

*Where we start . . .*

When have you been to an event, a meeting, or a party and felt like you didn't really belong? What gave rise to that feeling?

What would have turned things around for you? What would have made you feel like you "fit"?

*What we read . . .*

If you had been living in Palestine during the time Jesus walked the streets, do you think you would have approached Him? Why or why not? (How might that be related to the idea of "fit" mentioned earlier?)

Let's take a look at those who did, in fact, feel like they "fit" around Jesus. Read Mark 2:13-17.

What do you think it meant to Levi for Jesus to welcome his companionship? What would it have meant for those who already were part of Jesus' entourage?

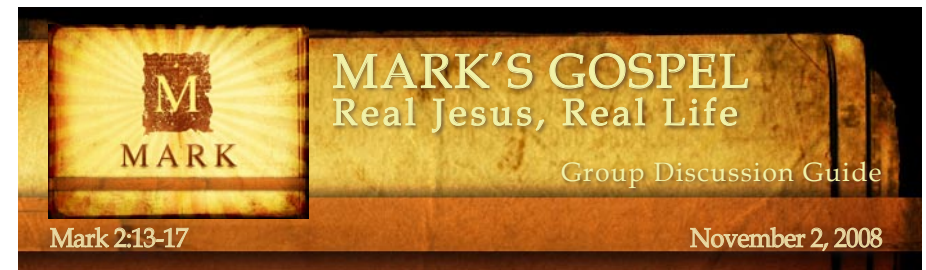
When Jesus settled in for a social time at Levi's house, who was there? Why were they there?

Some seemed troubled by Jesus' associations. Why were they troubled? What bothered them about those He hung out with?

*Why this matters . . .*

What keeps you hanging back from pressing in to really get to know Jesus on a personal level?

What do you need to see about Jesus, pictured here, to free you up to draw near to Him?



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*Diving in . . .*

Sometimes, being impressed with someone can generate the wrong response—at least the wrong response with regard to how the Father intends us to respond to being impressed with His Son, Jesus. As we have seen in Mark, Jesus was amazing; He said and did things that staggered people. He was massively impressive. But rather than causing people to pull away from Him as we sometimes do when we are in awe of someone, Jesus’ “awesome” character and personality ended up drawing people. And as we look at *who* Jesus ended up drawing to Himself, we will gain some profound insight into why we should not stand off but draw near to Him ourselves.

*Discussing . . .*

We have only a few verses to explore this week, but the “punch line” (where Jesus summarizes for us something of what He is up to) carries profound insight. And we really want our people to “get” what Jesus is saying—not just to hear it as some cliché and overlooked “religious saying.”

Begin your discussion by exploring what it feels like to not “fit” in a group or at an event. Most people have some sense of that; we don’t all fit equally well in all settings. Help your people explore what it is that gives rise to that feeling that we just don’t belong . . . and what it takes to turn that around and help them feel that they *do* belong. Those feelings can serve as a doorway in to what Mark tells us next about Jesus and His ministry.

As you turn to read Mark 2:13-17, a little background information will be helpful. First, let’s talk a bit about tax collectors.

In Jesus’ day, there were a variety of servants of Rome who collected tax. Some were Romans, appointed by Rome, who carried out tax policy on all, Roman citizens and conquered residents alike. But there were some tax collectors who were gleaned from the ranks of those conquered and under Roman rule. Such was the tax collector mentioned in this passage (as indicated by the language used by Mark). This kind of tax collector would have been a “national” of the subjugated territory (in this case a Jew) who had entered a competitive bid for collecting certain kinds of taxes for Rome in the area in which he lived. For example, these taxes might have been collected at toll booths along roads where something akin to a “passage tax” would have been collected; or the collector might have had a booth near the sea and collected a tax for fish caught. The tax collector made his living by paying to Rome what he had to in order to make good on his bid and charging whatever he could over that (to his own people!) in order to make his living. Needless to say, tax collectors were not popular. According to Jewish customs in the time of Jesus, tax collectors as a class were considered a special and lowly class of “sinners,” they were barred from testifying in any legal hearing as

they were held to be untrustworthy, and it was held to be lawful and right to lie to tax collectors!

For Jesus to invite Levi, a tax collector, to join His growing entourage was, undoubtedly a shock. Not only would it have shocked the “professional religionists” of the day (who would have considered it unhealthy and spiritual contaminating to associate with a tax collector), but it likely raised some eyebrows in Jesus’ own growing circle of friends. It is highly unlikely that Simon or James or others who had begun following Jesus in those early days would have willingly associated with a tax collector . . . until now, that is!

Mark tells us that not only did Jesus invite Levi to join His band, but He ended up having something of a party at Levi’s house. It is important to note that this would have meant a good deal more to those in Jesus’ day than it does for most people today. To take a meal with someone was to build a bond; sharing a meal was a sign of camaraderie, it wasn’t simply a “nicety.” That’s what prompts the question of the scribes.

As we have noted earlier, the scribes were professional students of the Law. They devoted themselves to the study and the transcription of the Old Testament. These particular scribes were of the “Pharisee” party. The Pharisees were one “flavor” of religious leader in Jesus’ day. They would have been the religious and social conservatives; they sought to hold to all the traditions of the people, sought to preserve Jewish heritage and culture, sought to live by the strictest of standards to not risk violating the Law. And they wouldn’t have taken to fraternizing with Roman sympathizers like tax collectors!

Don’t read their question as to argumentative; for them, it was a legitimate query. They couldn’t comprehend how this Jesus—who apparently was proclaiming God’s kingdom—could hang out with those they were convinced had no part in God’s kingdom! (Tax collectors being a particularly heinous sub-group of sinners, as is reflected in their question.) It was truly puzzling. And Jesus freely answered their question without hesitation and without rebuke.

What is the point that Jesus stresses in His reply? Simply put, He is hanging out with those He came for. And that is a remarkable and freeing assertion. Don’t read over it too quickly; let His words really grip you. He says it is the sick (the expression is, literally, those for whom life is “going badly”) who need help; He doesn’t have in view the well (literally, the “strong”). And to clarify, He says that He is not simply thinking in terms of the physically well or physically sick; He has specifically come for those who are sinful. You don’t need to resolve the question (at least from this text) as to whether all men are sinful or not (although the Scriptures surely teach that elsewhere). All you need to note is that those who see themselves as sick, needy, broken, desperate . . . those who recognize they have offended God, don’t have their lives together, are facing moral difficulties and have made bad choices in life . . . those are the kind of people Jesus is inviting into life with Himself.

What does this mean for us? So many people hang back from intimacy with Jesus because they feel they don’t measure up, they don’t live right enough, they aren’t good enough, they don’t “fit” in His kingdom. But Jesus doesn’t enter into relationship with people because they measure up! He enters into relationship with people, with us, because of our great need. We all need to see that, because at different times and for different reasons we all feel that we don’t “fit” with Jesus. But it’s not true. Because of His love and grace, we fit with Him . . . always.