

Scripture: Mark 2:13-17

Jesus is a Friend of Sinners!

Beloved in Christ, it's easy to pick friends who are nice; friends who are good-looking and who have a lot of money. It's easy to select friends who are similar to us, who are like us.

But is this what Jesus does? Are these the concerns Jesus shows? Jesus, the perfect Son of God, goes to [what the Jews of His day and people today would say are] 'bad people.' This is what we see in Mark 2:13-17. Jesus is a Friend of sinners. We see

1. He calls a sinner [vv.13-14]
2. He eats with sinners [vv.15-16]
3. He heals sinners [v.17]

1. He calls a sinner [vv.13-14]

We need to see this passage in light of the growing conflict against Jesus. At first, the scribes 'reason in their hearts' against Jesus [2:6-7] because He says He has the authority to forgive sins. Now, they will complain about Jesus to His disciples [2:16] -- that He eats with sinners. Soon they will become bolder and protest to Jesus Himself [2:24]. When you get to chapter 3, they begin to scheme how they may destroy Jesus [3:4].

In our passage, Christ now provokes a new accusation against Himself. Again, we read in **verse 13**, that He is walking by the sea. Again, all the crowds come to Him. What do we see Jesus doing again? He is teaching them.

Teaching can't be emphasized enough. Teaching is what we need. It is mentioned 15 times in the gospel of Mark. Jesus knows what we need. We come to know Jesus through the Word.

When Jesus finished His teaching, He resumes His walk along the sea. What does He see? **Verse 14**, He sees Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office.

There is something we need to know about Levi, the tax collector and his tax office in order to understand the complaint against Jesus.

The Romans ruled over the Jewish people. The Jews had to obey the Romans. They hated the Romans and had to pay taxes to them. We pay taxes too, but we pay taxes to our own government. But if a foreign nation, an enemy, ruled over us and we had to pay taxes to them, we might hate them too.

Some Jews even said to the Romans, 'You don't need to collect the money yourselves; we will do it for you. We will help you with the work.' So these Jews would help the enemy nation! These Jews did not do their work free of charge. They took care that they earned much money. They

collected more than what was necessary. In this way, they were stealing, extorting money from their own people! They gave the Romans what they were entitled and kept the rest for themselves.

In a short time, they became rich from money dishonestly gained; stolen money. The Jews hated these tax collectors even more than they hated the Romans! No one would speak a friendly word to them. If one saw a Jewish tax collector as he was passing by, he would spit on the ground and turn his head.

But the Jewish tax collectors were also mean people. If someone looked at a tax collector with disdain, he would laugh and think, "I'll get you." He would charge that person a greater amount of money. Hatred and malice also lived in his heart against his own countrymen.

A Jew who collected taxes was not allowed to be a witness in the court. He was expelled from the synagogue and a cause of disgrace to his family.

Now Jesus was passing by such a tax office. It was likely on a busy trade route from Syria to Egypt. Levi had a good position there. There he is sitting in his tax office. Probably he is figuring out how much money he had already earned that day. At the same time, he would keep his eye continually on the road to see if other merchants are coming by so that he could earn more money.

No; Levi received no love. He never received a kind word. No one greeted him in the streets. He had no friends. But 'he didn't deserve it either.' He would associate with other tax collectors and they would take turns to invite each other to their banquets.

Now Jesus is passing by. Yes, it is to such a 'hated man' that Jesus now turns in order to make him one of His disciples! Jesus stands still and looks at him. Levi does not see hatred in those eyes but love and compassion.

Love? He didn't expect to see love in Jesus' eyes! The hard shell around his heart begins to soften. His tough, calloused exterior begins to change. Brothers and sisters, his heart melts! We learn from these verses the power of Christ's call. Jesus says, "Follow Me!" Called by His grace! All at once, *"he arose and followed Him."*

Levi, by God's grace, is irresistibly drawn to Jesus! In Luke 5:28, we read that he forsook all! He left it all – his old life of sin. That's repentance. From a tax-collector Levi became an apostle. A man so deep in sin! You know who Levi is? His other name is Matthew [Matthew 9:9; 10:3]; yes, the writer of the first book of the New Testament, which is now known all over the world!

The comfort for you is that He who called Levi, lives today and still works. He is the risen and exalted Savior, the One who died for sinners! No one is too bad for Christ to call! Do respond to His call! Praise God, His grace is greater than all our sin.

This Jesus, Savior and Lord, calls sinners but also

2. Jesus eats with sinners [vv. 15-16]

You see the overflow of Jesus' forgiveness and love in Levi's life. More importantly, however, the focus is on Jesus! He forgives sinners, entering Levi's home in fellowship reclining at the table. See **verse 15**, *"Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples, for there were many, and they followed Jesus.*

Sinners and tax-collectors are sitting with Jesus. This suggests that Jesus – rather than Levi – is the real Host of the feast!

What Jesus does here, by eating and drinking with sinners, He had been doing as Yahweh during the Old Testament. Why did Yahweh [the LORD] rescue the Israelites from Egypt? What did Moses say to Pharaoh? *"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness'"* [Exodus 5:1]. Now, as Yahweh-in-the-flesh, He is in Levi's home, eating, feasting with tax collectors and sinners.

Yet the Pharisees and scribes [religious teachers] are offended! They are thinking, 'if Jesus is such a holy Person, He would never stoop so low as to eat with them. Why is He eating with them? First He calls Levi; now He even joins Levi for dinner, eating with many tax collectors and sinners!

No, we need to be clear: Jesus does not justify or condone sin. He never does. He is the Son of God, the God of all glory, veiled in the flesh! Jesus is able to eat with sinners because He is able to forgive them. And so it is to this day, we eat and drink the bread and wine with Jesus in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, for no other reason than that He continues to forgive our sin!

Levi understands grace! He receives grace and he wants his friends to know God's grace in Jesus. He hopes that all of the 'bad' people will, like himself, become followers of Jesus. We read in **verse 15**, *"and there were many, and they followed Him"*. The meaning is that 'they were beginning to follow Jesus.' They were sitting with Jesus because they had begun to see in Him a true Friend, one willing and ready to forgive sins.

How about the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Scribes -- were they willing and ready to join the feast with Jesus? See their crusty attitude and reaction! See **verse 16**: *"And when the Pharisees ['separated ones'] and the scribes [the teachers] saw Him eating with the tax-collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, 'How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?'"*

Where was their love for people not like them? They were interested not in people, but in problems about people. They were interested in finding what was wrong about people, sitting in judgment over them. Now they are ready and eager to find fault with Jesus for eating with such people.

Unlike Levi, they don't know God's grace and need for forgiveness. The guests are departing, and guess who is at the door to criticize Jesus for eating with sinners? They didn't have the courage to criticize Jesus directly, but they approach His disciples asking, "How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?"

What answer should the disciples give them? Do the disciples answer their question? After all, they too were with Jesus sitting with Levi in his house! Notice, the disciples have no answer. They probably don't know what to say. No, they don't need to defend themselves. Jesus will answer for them. He heard what the Pharisees said and He calmly answers them in verse 17.

3. Jesus heals sinners [v.17]

Verse 17, "... He said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick...'"

This is true, isn't it? If you are healthy, you don't need to go to a physician. Only if you are sick, do you need a physician! No one can disagree with that!

So why are the scribes and Pharisees upset with Jesus? Who is the Physician? Jesus. What has He come to do? He comes to heal sinners! He makes sinners whole. He forgives sinners so that He may eat with them. God restores fellowship with sinners in Jesus!

But notice Jesus also gives a warning in **verse 17**, "*I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.*" What He is saying this, 'You think you are righteous and that you don't need forgiveness. Well, then, if this is the way you think, then you don't need Me'. You think you are healthy. You think that you don't need a Physician.

They are standing outside fellowship with God. They are refusing the hand of fellowship with Yahweh-in-the-flesh. They reject His grace and His food!

Jesus says, 'Well, I come to call sinners to repentance. I came for such bad people. I will deliver them from their sins! If, in the eyes of the Pharisees and scribes, the tax collectors and sinners are sick, should they not be healed? When I forgive them and heal them, then I can eat and drink with them.'

They are aware of their spiritual need for the grace of God! He will save them from His wrath! They know their need and eat with the One who meets their need.

So, how does Christ want us to respond to Him?

In faith. This shows, first of all, by accepting the Lord's gracious invitation Sunday by Sunday in worship and attending His banqueting table. By coming to the Lord's Table, the Lord's Supper, we show that we join with fellow-member sinners, forgiven sinners. In this way, God continues to feast with us today. And this fellowship anticipates the supper of the Lamb to come in the new heaven and new earth.

How else should we respond to God's dinner invitation? We get to sit around the Lord's Table. Who gets to sit around our dinner table? God has invited us to eat and drink with Him. Whom do we invite to eat and drink at our table? We ought to image God's hospitality toward us, we, who are so undeserving!

We begin to know one another as members. That's good. But we also get to know the sins, the faults, and short comings. And, sometimes, it is easy to stand outside of God's house, and be critical of fellow members. But the real test starts with us: Do people see in us that Jesus is the Friend of sinners? Do they see the grace of God, the love, and forgiveness in us, as we open our hearts to others, beginning with those close by us?

Jesus is the Friend of sinners. He calls sinners. He eats with sinners, and He heals sinners. *"Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon"* [Isaiah 55:6-7]. Amen.