

Jesus Eats with Sinner: Mark 2:13-17
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This morning we are back to the Gospel of Mark. It was great to have Bruce Ware preach here last week. I hope you were here to experience that sermon, and I hope you'll listen to it again and encourage others to listen to it. What a great topic for us to consider: beholding the God of self-sufficient fullness. God does not need us. We need Him. And we need to be reminded of that again and again. God has no lack. He has no needs. And therefore it would be blasphemous for us to come to Him as if we could meet His needs. God says in Psalm 50:12, "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine." Or Acts 17:24-25, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." What we need to realize is that the God of the Bible, the One true and living God, is unlike all the false gods who are worshipped. In all the cults and all false religions, we must work for god. We have to meet his needs. We have to shore up his deficiencies. And then, maybe, he will reward us. But that's not the God of the Bible. Isaiah 54:4 says, "From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him." This is the all-sufficient and mighty and gracious God of Scripture. What are we to do? We wait for Him. We rest in Him. We trust in Him. We put our hope in Him. And He acts! He does the work.

And this ties in with our passage for this morning in Mark 2:13-17 because Jesus here makes the statement, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." You see, the God of self-sufficient fullness is infinitely offended by those who think they do not need His help. For those who think they do not need a physician, for those who think they are not sick, for those who think they are righteous, this kind of attitude is like putting ourselves in the place of God. This kind of attitude is like saying to God, "I don't need you. I'm self-sufficient. I don't your help, or anyone else's." Do you see the arrogance in this, and how it turns everything upside down? God is self-sufficient. And out of the delight He has within the Trinity, and the goodness and grace of His character, He acts for those who wait for Him. And thus He gets all the glory. But when we pretend that we are self-sufficient and righteous and do not need help, we are seeking to rob God of His glory and wanting to take that glory for ourselves. We have to

get this right. As we relate to God, we are not the givers. We are the receivers. God is the giver, and the giver gets the glory. And as we humble ourselves before Him and wait on Him, then we will receive the good that He gives, namely, Himself. We come to Him needy and helpless, and He acts on our behalf. I pray that God will impress this on our hearts as we study this passage.

The scandal in this passage is that Jesus eats with sinners. I love how Jesus was always ruffling feathers. He was always causing a stir. He was always drawing a very polarized crowd—some who were in awe of Him and wanted to be healed by Him and be with Him, and others who hated Him so intensely that they wanted Him dead. There's nobody like this man. No one who has ever walked the face of the earth compares with Jesus. He is entirely unique. He is the God-Man. Let's stand in awe of Him as we study these verses.

Mark 2:13-17

In verses 1-12 of this chapter, which we looked at two weeks ago, Jesus demonstrates His authority to forgive sins. The question that is answered in our text for this morning is, Whose sins does He forgive? Jesus shocked everyone with His statement in verse 5, "Son, your sins are forgiven." The scribes were appalled at this. And now Jesus makes His ministry all the more appalling in their eyes by calling a tax collector to be one of His disciples and then going to eat with tax collectors and sinners. And in such a controversial and clear way He makes the point loud and clear: I did not come to uphold the legalistic religion of the scribes. I did not come to make the self-righteous feel good about themselves. Instead, I came to oppose that mindset at its very core. I came to confront the sinful assumption of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness. I'm not going to give my glory to anyone else. Instead, I'm going to help those who know they are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

So in the flow of these two passages, we have seen in verses 1-12 that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. And now we learn in verses 13-17 that He forgives the sins of sinners. That is, those who recognize themselves to be sinners.

There are four pieces to this narrative in verses 13-17. First of all, Jesus calls Levi in verses 13-14. Second, Jesus eats at Levi's house in verse 15. Third, the scribes oppose Jesus in verse 16. And finally, we hear Jesus' response in verse 17.

Jesus Calls Levi (verses 13-14)

Verse 13 gives us another glimpse into a typical day in the life of Jesus. He was still in Capernaum, which is on the Sea of Galilee. But rather than being in the house, where He was in the last story, He is now out beside the sea. The crowd is coming out

to Him. And what is He doing? He is teaching. This was the focus of His ministry. Even though the crowds were so enthralled by Jesus' healing powers, Jesus' own focus was teaching and preaching. And that's what we see Him doing here.

Then verse 14 records the calling of Levi. Back in 1:16-20 we read of the calling of the four disciples: Simon and Andrew, who were brothers, and James and John, who were brothers, and all four of them fishermen. There are some similarities between these two accounts, and also a striking difference. Both take place beside the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum. It's quite possible, in fact, that the fishermen knew who Levi was. They all worked in the same area.

These accounts are also similar in that they show Jesus' effectual call. Back in 1:17-18, Jesus said to Simon and Andrew, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him." The same thing happens with James and John. Jesus calls, and they leave everything and follow. Levi does the same. In 2:14 Jesus says simply, "Follow me." And then the astounding thing is that Levi rose and followed him. This is the effective call of Jesus. This is the authority with which Jesus spoke.

The dramatic difference between these two accounts is that Levi is not a fisherman, but a tax collector. This would have seemed absolutely ludicrous to those who saw what was happening. I would love to know what Simon and Andrew and James and John thought of this. They might have been assuming that any other disciples Jesus might call would be pretty much like them. Maybe not fishermen, necessarily. Maybe they would come from other walks of life. But they should at least be decent upright citizens. Well Jesus is constantly breaking the mold and acting contrary to expectations. And here He does so in such a radical way.

You have to understand that tax collectors were despised by society. They were crooks. They were greedy. They were liars, extortionists, cheats. They didn't care about anyone else, only their own wealth. Here's how the tax collecting industry worked. It would be determined what amount of taxes should be gathered from a particular area, and then individuals would bid for that post. They were required to deliver the designated amount to the authorities, but then whatever else they could get out of the people they could keep for themselves. So you can see how it was a very shady business. The tax collectors were experts at cheating and lying and manipulating. And they would have had their thugs to enforce payment. It would have been like the bully who takes your milk money everyday, only on a much broader scale. The people were at the mercy of these guys. Whatever the tax

collectors felt like they could squeeze out of the people, they would. And they became very wealthy doing so.

Capernaum was a key spot for tax collectors because of the Sea of Galilee and the taxes they could enforce on the fishing business as well as the customs taxes they could gather from those who were travelling through the area. Capernaum is located on the northern side of the Sea of Galilee, and it was a border town between the area controlled by the tetrarch Antipas and the area controlled by the tetrarch Philip. And it was on a major thoroughfare running through the region, the Via Maris, which ran from the Mediterranean Sea all the way to Damascus. And anyone going through would be taxed on the goods that they were carrying. Tax collecting was big business in Capernaum.

What made Levi all the more loathsome was the fact that he was a Jew working for the Romans. He had sold his soul to the political enemy, all for material gain. He was a man who cared for nothing but money. He would have been shunned by his fellow Jews, not allowed in the synagogue because tax collectors were considered ceremonially unclean. He would not be allowed to testify in court because tax collectors were considered untrustworthy. In many ways, he was an outcast of society, although a very wealthy outcast of society. James Edwards, in his commentary on Mark, writes, “It may be that contact with Levi was actually more offensive than contact with a leper since a leper’s condition was not chosen whereas a tax collector’s was.”¹ So when you think of the tax collectors in the Bible, and how they were viewed by those around them, you can think of folks like Bernie Madoff and his Ponzi scheme which defrauded his clients of billions of dollars. The tax collectors of Jesus’ day stole money from their clients through deceit and trickery. But there was nothing the people could do about it.

This is why it would have been so shocking to see Jesus walk up to the tax booth and say to Levi, “Follow me.” People would have said, But Jesus don’t you know who he is? Don’t you know what he does? He can’t be one of your disciples! He’s unclean. He’s a liar and a cheat. But Jesus says, I’m going to make him one of my own. I’m going to change him. I’m going to use him to spread the Good News about me. Levi is also known as Matthew, and he is the one who wrote the Gospel of Matthew. What an awesome picture of the powerful change that Jesus can work in a person’s life. And I think Matthew wanted to highlight that in Matthew 10 where he lists the twelve apostles and refers to himself not simply as Matthew, but Matthew the tax collector. Matthew Henry says of this, “It is good for those who are

¹ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), page 83.

advanced to honour with Christ, to look *unto the rock whence they were hewn*; often to remember what they were before Christ called them, that thereby they may be kept humble, and divine grace may be the more glorified.”²

Jesus delights in this. He finds a special delight in doing the unexpected, and calling those who seem most unlikely to be His followers. And in this way divine grace is magnified. This should be an encouragement to us in at least two ways. First of all, no matter what your background is, no matter how badly you have messed up your life, Jesus can save you. Nobody is too sinful for Jesus to save.

And secondly, this should motivate us to reach out to those people who, in our minds, might seem to be the most unlikely followers of Jesus. That guy in your workplace who is rude and crass, the neighbor who seems like he’s interested in nothing but football, the college student who has an objection to everything the Bible says, the family member who scoffs at your commitment to Christ. We can too easily let those things deter us. We think, Oh, that person is closed to the Gospel. But what does Jesus do? He goes after those people. He has a special interest in those very individuals. He loves to hang out with tax collectors and sinners. His grace is magnified in the salvation of such individuals.

Jesus Eats at Levi’s House (verse 15)

In the next scene we see Jesus at Levi’s house. They are reclining at table enjoying a great feast (as Luke adds in the parallel passage in Luke 5). Levi is apparently celebrating the fact that Jesus has chosen him to be one of His disciples, and he is hosing this party in honor of Jesus. And look who he invited. All his friends. And his friends are, of course, other tax collectors. For those who were appalled at the fact that Jesus called Levi to follow Him, this is the only way the situation could possibly become any more appalling. Jesus goes to eat with these folks. The tax collectors, and others who fit into the broader category of sinners. This term, sinners, referred to those who were not concerned with the scribal tradition like the Pharisees were. There was the religious elite who followed all the food laws and customs, and then there were the “sinners” who did not. And the Pharisees looked down on these sinners. They thought them to be inferior. And they certainly would not eat with them, because they were unclean.

But this is exactly where Jesus wants to be. He wants to be with the tax collectors and sinners, these people who were always

²Henry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody : Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Mt 10:1

shunned by the religious leaders of their day. Now, surprisingly, Jesus and His followers come right into Levi's house and recline at his table and enjoy a meal with him and his friends. And so we have this scene that is so beautiful and poignant, and yet also highly offensive. It depends, of course, on how one looks at it. Through a Gospel lens we see the beauty of Jesus coming to seek and to save the lost. He came to call sinners. But through a legalistic and self-righteous lens, this is scandalous. How could Jesus associate with these people?

One other thing we should see here is the profound way that Jesus is identifying with sinners. To share a meal together is a sign of fellowship and friendship. And Jesus is showing that He is a friend of sinners. The wording in the middle of verse 15 puts the emphasis on Jesus. Even though it is Levi's house and Levi is technically the host of this banquet, it is a meal that centers around Jesus. It says, "many tax collectors and sinners were reclining *with Jesus* and his disciples." What we're seeing here is the Messiah, the Lamb of God, inviting sinners to eat with Him. In this way the meal at Levi's house points to a much greater banquet that will take place at the end of the age, at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Jesus dwelling with sinners. Jesus eating with sinners. This is the wonder of the Gospel, that Christ has made a way for this to be possible. Sinners like you and me who deserve nothing but God's wrath, can enter into His presence and dwell with Him and enjoy Him forever because of Christ's sacrificial death.

The Scribes Oppose Jesus (verse 16)

In verse 16 the scribes oppose Jesus. They question Him again, like they did in the last section. They are skeptical and condemning and judgmental. In the parallel passage in Luke 5 it says that they *grumbled* at the disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners." Jesus was breaking all of their rules. He was not abiding by their system of legalistic religion, and they hated Him for it.

What the scribes are demonstrating here is a prideful and self-righteous separation. Let's think carefully about this because there is a biblical mandate for separation, and yet also a condemnation of this kind of separation. So in what ways are we to be separate, and in what ways is separation sinful?

The most helpful thing I've seen so far in answering that question is to put together the fact that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners and the statement in Hebrews 7:26 that Jesus, our high priest, is "holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." When we put those things side by side I think we can learn something about how we, as redeemed sinners, should and should not be separate from unbelievers. On

the one hand, we should eat with unbelievers and love them and tell them about our Savior. We must not shun people just because they have not yet had their eyes opened to the glory of Christ. On the other hand, though, we must remain distinct from unbelievers in that we are pursuing holiness and Christ-likeness in our lives. In other words, our love for unbelievers and our desire to be with them must not lead to moral compromise. Friendship with the world is enmity with God (James 4:4). This is what we see in Jesus' life, and He is to be our example in this. Jesus being separated from sinners is just another way of saying that He is holy. And when we observe His earthly life and ministry we realize that true holiness does not imply the kind of legalistic separation that the Pharisees enforced.

Now, it may be relatively easy to grasp that principle, that we are to love unbelievers and reach out to them and yet not emulate their worldly behavior. It's a great deal more difficult to know how this principle should play out in the particular situations of our lives. This will require wisdom and discernment and godly counsel. In many ways, we need to be more proactive in reaching out to unbelievers and spending time with them and developing relationships that will communicate the Gospel to those who are lost. Like Jesus, we need to go and hang out with those whom the religious elite would scoff at.

But as I say that I'm also aware of the grave danger of letting worldly friends suck you into a worldly lifestyle. Listen to what J. C. Ryle says in his book on Holiness. He writes, "Nothing perhaps affects man's character more than the company he keeps. We catch the ways and tone of those we live and talk with, and unhappily get harm far more easily than good. Disease is infectious, but health is not. Now if a professing Christian deliberately chooses to be intimate with those who are not friends of God and who cling to the world, his soul is sure to take harm. It is hard enough to serve Christ under any circumstances in such a world as this. But it is doubly hard to do it if we are friends of the thoughtless and ungodly. Mistakes in friendship or marriage-engagements are the whole reason why some have entirely ceased to grow. . . . Let us seek friends that will stir us up about our prayers, our Bible-reading, and our employment of time—about our souls, our salvation, and a world to come."³

Somehow we need to hold these things in balance. We need a strong support network of other believers around us who are going to hold us accountable and spur us on to love and good deeds. We will need to cut off certain relationships with unbelievers that are pulling us down the wrong path. But then we

³ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001 [originally published 1877]), page 112.

must also be reaching out to unbelievers to communicate the love of Christ, rather than looking down our noses at “those sinners.”

One other observation that is helpful in answering this question is to notice the motivation and the intended result of the scribes’ actions. Their separation was motivated by prideful self-righteousness and the intended result was their own glory. We’re better than those people. We would never go to the house of a tax collector. We would never eat the things they eat. We’re going to be entirely separate from them in order to show how great we are and how despicable they are. The kind of separation that the Bible commands of us is entirely different. It has a different motivation and a different result. The motivation should be the pursuit of holiness. Not an “I’m better than you” attitude, but rather “I want more of Christ.” And the result, then, is not my glory but God’s glory. So we can use these things to check our motives when we are choosing to separate ourselves from certain individuals. Am I being like a Pharisee, wanting to glorify myself by showing that I’m morally superior? Oh, I would never watch a movie like that! I would never listen to that kind of music! I would never go to a place like that! Or is my separation motivated by the pursuit of holiness and intended to glorify God? If this is the case then we’ll sound very different in our explanations for why or why not we do certain things. Rather than coming across in a demeaning tone, we’ll speak humbly and say something like, “You know, there’s nothing more precious to me than my relationship with Christ. And I know that I’m prone to wander. I know how easily I’m tempted. And I don’t think that that movie, or music, or activity, or whatever it is, is going to help me along in my relationship with Christ.”

Let’s learn from the negative example of these scribes. Let’s look in the mirror and see the Pharisee that resides in each one of us. And let’s wage war against the self-righteousness that we may not want to even acknowledge is there. I spent some time thinking about some of the subtle ways that self-righteousness surfaces in my own life, and I’ll share them with you. Maybe you’ll be able to identify, and hopefully this will encourage you to look into your own heart as well and battle against self-righteous attitudes. One way that self-righteousness shows itself is in bitterness. If I’m feeling bitter toward someone for something they said or did, the assumption is that I would never do such a thing. I’m better than that. I’m morally superior to that person who hurt me. And, of course, those bitter feelings that are tied together with prideful self-righteousness, will bring about sinful division and separation.

I also realize that self-righteousness rears its ugly head in response to correction or advice or admonishment. I

especially think of conversations with my dear wife when she brings a gentle rebuke or even just a bit of helpful advice. I can find myself thinking, she doesn't know what she's talking about. I know what I'm doing. I don't need her counsel, or anyone else's for that matter. I don't need anyone's help. What a wicked attitude to have. And that attitude creates separation in a relationship. In a marriage, in a friendship, between parents and children, etc. When we are unwilling to receive correction or advice, we set up a wall around ourselves that cuts us off from those who care about us most.

So whether it's bitterness toward someone, or if it's the reluctance to receive correction, these manifestations of self-righteousness create ungodly separation between people.

Jesus' Response (verse 17)

Finally, let's look at Jesus' response in verse 17. The scribes oppose what Jesus is doing, and Jesus answers them by saying, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Jesus first gives an analogy—an analogy that the scribes would have understood and agreed with. It's only natural for a doctor to go to those who are sick. And, likewise, it's only natural for Jesus, the Physician, to gravitate toward those who are spiritually sick. And the scribes may have resonated with that point. They may have thought, "It's true, we don't need any help. Those tax collectors and sinners do need a lot of help." But it was that very attitude that Jesus was confronting with these words. He says, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." The parallel account in Luke 5 adds "to repentance." "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). We think back to Mark 1:14-15, where Jesus was preaching, "repent and believe in the gospel." What He's saying now is, I have come to bring this message not to the righteous, but to sinners.

On the surface it may have sounded like Jesus was accepting the scribes' assessment of who was righteous and who was a sinner. The scribes would have immediately put themselves in the category of "the righteous." But in reality Jesus was confronting the very root of the scribes' problem. They *thought* they were righteous, which is a sin far more dangerous than the ugliest outward sins. It's so dangerous because the deception of self-righteousness keeps a person from receiving any help. That's where these scribes found themselves, and that may be where you are this morning if you are unwilling to acknowledge your desperate need for Christ.

Think about Jesus' analogy of the physician. Picture yourself in a doctor's office, and the doctor comes in and says, I'm

very sorry, but you have cancer in your body that is spreading rapidly and is life-threatening. There is a cure, but it will require radical intervention. We need to act immediately. And you say, Oh doctor you must be mistaken. I feel great. I'm having the time of my life. I'm not in any pain at all. You must have your records mixed up. There's nothing wrong with me. The doctor insists that the records have not been mixed up. You are, indeed, in a very serious condition and your life is in jeopardy. But you refuse to take his advice. You are convinced that there is nothing wrong with you.

The physician cannot help those who think they are well. The physician can only help those who know they are sick. And that is why self-righteousness is such a dangerous and damning sin, because it keeps us from seeking the help we so desperately need. To quote J. C. Ryle again, he has a discussion of what it costs to be a true Christian. And the first thing he says is, "it will cost him his self-righteousness. He must cast away all pride and high thoughts, and conceit of his own goodness. He must be content to go to heaven as a poor sinner saved only by free grace, and owing all to the merit and righteousness of another."⁴ If you are here this morning as someone who is still clinging to the illusion that you are righteous, I plead with you to open your eyes and realize that you are not well, but sick. You are not righteous, but a sinner. And our only hope as sinners is to look to our Savior Jesus Christ who eats with sinners, and died for sinners. And for those who recognize their need for Him, He takes our sin upon Himself and He covers us in His righteousness. That's the Gospel.

The analogy between the mere human physician and the Great Physician does break down at a crucial point, because whereas the human physician can do nothing for the person who is unwilling to receive help, the Great Physician can change that unwillingness into willingness. That's the beauty of God's sovereign grace. He will not help those who think they need no help. But He will work to regenerate hearts so that self-righteous individuals realize that they do need help. The Apostle Paul is a profound example of this. He writes in Philippians 3, "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." But God worked in such a miraculous way in his heart that he goes on to say, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." In other words, the "righteousness" that he thought was such gain, he now understands to be loss. All that matters is Christ. I pray that right now God will be working in

⁴ *Holiness*, page 83.

hearts to make us see our need for Him. We are not well, but sick. We are not righteous, but sinners. So rather than looking to ourselves, let's look to Christ. He is our only hope.