

**“THE FRIEND OF SINNERS”**

As we study the Gospels, we come across a wide variety of literary types. There are miracle stories, wisdom sayings, conflict narratives, parables, and more. In this text, we have an example of what is sometimes referred to as a call narrative. It is the second call narrative recorded in Mark. The first is found in chapter 1, where Jesus calls four fishermen to leave their nets and boats to follow him and become fishers of men. In both of these passages, Jesus issues a summons to discipleship, and that summons is met with instant obedience. But there is a different emphasis in this account of the call of Levi. Here, the emphasis is not upon the work to which Jesus is calling his followers, but upon the sort of people who can become his followers in the first place. In these verses, we learn that there is a fundamental prerequisite that has to be met by a person before he can say that he belongs to Jesus Christ. We will see what this prerequisite is as we work our way through the passage.

In our study of Mark, we have seen that Jesus was quickly gaining popularity as a religious teacher in Israel. He was preaching with divine authority, casting out demons, and healing the sick. And all of this caused Israel’s religious authorities to begin to see Jesus as a threat, and their concerns were only intensified by what he did in this passage.

As you may know, tax collectors were held in extremely low esteem in first century Israel. One rabbinic text even went so far as to group tax collectors together with robbers and murderers as the most notorious of transgressors (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Qama, 113a). There were a number of reasons why this was the case. For one thing, tax collectors collected money for Rome, and the Jews greatly resented being under Roman control. Tax collectors were seen as traitors. And then there is the fact that the Roman tax system lent itself to terrible abuses. A tax collector obtained his office by bidding against other candidates: the person who promised to collect the most taxes won the right to do so. Once the post was secured, any funds collected beyond what was bid were pocketed by the tax collector himself. As you can imagine, this caused many tax collectors to be fairly unscrupulous in their work. We see an example of this in the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19, where Zacchaeus demonstrated his repentance by making restitution to all the people he had cheated and taken advantage of throughout the course of his career. And one other reason why the Jews had such a low view of tax collectors was the fact that they were in regular contact with Gentiles, which rendered them, at least according to the dominant traditions of the day, ceremonially unclean. And for this reason, Jews who engaged in the work of tax collection were considered outcasts, and they were even excommunicated from the local synagogue.

There is no doubt that Levi was a Jew, because Levi is a Jewish name. And there is also no doubt that this Levi is the disciple who is also known as Matthew, because he is

identified as Matthew in the parallel account in the Gospel that bears his name. As a tax collector, Levi represented Roman oppression. He probably forced people to pay far more tax than what was fair. And he lived as an outcast among his own people. But despite all of this, when Jesus saw Levi, he called him to be one of his disciples.

Levi responded to Jesus' call to discipleship not only by immediately following him, but also by throwing a feast in Jesus' honor. And this was a matter of great significance. In first century Israel, Jesus' willingness to share a meal with such people in the home of a tax collector was something that bordered on being scandalous. For the Jewish people, as for most of the peoples of the ancient world, the matter of table fellowship, or the people with whom you would share a meal, had high symbolic value. You did not eat with just anyone. Sharing a meal signified the most intimate of social relationships. It was a symbol of identification, something that created a bond between those who dined together.

As an aside, we should reflect upon this in relation to our participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is no small thing that Jesus invites us to dine with him at his table. Nor is it a small thing that we partake of the Lord's Supper alongside our fellow Christians. The sacrament of Christ's body and blood really is a sign and a guarantee of the intimate fellowship that we enjoy with Christ and with each other. That is why it is sometimes referred to as "communion."

But do not misunderstand what is taking place in this passage. Jesus' table fellowship with these sinners does not mean that it is possible for him to have a bond of fellowship with wicked people. Jesus was not identifying with these people in their sin. He was not saying that he was no different and no better than them. He was not trying to win sinners to himself by convincing them that he is really just like them. Such things could never be true. Jesus is God incarnate. He is completely and perfectly holy. He does not and cannot identify with sinners in their sin.

Rather, Jesus' table fellowship with these sinners demonstrates that his ministry was about enabling sinful people to be able to identify with him. Jesus does not call sinners to himself so that we might go on cherishing our sin. He came in order to set us free from sin's bondage. He came to give us new life. He came to sanctify a people for himself, a people who would be holy as he is holy. As we saw in the passage in which he cleansed the leper, Jesus is not defiled when he comes into contact with impurity. Just the opposite. It is his holiness that is contagious. And that is why he was able to have table fellowship with these sinners, regardless of the objections made by the scribes.

Jesus responded to those objections with a memorable declaration: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." It is important to understand what Jesus meant when he spoke of these two

groups of people. He was not saying that there are some people who have obtained a righteous standing with God on the basis of their own efforts. He was not telling the scribes that they did not need him because they were righteous enough on their own. Instead, he was using the term “righteous” in an ironic manner. He was talking about people who are so blind that they cannot see the true condition of their hearts, people who have been deceived into thinking that they can have confidence in their own righteousness, people who think that they are good enough by their own efforts. Jesus cannot do anything for people like that. He has nothing to offer to those who think about themselves in that way.

And this brings us to the fundamental prerequisite Christian discipleship that I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon. This passage teaches us that the one requirement that must be met before a person can follow Jesus Christ is to see that he or she really is a sinner, and then to remain convinced of that fact for the rest of his or her life. Jesus is a friend for sinners, but he is no friend for those who are content with their own righteousness. As Calvin writes,

“Christ came to quicken the dead, to justify the guilty and condemned, to wash those who were polluted and full of uncleanness, to rescue the lost from hell, to clothe with his glory those who were covered with shame, to

renew to a blessed immortality those who were debased by disgusting vices.” (p. 402)

This is why Jesus humbled himself and became a man and submitted himself to death on a cross. He came to save people who are steeped in sin, people who realize that they are incapable of making themselves right with God. Jesus did not come for the healthy. He came for the sick. He did not come for those who are content with their own righteousness. He came for those who know that their only hope is to receive a righteousness that comes from outside of themselves.

It boils down to this: the only way to approach Jesus is the way of humility. He opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. Never allow guilt and shame and embarrassment over your sin to keep you from Christ. Yes, at those moments when you get a glimpse of your heart’s actual condition, you will feel guilty and ashamed. Levi certainly had things to be ashamed of, but none of them prevented him from responding to the gracious call of Christ. The only insurmountable barrier to fellowship with Christ is pride. It was pride that kept the scribes and Pharisees from Christ. The person who clings to some supposed good that he sees in himself, the person who thinks that she is not nearly as bad as others, the person who blames people or circumstances for his own sins, such people cannot hope to receive any help from Christ. But those who know that

they need a doctor, those who know that their condition is desperate, those who are convinced that Jesus Christ is their only hope, these are the people Jesus came to save.

What about you? Do you know that you are a sinner? Do you have a sense of the true condition of your heart? These questions are probably not new to you. You have heard them before. But it is important to always have them before you, because each and every one of us is prone to the sin of spiritual pride. You and I are always in danger of slipping into a mindset in which we think that there is something about us that sets us above others. It might be a choice that you have made, or a stand that you have taken, or a habit that you have cultivated, or a service that you perform, or an idea that you have embraced - it could be anything. There are countless ways in which we can be deceived into thinking that there is something within us that makes us, at least to some degree, acceptable to God.

But the Bible leaves no room for such thinking. The truth never changes. The Scriptures tell us that there is no one righteous, no not one. Regardless of how you compare to other people, the Bible says that you are totally depraved. And that is why, for the rest of your days on this earth, you must be a person who mourns over your sin, a person who longs to be freed from the guilt and power of sin, a person who constantly pleads with God to deliver you from this body of death.

If you are that kind of person, if you truly are an acknowledged sinner, then you can be sure that you are welcome at the table of Jesus Christ. You can be certain that you are just the kind of person that Jesus came to save. Alexander Whyte puts it this way:

“Is it the positively awful pollution and depravity of your heart that casts you, day and night, on your face before God and man? Is this the cry that never ceases before God from you: ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God’? Is your inward enslavement to sin something that you have never seen or heard equalled in Holy Scripture, or anywhere else? Is that, indeed, so? Then, - just say so. You cannot take into your mouth a better argument with God than that. Tell Him: put Him in remembrance: search the Scriptures: collect the promises, and plead with Him to consider your case, and to say if He has ever seen such a sad case as yours - ever since He began to sanctify and to save sinners. And He will surely bow down, and will hear that cry of your heart that no mortal man hears: and He will wipe off the tears that no mortal hand can touch.” (*Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, 220)