

Text: Mark 2:13-17

Title: “Jesus, Friend of Sick Sinners”

Our mission is to “know, follow and share Jesus Christ.” If we truly know Him in a personal relationship we must follow Him as disciples. And if we are disciples we will share Him with others who do not have a relationship with Christ. Church, we are the Body of Christ. He lives *in* us and He lives *through* us. So our ministry as a church and as individual believers should resemble the life and ministry of Jesus. One thing we know about our Lord ... He relentlessly pursued people who were far from God, even those who were just a hopeless mess. In fact, Jesus was known as “a friend of sinners.” That was welcomed news to people who thought that God really didn’t want to have anything to do with them. People who had messed up felt comfortable around Jesus because they knew He loved them unconditionally. He loved them as they were, but He refused to leave them as they were. That’s what a true friend does.

Today we’re beginning a new series entitled, “Jesus, Friend of Sinners.” Ironically that title was actually a criticism leveled at Jesus by the religious leaders of the day. They said of Jesus...

Luke 7:34b - ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.” ’

Jesus constantly had to deal with this religious bigotry as we see in our text today ... Mark 2:13-17. The fact is that the Bible reveals that we are *all* sinners and hopelessly lost without Christ. And Jesus is a friend to all kinds of “sinners,” and here in Mark 2 we see sinners are the spiritually sick who need Dr. Jesus. **Read Mark 2:13-17.**

Earlier Mark explained that up to this point Jesus proclaimed...

Mark 1:15 - “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

And people begin to respond to that message ... repenting, putting their trust in Christ and following Him. And Jesus continued to impact others. In fact, Mark 2:13 says that a large crowd came to Jesus and He taught them. We need to understand this about Jesus:

1. JESUS ARRANGED HIS LIFE TO MAKE CONTACT WITH NON-BELIEVERS.

Mark 2:14a - As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth.

As Jesus walks along the shore of the lake where so much of His ministry took place His eyes rest on Levi ... a character with a contemptible occupation as a tax collector. Think of him as more of a border patrol agent who collected a tax from people as they traveled and carried goods through his territory. Picture Levi like a parking lot attendant at a Rangers baseball game. The Rangers make him charge you say \$15 to park in the lot, but if Levi wants to charge \$20 he can put the extra \$5 in his pocket. You and I have a choice as to whether or not we will park in

the lot, or if we will even go to a game. But the people in New Testament times had no other options but to pay the creep his money.

So most people despised Levi and others like him. He was rarely invited to socialize with regular people. His parents would have been embarrassed to tell others what their son did for a living. No one trusted him. Most importantly because of his way of life Levi was banned from the Temple and the synagogue services. But the money was so good that a greedy tax collector wouldn't mind giving up some of those privileges.

Here in Mark and in other places in the Gospels, tax collectors were lumped in with a category of people called "sinners." The word means people who miss the mark ... who don't measure up in one way or another. You see that word is in quotation marks, meaning that people like this were branded. Some, like prostitutes, were in this category because they didn't measure up to the moral law. Some were lumped into this category because they didn't measure up to the religious expectations of others.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION – Levi would have been like the character Cru in the movie "Despicable Me." Boys and girls, remember him? Cru lives in a respectable neighborhood with white picket fences and beautiful flowers. But Cru is really out of place there. His house is painted black and his lawn is dead. He's a devious guy with plans of developing the technology to steal the moon. He has a small army of weird creatures called Minions. Cru is hated by most people and, truth be known, he doesn't really care ... or at least that's the impression he gives. Inside he's branded himself as "despicable me."

Levi would have thought of himself as "despicable me." That's his life and he just accepted it ... at least until a Jewish teacher named Jesus dropped into his tax office one day. Jesus arranged His life to make contact with people like this. We'll see why in just a moment, but that's not the way most believers think about their lives. The longer we are Christians, the smaller our circle becomes. Most of our friends are church people, and it rarely crosses our minds as to what we should be doing to make contact with people who are far from God. Let's keep our eyes open to see the people Jesus sees. Next...

2. JESUS EMPHATICALLY CALLS NON-BELIEVERS TO FOLLOW HIM.

Mark 2:14b - "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

I say this is *emphatic* because it is a command. We need to understand how radical this is. Up to this point Levi probably had no qualms with cheating people the way he did and offending God in the process. But suddenly Levi drops everything to follow Jesus. Luke's Gospel says...

Luke 5:28 - Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

The only explanation for this kind of abrupt turn around in Levi's life was the power and the love of Jesus Christ that transforms a person's life. Someone has said that the calling of God

never leaves us where it finds us. You will either believe and obey and go on in following Jesus as a new person, or you haven't really been saved at all. There's repentance here. Levi leaves his unscrupulous lifestyle behind. There's faith here. To follow Christ requires faith and trust in Him. "Lord, I don't know where this is taking me, but I'm trusting you with my life, my soul and my eternity." Do you need to take that step today?

The dramatic change in Levi's life is immediately seen in the next part of this story. The next thing we know ...

Mark 2:15 - While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

Here's the next truth we take away from this encounter:

3. FOLLOWING CHRIST CONNECTS US WITH OTHER BELIEVERS ... AND NON-BELIEVERS.

Are you familiar with the term "third places"? It's a term used today to describe the fact that most people's lives typically revolve around three places. There's our home, our work, and then the "third places" where we hang out outside of home or work. For many Christians church activities have become that "third place." And that's fine; but let's make sure our "third place" doesn't isolate us from non-believers. Our non-believing friends have different "third places" ... Starbucks, sports fields, or a local park.

Mark 2:15 says there's a dinner party happening at Levi's house ... and what an interesting mixture of guests he had. Jesus was there. Levi's heart has been opened to Jesus and now his home has been opened to Jesus. It also says that *many* tax collectors and "sinners" were there. Tax collectors probably ate together often because no one else wanted their company. Interestingly, the way Mark puts this, Jesus acted as the host. They "were eating with Him." The disciples were present too. We're not told what they thought about this. Maybe they wondered: "Jesus, is this where this movement is going? Are these the kind of people you are asking us to start hanging around with?"

But these despicable characters were attracted to Jesus. Why? Because He loved them unconditionally. They felt comfortable with Christ. In fact, Jesus was "the life of party," literally. His presence in that house meant Life was present. And the tax collectors and "sinners" loved that. Are you the "life" of your office dinner or sorority party? By that I mean are you there as the eyes, ears, lips, hands and feet of the One who is Life?

If your motivation is to try to be cool and to be part of the crowd then you don't need to be there. Will you compromise your own moral standards in doing so? Then you shouldn't go. Jesus didn't go to dinner parties to indulge sinful appetites. Wherever you go, Christ-follower, make sure you're the "Life" of that gathering. If you're not bringing them up, they're bringing you down.

But not everyone was happy with what Jesus did.

Mark 2:16 - When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the “sinners” and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”

Here’s what happens next:

4. JESUS CONFRONTS US WITH HIS TRUE PURPOSE FOR COMING.

Look at v.16. Now let’s talk about these “teachers of the Law who were Pharisees.” Just about every mention of the Pharisees in the NT leaves a negative impression. They were stuffy, judgmental religionists. But that wasn’t always the case. They probably came into existence at a time when the Jewish culture was being overrun when their homeland was invaded by the Greeks. Pharisees became the guardians of authentic Judaism. They wanted to protect their faith from being contaminated by outsiders. They were the traditionalists ...in the good sense of the word, at least in the beginning. They were the “conservatives” who held to the strict teachings of the law of God. They were called “teachers of the law” because in an effort to keep their religion pure they preserved the law ... not just the Ten Commandments, but hundreds of other “laws” they had developed to build a wall of rules around themselves to keep themselves “clean.” But this wall of rules also served to keep despicable people like Levi from contaminating them. Over time they became religious bigots ... there were simply too “good” to associate with people who weren’t that good.

So you can understand why they quizzed Jesus’ disciples, “Why in the world would Jesus do something like that.” But this is the Good News about Jesus. This is what He has come to do. There are those who believe themselves to be so bad there is no *possibility* for their salvation. There are those who believe themselves to be so righteous that there is no *need* for their salvation.

You see, the fact is that God is an absolutely righteous God. He *requires* righteousness ... a righteousness that He in turn *achieves* for us because we can’t ever be righteous enough to meet His standards. He did this by sending His Son to live a perfect life, die for our sins and be raised from the dead victorious over sin and death. Then God *gives* this righteousness as a gift to those who put their faith in Christ.

Well, what does Jesus think about their attitude?

Mark 2:17 - On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Jesus answers them with a familiar proverb: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Jesus is being facetious here. The “healthy” are those who *think* they are good enough

and don't need the righteousness of God. The "sick" are the ones who *know* they are not good enough and are dependent upon the "doctor."

And Jesus states His mission ... "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. I mingle with sinners because they have a disease and I have the cure." People are never saved who persist in thinking they are "righteous" enough. Jesus saves those who *know* they are sinners ... that they don't measure up ... that they have missed the mark.

Jesus doesn't just wait for sick sinners to come to Him; He goes seeking after them. He makes house calls!

Luke 19:10 - For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

We shouldn't be afraid to engage non-believers on their turf. This idea that we should just open the doors of the church and wait for them to come to us is not New Testament Christianity. It is an easy church-ianity, but it falls short of the mission of Jesus. Remember Jesus came to *seek* and to save the lost. It's not enough for us to think, "Well, Fort Worth knows we are here (and have been for more than a hundred years). If they come, fine. If they don't, that's OK too, because we like ourselves and we like being together. That's not New Testament Christianity.

ILLUSTRATION – Not far from us is J.P.S. Hospital, one of the finest trauma centers in this part of Texas. If you are severely injured in a car accident, that's probably the place the ambulance will take you. It's also the place you go if you can't afford to go anywhere else. They won't turn you away. What if our community began to see our church as the spiritual J.P.S. Hospital ... a trauma center and a place where everyone is welcome?

Oh, by the way, maybe you've already made the connection, but Levi went by another name ... Matthew. That's right. He's the disciple who wrote the very first book of the NT ... the Gospel of Matthew. He penned 28 chapters packed with the Gospel and the witness of Christ. Jesus saw something in Levi that no one else saw.