government that occupies their country and oppresses them.

Imagine you're driving across Oklahoma on the turnpike. When you get to the toll booth, there is the flag of a foreign country on display. You learn that a corrupt governor has ties to this foreign government and is funneling turnpike money to the other country. There are state troopers standing by to make sure you pay the toll. You take out your frustration and anger on the person working in the tollbooth. That's Levi.

Levi would have been an outcast in Jewish society. "Good" people would have stayed away from him. He would have been excluded from the temple and synagogue. He may have had lots of money, but few friends. And the friends he had would have been other social and religious outcasts like himself.

This lonely, wealthy, guilty man sees the crowd coming along the shore toward him. He notices the figure who seems to be the center of attention. He's the rabbi Levi has heard about.

And then Jesus walks right up to Levi and, as with the four fishermen earlier, he says, "Follow me." Jesus saw Levi, wanted him, chose him and invited him. Jesus saw something in hated and rejected Levi. Jesus specializes in rejects. He sees their value that others, and the people themselves, often fail to see.

Michelangelo is said to have rummaged through discarded pieces of marble because he could see something in the blocks that others had

rejected. And from some of those discarded pieces he fashioned some of his greatest works.

Seeing the person Levi could become, Jesus said, "Follow me." Levi heard those words and somehow saw in them the chance to leave his dirty business behind and find the fulfillment of his deepest longings. And Levi left the greed and the threats, the ties to Herod and Rome, the business, and the loneliness. He left it all and went with Jesus. He became a disciple, an apprentice, a follower of Jesus.

Jesus' gracious invitation breaks into Levi's world and changes his life. Levi responds with repentance and faith (see 1:14). We see that as he leaves his old life and begins a new journey with Jesus. He couldn't go back, but he had never felt so free. Nothing mattered now except following Jesus.

In the next scene we find Jesus at a dinner party in Levi's house. Levi has invited many tax collectors and other "sinners" to the meal. He wants all his friends to meet Jesus like he has. Mark mentions that many of these outcasts followed Jesus.

Remember, tax collectors were hated and excluded. So were the other people called "sinners." These were probably people who wouldn't live according to the Pharisees' rules of righteousness. They disregarded the Law in one way or another. A "good" Jew wouldn't associate with them because "you're known by the company you keep." Also, contact with such people would contaminate the good people and make them unable to participate in religious activities. The Pharisees would have been glad for these sinners to repent and straighten up their lives. But until they did, the Pharisees really wanted nothing to do with them.

Jesus, however, seems to enjoy their company. He eats with them. In that culture, eating with someone showed a close relationship. It meant committing yourself in friendship to the person you ate with. Sharing a meal was an intimate social contact that created a bond between the people eating together. For religious Jews, eating with a person implied religious acceptance of that person. So Jesus' eating with these "sinners" was a sign of his accepting them and forgiving their sins. Even more than a sign, his meal sharing was an act of acceptance and forgiveness.

And that was what the scribes and Pharisees had trouble with. They believed that God's kingdom would come *after* Israel repented and people got their lives straightened out. When the people (or at least most of them) obeyed the law, then the kingdom could come. Jesus was saying, and acting out, the reality that God's kingdom would come to sinful Israel by God's free and gracious initiative. Jesus' ministry was the opening event of this move of God's. Jesus demonstrates that God's kingdom comes by divine grace and initiative and doesn't wait for a program of religious reform of Israel. He knows the best way to demonstrate this is to go to well-known sinners and welcome them to divine favor (Larry Hurtado, *Mark. A Good News Commentary*). Like healing and driving out demons, like teaching with authority, Jesus' table fellowship with all kinds of people was a demonstration of the kingdom's presence and power. And like those other signs, his inclusion of outcasts called for a response: "repent and believe," "follow me."

The Pharisees saw their table as a miniature temple, so they wouldn't welcome and eat with anyone there who was not pure in their view. And, they thought that if Jesus were a true rabbi and truly righteous that he too would avoid social contact with such people. But Jesus is right in the middle of them, eating with them and accepting them.

So some scribes who were Pharisees ask Jesus' disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" The disciples may have been wondering that themselves. But Jesus overhears the conversation and replies, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, sick people do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. I'm not here for those who have it all together and have no need for forgiveness. I'm here for the ones who are desperate and know their need."

Like a doctor, Jesus sees the pain and need of people and seeks to treat it. He's not out to condemn us, but to heal us, to forgive and renew us.

This scene in the Gospels captures the gospel of grace. Brennan Manning, in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, describes it. His comments on it are so good I want to read them to you:

Here is revelation as bright as the evening star: Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, hookers, addicts, IRS agents, AIDS victims, and ... used car salesmen. Jesus not only talks with these people but dines with them—fully aware that his table fellowship with sinners will raise the eyebrows of religious bureaucrats who hold up the robes and insignia of their authority to justify their condemnation of the truth and their rejection of the gospel of grace.

...Jesus, who forgave the sins of the paralytic (thereby claiming divine power), proclaims that he has invited sinners and not the self-righteous to his table. ...

In effect, Jesus says that the Kingdom of his Father is not a subdivision for the self-righteous nor for those who feel they possess the state secret of their salvation. The Kingdom is not an exclusive, well-trimmed suburb with snobbish rules about who can live there. No, it is for a larger, homelier, less self-conscious caste of people who understand they are sinners because they have experienced ... moral struggle.

Manning then reminds us that the church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners (19-21).

This scene in Mark also is part of a series of controversies Jesus has with the religious authorities. They've already questioned Jesus' authority to forgive sins (2:1-12). Jesus later deals with a question about why his disciples didn't fast like the disciples of the Pharisees and John the Baptist (2:18-22). Pharisees will challenge Jesus concerning his Sabbath observance and healing on the Sabbath (2:23-3:6). This series of challenges ends with the Pharisees beginning to plot how to kill Jesus. Jesus is rejected for showing grace and compassion to rejects, for partying with outcasts. At another point in the Gospels, Jesus is called a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). And that wasn't a compliment, it was condemnation of Jesus' attitude and behavior. But Jesus gladly accepted that title, because it's who he is. Jesus is a friend of sinners.

A man named John Dickson tells about his introduction to Christian faith and life. He says his conversion was the result of God working through a person who was willing to embody the mission of the “friend of sinners.” John Dickson lives in Australia. When he was growing up there was a once-a-week Scripture lesson in many state high schools. One of the Scripture teachers, named Glenda, had the courage to invite John’s entire class to her home for discussions about God. They probably would have ignored the invitation, except she added, “I’ll be making hamburgers, milkshakes, and scones.” He and his friends were all skeptics. And they were amazed that this woman would open her home—and kitchen—to them. Some of the guys in his class were among the worst “sinners” in the school. One was a drug use and seller. One was a class clown and bully. One was a petty thief with a string of breaking-and-entering charges on his record.

John says he couldn’t figure Glenda out. She was wealthy and intelligent. She had an exciting life married to a leading Australian businessman. What was she thinking inviting these guys for a meal and discussion? She was never pushy or preachy, but completely relaxed and generous. When her VCR went missing one day, she made almost nothing of it, even though she suspected—with good reason—that someone from the group took it. Her open, flexible, generous attitude toward those “sinners” was the doorway into a life of faith for John. As they ate and drank and talked, he realized this was not just a missionary ploy on her part. She truly cared for them and treated them like friends or sons. As a result, over the course of the next year, she introduced several of the people in the class to the ultimate friends of sinners, Jesus

(www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/october/3100410.html).

Jesus calls and welcomes us like he did Levi and his friends, like he did John Dickson and his friends. He calls us to join him in inviting and welcoming, accepting and offering forgiveness to all kinds of people. Those who are down and out and those who are up and out. Losers and rejects. Sophisticated and refined. The good, the bad, and the ugly. All of us are chosen by Jesus, invited by him, welcomed, accepted and forgiven by him. All we have to do is show up at his party.

What if we really believed that? What could the church be? What kind of influence would we have on the world around us if we lived in that kind of humility? Knowing that in God's eyes we're all ragamuffins who need grace and help and pity. Extending to all the people around us the love and grace we've received from Jesus. And doing it with the joy of a great feast and celebration.

One more thing about this: Jesus offers not only acceptance, but also forgiveness and transformation. To accept Jesus' invitation, to come to him, to eat with him, and know we're accepted by him changes us. It changed Levi. In the Gospel of Matthew, when we read this story, the tax collector's name is Matthew rather than Levi. Some think that Levi was the man's given name and Matthew was the nickname Jesus gave him. Matthew means "gift of God." Levi Matthew never forgot the gift God gave him in his relationship with Jesus. And I don't think he ever forgot that God made him into a gift to help others know the love and grace, the acceptance and forgiveness, the new life offered in Jesus.