

Mark 2:13-17, Jesus Calls Sinners to Himself

"13 He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 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.

15 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. 16 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?' 17 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.'"

I. Jesus Calls a Notorious Sinner - In our last lesson, we saw that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. In this lesson we will see that Jesus creates a scandal by consorting with the worst sorts of sinners in order to bring them the good news that no one is beyond God's power to save.

1. The Setting of the Call of Levi -

a. The Increase of Adoration and Opposition - Jesus is at the Sea of Galilee, the scene of the calling of his first four disciples (Mark 1:16-20). At that time, only the four disciples and some hired hands are noticed. Now Jesus must navigate a large crowd on the shore to seek those whom the Father has given him. In the next chapter Jesus will instruct the disciples to ready a boat in case the thronging crowd threatens to crush him (Mark 3:7-12). Then, in the fourth chapter, Jesus will actually have to get in the boat and drop anchor near the shore in order to preach (Mark 4:1). This progression effectively portrays the increasing interest in Jesus, which is paralleled by the increasing opposition of the political and religious authorities.

b. A Place of Redemption - The sea is in Jewish memory a place of redemption. Mountains, rivers, deserts, and the sea all carry associations from redemptive history. The sea is a symbol of destructive and chaotic forces which threaten human existence. Only the power of the Lord keeps it at bay (Job 38:8; Psa. 89:9). He opened the sea to let his people pass through on dry land, and let it wash over and destroy the armies of Pharaoh. On the shore, the people of Israel were awestruck by the mighty deliverance of the Lord: "Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses." (Exo. 14:31). And they rejoiced and sang a new song:

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
The Lord is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him." (Exo. 15:1b-2).

Surely this same God can save a tax collector!

2. Levi the Son of Alphaeus -

a. Levi as Matthew -

Although there is no "Levi" mentioned in any list of the twelve disciples, this figure has traditionally been associated with the apostle Matthew. It would not be unusual for a Jewish male to go by more than one name in first-century Syria, and the similarities between this event and the calling of Simon, Andrew, John, and James (Mark 1:16-20) suggest it. Also this story seems to be a

parallel of Matthew 9:9, which also follows the healing of the paralytic, and in which the tax collector is called “Matthew”.

Perhaps Mark uses his lesser-known name “Levi” in order to emphasize the scandalous nature of his sin. Being a tax collector, as we shall see, was thought to be bad enough. If Matthew was born a Levite, he would be considered many times worse. A Levite is supposed to be dedicated to God to serve in the temple. That one born into the priestly tribe had become a tax collector was unthinkable.

B. Son of Alphaeus - The lists of the twelve disciples in all three synoptic gospels include a man named “James the son of Alphaeus”. Some early scribes evidently confused James and Levi, as some early manuscripts substitute “James” for “Levi” in Mark 2:14. “Alphaeus” does not appear to be a common name at the time, so that weighs against there being two men with different fathers with that name. On the other hand, if James and Matthew (Levi) were brothers, why are they not listed together in the lists of the twelve, as are Simon (Peter) and Andrew, and John and James (Matt. 10:2-4; Luke 6:14-16)? In Mark’s list, however (3:16-19), Simon and Andrew are not together, nor are they mentioned as brothers. Perhaps such details are not as important to Mark.

3. How Tax Collectors Were Regarded - The provincial land and poll taxes were collected yearly by councils of Jewish leaders⁽¹⁾ to deliver directly to Rome. Tax collectors (*telōnēs*), on the other hand, were positions farmed out by local governments to the highest bidder. They were essentially customs officials, collecting taxes on goods transported across the borders of the various provinces and tributaries.

Matthew manned a toll booth by the sea in Capernaum, which was near the border of Galilee and Auranitis. He would have been in a position to monitor traffic around and across the sea, and collect duties on goods transported into Galilee, which was governed by Herod Antipas. Tax collectors were despised for several reasons:

a. Morally Bankrupt - Tax collectors were allowed to charge whatever they could and keep whatever they collected above the actual tax. They were seen as greedy, corrupt officials who cheated people by charging more than was reasonable.

b. Ritually Unclean - Tax collectors came into direct contact with Gentiles on a regular basis. Gentiles were ignorant of the purity laws of Moses. Gentiles were constantly eating and touching unclean things, and physical contact, or in some cases even proximity with Gentiles would make a Jew also unclean. Additionally, many Gentile coins were engraven with idolatrous images of their gods and goddesses. To handle them would also defile an observant Jew.⁽²⁾

c. Traitors - Tax collectors took money from their own people and gave it to their oppressors, who used it in part to maintain their power. Thus, tax collectors were seen by many Jews as traitors.

4. The Call and Response - As with the calling of the two sets of brothers (1:16-20), Jesus demonstrates the authority of God in calling and exciting a response from men. It is patterned on the call of God to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-4).

a. No Looking Back - “...it was a harder thing for Levi to rise up and follow Christ than it was for Peter and his comrades. Their occupation as fisherman was one to which they could easily return--as indeed they did return after the Resurrection. But there was no return to his toll-booth for Levi. When he left it, he left it altogether ... From a publican to an apostle--what cannot grace do? It can lay hold of us in our weakness and sin, set us among princes, and make us inherit a throne of glory.”⁽³⁾

b. Effectual Calling - “Without a divine call no one can be saved. We are all so sunk in sin, and so wedded to the world, that we should never turn to God and seek salvation unless he first called us by his grace. God must speak to our hearts by his Spirit before we ever speak to him ... He often chooses those who seem most unlikely to do his will, and furthest off from his kingdom. He draws them to himself with almighty power, breaks the chains of old habits and customs, and makes them new creatures.”⁽⁴⁾

II. Jesus Feasts with Sinners

1. The House - Although the language here is ambiguous, the parallel passage in Luke 5:29 makes clear that the house is Levi's. Although it may seem strange to bid someone to "follow me" to their own house, that is the pattern established in 1:16-20, 29, where Jesus stays at the home of Simon and Andrew.

2. Tax Collectors and Sinners - "The word *sinner* (*hamartōlos*) had a double significance. It did mean a man who broke the moral law; but it also meant a man who did not observe scribal law ... The man who was guilty of theft and murder and the man who did not wash his hands the required number of times and in the required way before he ate were both sinners. These guests of Matthew no doubt included many who had broken the moral law and played fast and loose with life; but no doubt they also included many whose only sin was that they did not observe the scribal rules and regulations."⁽⁵⁾

3. The Feast -

a. Luxurious Dining - The Greek word for "reclined at table" specifically refers to the practice of reclining on one's side on a divan-style couch, supporting the head with the left arm. This was a Greco-Roman custom. Jews would ordinarily sit at table, but "at solemn festival meals and when guests were being entertained in style reclining was the rule."⁽⁶⁾

The parallel passage in Luke 5:28 calls the occasion "a great feast".

b. Messianic Feast - "The expression used in Ch. 2:15, 'they reclined at table together with Jesus,' suggests that Jesus--the Messiah--and not Levi, was the host at this festive meal. When this is understood, the interest of the entire pericope centers on the significance of Messiah eating with sinners. The specific reference in verse 17 to Jesus' call of sinners to the Kingdom suggests that the basis of table-fellowship was *messianic forgiveness*, and the meal itself was an anticipation of the messianic banquet. When Jesus broke bread with the outcasts, Messiah ate with them at his table and extended to them fellowship with God ... The meal was an extension of the grace of God and an anticipation of the consummation when Messiah will sit down with sinners in the Kingdom of God."⁽⁷⁾

4. The Disciples and Many Followers -

a. Who are the "Many who followed?" -

Does the "many who followed him" refer to "his disciples" or to the "tax collectors and sinners"? "The context favors the second interpretation."⁽⁸⁾

Emphasizing the large number of tax collectors and other sinners with Jesus would have the effect of "heightening the scandal of Jesus' disreputable entourage."⁽⁹⁾

b. Staying Clean - The disciples were with Jesus at the feast. How were they able to dine with "sinners" without becoming unclean (especially concerning their own conscience)? "A divine figure who had power to remit sin need not fear the contagion of human sinfulness ... If Jesus' disciples are justified in following his example in this matter, that is simply because they live in the new situation he has introduced and partake of his messianic power. It was this that the scribes failed to see; once again their basic error in Mark's eyes was a failure to recognize the true -- messianic -- identity of him with whom they were dealing."⁽¹⁰⁾

III. Jesus Challenged by the Religious Authorities

1. Scribes of the Pharisees - Not all scribes were Pharisees. The "Pharisees" were one of many sects found in first-century Judaism, noted for their strict adherence to the law. Mark notes the affiliation of the scribes observing the feast in order to bring out the extreme contrast between the two parties: Jesus and his disciples, who disregard the religious taboos against dining with sinners, and the Pharisees, who are the strictest adherents to such laws and customs.

2. Oppo Research - Due to the lack of historical evidence of a significant Pharisee presence in Galilee, it has been suggested that these scribes were from Jerusalem, sent to spy on Jesus and his movement.⁽¹¹⁾

There is also the question of how the Pharisees witnessed the banquet. Surely they would not have been inside a house filled with tax collectors and sinners. But if they were indeed spies, they may have been observing Jesus through a window.

3. An Indirect Challenge - The scribes posed the question to the disciples. This being the first mention of Pharisees in Mark, and hence their first encounter with Jesus, they may have wished to avoid direct confrontation

until they could gather more information. The word “he” is actually a term of contempt in the Greek. It is as if they had said, “Why does this guy eat with sinners?” In the Greek, the sentence can be taken as a question or a statement, but either way the sentiment is the same.

IV. Jesus’ Statement of Purpose

1. A Proverbial Response - Jesus quoted a popular proverb, commonly found but with some variation. For example, the Greek philosopher Diogenes the Cynic said: “As a doctor must go among the sick, so a wise man must mix with fools.” Another variation is attributed to King Pausanias of Sparta, who is reported by Plutarch as saying, “It is not the custom of doctors to spend their time with the healthy, but where people are ill.”⁽¹²⁾

2. The Messianic Purpose - The language used here in Greek, “I came,” is the same as that used in 1:38: “that is why I came out”. This is a statement of purpose, and refers to the incarnation. In the first example, Jesus came “to preach” the message of the kingdom; here, he has come “to call...sinners” into the Kingdom.

“We have got nothing right in religion if we think the sense of sin should keep us back from Christ. To feel our sins and know our sickness is the beginning of real Christianity. To be aware of our corruption and abhor our own transgressions is the first symptom of spiritual health. Happy indeed are those who have found out their soul’s disease! Let them know that Christ is the very physician they require, and let them consult him without delay.”⁽¹³⁾

3. No One Righteous. No, Not One - It should not be supposed that there are those who are actually righteous and have no need of Jesus. The statement is ironic. Jesus has come to call those who see their need for him, whose eyes have been opened by the Spirit to behold the depths of their sin, and are drawn by the Father to Jesus as the only way to be justified before God. Those who focus on the sins of others will be blinded to their own.

“He whom you detest appears to you to be unworthy of the grace of Christ. Why then was Christ himself made a sacrifice and a curse, but that he might stretch out his hand to accursed sinners? Now, if we feel disgust at being associated by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper with vile men, and regard our connection with them as a sort of stain upon us, we ought immediately to descend into ourselves, and to search without flattery our own evils. Such an examination will make us willingly allow ourselves to be washed in the same fountain with the most impure, and will hinder us from rejecting the righteousness which he offers indiscriminately to all the ungodly, the life which he offers to the dead, and the salvation which he offers to the lost.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Notes

1. Green, McKnight, & Marshall, eds. Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, p. 805.
2. Marcus, Joel. Mark 1-8 [The Anchor Bible], pp. 225-226.
3. Jones, J. D. Commentary on Mark, pp. 52-53.
4. Ryle, J. C. Mark [The Crossway Classic Commentaries], pp. 22-23.
5. Barclay, William. The Gospel of Mark [Daily Study Bible], p. 57.
6. Cranfield, C. E. B. The Gospel According to St. Mark [The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary], p. 103.
7. Lane, William L. The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], pp. 107-108.
8. Bratcher and Nida. A Translator’s Handbook to the Gospel of Mark [Helps for Translators], p. 215.
9. France, R. T. The Gospel of Mark [New International Greek Testament Commentary], p. 134.
10. Nineham, D. E. The Gospel of Saint Mark [The Pelican New Testament Commentaries], p. 97.
11. Gundry, Robert H. Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross, p. 129.
12. Both quoted in France, R. T. The Gospel of Mark [New International Greek Testament Commentary], p. 135.
13. Ryle, J. C. Mark [The Crossway Classic Commentaries], p. 24.
14. Calvin, John. Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, vol. I pp. 402-403.