

Eating Supper with Sinners

Mark 2:13-17

Rev. Brian Bill

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I've been a bit quiet about the Green Bay Packers lately. I'm sure you've noticed. It may or may not be because they've lost their last two games. I actually have a solid theory about why they haven't been winning. It can all be traced to the release of the McDonald's commercial that featured long-time Bears Coach Mike Ditka wearing a Packers sweater.

Former Bears Hall of Fame linebacker Mike Singletary couldn't take it any longer when he called Ditka out on Thursday: *"How in the world did they have you do that? There's just some things you can't do."* Initially Bear fans winced when they saw him wearing green and gold but now I'm wondering if it wasn't all part of a plan to throw the Packers off their game. I think Ditka should go back to rooting for the Bad News Bears and everything will get back to normal.

It was unsettling for fans to see 'Da Coach' rooting for a team that he actually has hated for decades. In our passage for today, we're going to see that it was even more jarring for some religious fans to see a hated tax collector change sides and follow Jesus.

Let's stand and read Mark 2:13-17 together: *"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."*

Our outline for today is simple.

- Follow the Savior** (13-14)
- Focus on Sinners** (15-17)

Follow the Savior

Look at verse 13: ***“He went out again beside the sea...”*** We learned last week that Jesus has been in Capernaum, which is located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. People start running to him again: ***“and all the crowd was coming to him...”*** The tense of this word is that the crowd is building: ***“and He was teaching them.”*** The idea is that He *“kept teaching.”* We know from 1:14 that He was proclaiming the gospel of God: ***“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”***

In the midst of all the people, Jesus noticed a person.

1. He saw Levi. Check out verse 14: ***“And as he passed by He saw Levi the Son of Alphaeus...”*** Jesus is on mission wherever He goes. Just like we’re to be. Crowds of people are everywhere and yet He locks on to Levi. His parents had a lot of hope for him because he was named after one of the sons of Jacob. It was from the tribe of Levi that the priesthood was descended. Levi would have been raised to fulfill some kind of religious responsibility.

We make judgments based upon personal appearances but Jesus saw something more. In Matthew 9:9 we read: ***“He saw a man.”*** Jesus sees past the sin and sees a servant. He can tell Levi is unsatisfied and searching for something of significance. When Jesus looks at people, He sees potential. He knows you’re a mess but He also knows that you matter to Him. He sees what no one else can see. He sees your guilt and shame but He also has plans and purposes for you. Others may remind you of your past but He sees your future.

“sitting at the tax booth...” Levi was a tax collector, which was another way of saying that he was *“the scum of the earth.”* He had purchased a tax franchise, which allowed him to charge taxes on anyone walking by his tax booth. He was required to send in a certain amount of taxes to Rome but he could charge whatever he wanted and keep the extra as personal profit. As a result, tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, often became very wealthy.

Capernaum was on the caravan route between east and west so it was a perfect place to set up a tax booth. He collected on imports and exports, on bridges, roads and harbors. He would tax the number of axles on a wagon, the number of legs on a donkey, and charge a pedestrian tax if someone was out walking. He also charged taxes on the number of fish the fishermen caught. Tax collectors were...

- ❑ **Dishonest.** They were known to overcharge people and when someone couldn't pay they would be given a high-interest loan. They took bribes from the rich and extorted the poor.
- ❑ **Disqualified.** Tax collectors were not allowed to give testimony as witnesses because no one trusted them. Their tithes weren't even accepted (BTW, we accept all tithes here).
- ❑ **Disloyal.** Though he was Jewish, he was considered a traitor because he worked for the hated Romans. He had turned his back on his family, his nation and his God.
- ❑ **Detested.** Tax collectors were classed with murderers and robbers, only they were considered the worst. Jewish people despised them more than Roman officials or soldiers. Sometimes children would come up and spit at tax collectors, encouraged to do so by their parents.
- ❑ **Disgraced.** By extension Levi's family would also have been ostracized by the community. He was a letdown to his family and the source of shame.
- ❑ **Defiled.** He was considered an outcast and was excommunicated from the synagogue. According to the Rabbis, there was no hope for a loser like Levi.

2. He summoned Levi. After looking at Levi Jesus issued a very short command: ***"Follow me."*** This is in the present tense so He was saying something like this: ***"Be following me"*** or ***"Be following with me."***

Alan Carr lifts a few lessons from this passage that are worth pondering:

- ❑ No one is beyond hope
- ❑ Jesus knows how to reach your wayward loved ones
- ❑ Jesus sees the hidden potential in the lives of the lost
- ❑ It's impossible to know what's happening in a person's heart

What Levi does is startling. He doesn't just put on a sweater and declare a different allegiance but instead, ***"He rose and followed Him."*** He immediately obeys. He gets up and goes. He's not just giving intellectual assent but makes a decision of his will and then moves physically.

Luke 5:28 provides some additional insight: ***“And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.”*** In the original, this sentence reads this way: *“And he left all, rose up, and followed him.”* This is amazing. Levi left everything even before he got up and went with Jesus! There needs to be a leaving before there can be a rising. He believed and then he bolted.

We read in 1:18 that the fishermen left their nets. In Mark 10:50, Blind Bart threw off his cloak, ***“sprang up and came to Jesus.”*** Here’s a question. What have you left behind to follow Jesus? Is there something you’re still holding on to? That may explain your lack of joy. One pastor said it like this: *“The freest people are those who’ve learned to leave things behind.”* Jim Elliot is famous for saying: *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose.”* Jesus said in Luke 9:62: ***“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”***

His response was wholehearted. He totally made a break with his tax business. He didn’t stoop to gather any shekels or tidy up his books. He left it all, he got up and he followed Christ. The four fishermen could back to fishing (and they did) but for him, his work as a tax collector was now over. Someone else would quickly take his place.

A chicken and a pig were walking down the road together. They passed a sign for a local diner advertising its breakfast special: “Ham and Eggs – \$2.95!” The chicken said, “That’s our whole contribution to society: breakfast food!” The pig replied, *“For you, it may be a contribution. For me it’s a total commitment.”*

Jesus really picked a motley crew of disciples, didn’t He? The first four are fishermen and the fifth a tax collector. One pastor says, *“I never would have considered Levi. But then, I probably wouldn’t have considered you, either. Or me.”* There were a lot of surprised people that day. The crowd was confused. The disciples were dumbfounded. And Levi couldn’t believe that Jesus was calling him.

Levi would no doubt have hit these four guys up for taxes on their fish. Can you imagine the tension on the team between these guys? When I pastored in Pontiac we had a large number of police officers and correctional officers who attended our church. These men and women would tell me that it was difficult for them when they would see someone they had arrested come to church. One time, after a new believer was baptized, one of my law enforcement friends called me and told me

that he was struggling because he knew this person's past. I shared this passage with him and told him that the Lord loves to put people with different pasts on the same team!

So the first thing we must do is *follow the Savior*. The second thing we must do is *focus on sinners*.

Focus on Sinners

If you would have asked Matthew at this point if he thought Jesus could use him as an evangelist, he would have said, *“That’s a good one. That’s funnier than a flat tax.”* I imagine Levi brainstorming and asking himself, *“What do I do well? Let’s start there.”* An idea comes to his mind but he blows it off. *“I throw great parties but I’m a Christ-follower now. I probably shouldn’t be doing that anymore.”*

And then it hits him: *“What if I had a party with a purpose? What if all my IRS buddies came and what if I invited Jesus and the guys? What if Jesus rubbed shoulders with my irreligious friends and what if some spiritual conversations took place? That would be cool.”*

I see three important factors that will help us focus on sinners.

1. Express acceptance. Look at verse 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.”* The word **“recline”** is used twice in this verse. It refers to the practice of lying on your side, leaning on your elbow, with your head by the table. It’s the posture that people took when they settled in for a long and relaxed meal.

The phrase **“at table”** is a term of identification and friendship. In that culture when you had a meal with someone you were saying, *“I accept you and identify with you.”* To eat from the same loaf of bread was to join yourself to the person you’re eating with.

His network of friends and acquaintances are eating nachos and cheese and watching the Packers get back on track. As he looks around the room, he sees Peter talking to two publicans. *Bring it on, Pete!* And there’s John over there – *Go for it, John!* And then he sees Jesus with a whole crowd of people around Him

as He calls more people to follow Him. Levi was so happy he almost laughed out loud.

That night was just the beginning. Being a tax collector, he was good with a pen and paper and for the next three years he recorded what he saw and heard of Jesus. His writings became known as the Gospel of Matthew. He followed the Savior and focused on sinners. He had a heart for his lost friends and the guts to try to reach them.

Some of the most effective evangelists are brand new Christians. They still have lots of “sinners” in their life and they can’t stop talking about what Jesus has done for them. Over time, zeal can evaporate, and connections with non-Christians are replaced with new friendships with Christians. In one sense, this is good and healthy and some of us do need to sever unhealthy relationships. But on the other hand, we need to make sure we don’t insulate ourselves from the very people Jesus wants us to reach. That’s why we talk so much about neighboring. God has put us where we live on purpose for His purposes.

I love how many of you wrote down the names of three lost people on post-it-notes last week [go up to boards]. It’s very moving to know that Edgewood is filled with people who get that this is a hospital for the hurting. I can’t wait until we start hearing of people on these post-it notes coming to faith in Christ. If you’d like to add any names today we’ve placed some post-it note pads on the front pew. Simply come up after the service and fill one out and then place on the black boards [let’s pray right now for the people up here].

2. Expect opposition. If you mix it up with the marginalized it’s highly likely that you’ll be criticized, often by those who are the most religious. We see this in verse 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.’”*** This is the first time Mark mentions the Pharisees. They were known as separatists or literally, *“the detached ones.”* Let’s give them props for attempting to obey the laws of God but the problem was that they added a bunch of other laws to the list. The number one rule was to stay away from the unrighteous.

The grouping ***“tax collectors and sinners”*** is used three times to emphasize that the religious establishment frowned on sinners while Jesus focused on them. In their minds, the Pharisees had reached a place where they thought they were better

and more righteous than others. John MacArthur writes, *“The religious hated Jesus for condemning good people and they hated him for forgiving bad people.”*

On Tuesdays the pastoral team goes out for lunch together. This past week we ate at Arthur’s. After hanging out in our holy huddle, we got up to leave and as we were headed out, we saw someone from Edgewood who was in line with three of his buddies. He waved to us and said loudly, *“These are my pastors”* and then he turned to the guys he was with and said, *“And these are my crooks!”* Later that day I called to give him props for hanging out with unholy crooks. That’s what we’re all supposed to do.

Notice that the Pharisees corner the disciples to express their disdain. The phrase, *“eat with”* can be translated as, *“always eating with.”* Their criticism is really a compliment, isn’t it? They didn’t have the courage to confront Christ. Last week we pointed out the religious guys criticized Jesus in their hearts, here we see them complain to the disciples and soon they will attack Jesus to His face. It really bothered them that Jesus spent time with sinners. Jesus really gets the religious leaders worked up in Matthew 21:31 when He says, *“Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”*

Express acceptance to sinners. When you do, *expect opposition*. That leads to the third truth.

3. Emulate Jesus. I love how Jesus reframes our understanding. He takes this opportunity to clarify His mission. His entire purpose was to spend time with sinners in order to bring salvation to them as seen in verse 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...’”* Jesus quotes a well-known proverb to silence the Pharisees. As followers of Jesus we must keep coming back to the example of Jesus Christ. If we claim to follow the Savior we will focus on sinners.

A couple weeks ago I went to the doctor because I was feeling sick. As I looked around the waiting room it was evident that I wasn’t alone. Some patients looked pale. Others were walking slowly. Many of us were coughing and sneezing. No one was smiling. We were there because we knew we were sick. This week I saw a surgeon friend when I was visiting someone in the hospital. Surgeons follow up with those who’ve had surgery. Listen. Hospitals aren’t for healthy people. When people are sick they need a doctor. Jesus seeks sin-sick sinners. The church is meant to be a hospital for the hurting, not a palace for the perfect.

Can you imagine a hospital with a mission statement that said, *“We’re here for the healthy. If you’re sick, stay away!”* Can you imagine a church that saw as its purpose to provide a place for perfect people? Let’s be clear. We exist to help the hurting, to minister to the messed up, to serve the sin-sick and to love the unlovely so that they can have their sins forgiven by the Great Physician. When I hear people say, *“I don’t want to come to church because it’s filled with hypocrites,”* I often smile and say, *“Why don’t you join us and we’ll have one more.”*

C.T. Studd is famous for saying, *“Some wish to live within the sound of Church or Chapel bell; I want to run a Rescue Shop within a yard of hell.”*

Jesus moves from an analogy to an appeal to His authority: ***“...I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”*** Jesus came to bear our burdens, to become the sacrifice for our sins, but the Pharisees forgot all about helping the hurting. Jesus lets them have it in Matthew 23:4: ***“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”***

The whole purpose of Jesus’ coming was to save sinners. Luke 5:32 includes that He came to call sinners ***“to repentance.”*** This is the essence of the gospel. The Savior came to save sinners. Paul captured this in 1 Timothy 1:15: ***“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”***

In his new book called, *“Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel,”* Russell Moore reminds us that we should never forget the transformative power of the Holy Spirit as we engage the culture. Whenever he feels himself growing discouraged about the future, he reminds himself, *“the next Billy Graham might be drunk right now...the next Jonathan Edwards might be the man driving in front of you with the Darwin Fish bumper decal. The next Charles Wesley might be a profanity-spewing hip-hop artist right now. The next Charles Spurgeon might be managing an abortion clinic right now. The next Mother Theresa might be a heroin-addict right now. The next Augustine of Hippo might be a sexually promiscuous cult member right now, just like, come to think of it, the first Augustine of Hippo was.”*

The Pharisees thought of themselves as righteous so they looked down their noses at those who sinned differently than they did. To them it was scandalous that Jesus would spend time with sinners.

Action Steps

Let's think through how we can apply this message.

1. Wholeheartedly follow the Savior. Is there something holding you back? What is it? Let it go. Now. Get up and follow. Because he left all to follow Jesus, Levi's name was changed to Matthew, which means, "Gift of God." Have you received the gift of salvation?

His call to you is the same as it was for Levi: "*Follow Me.*" It's the call to conversion and commitment, the call to salvation and surrender. The gospel has nothing to say to those who believe they have no sins that need to be forgiven. Too many today think Christianity is just for good people. But Christ is for those who know they're bad and realize they cannot approach a holy God on the basis of their own merit. Most of us underestimate God's holiness and overestimate our own goodness. You're not too bad to be saved, but you might be too good to be saved. Erwin Lutzer says, "Don't ever diminish the cross by saying, 'This sin is too big to be forgiven.'"

2. Intentionally focus on sinners. Slow down so you can see the Levis around you. Look at your social calendar. Do you only hang out with holy people? Think of just one person who doesn't know Jesus. What one thing can you do this week to spend time with him or her? Maybe you can have supper with a sinner. When Jesus prayed for his followers in John 17:15, He said, "***I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.***"

When Oliver Cromwell ruled England, the nation experienced a crisis when they ran out of silver and could not mint any coins. Cromwell sent his soldiers to the Cathedral to see if any silver was available. They reported back that the only silver was in the statues of the saints, to which Cromwell replied, "*Melt down the saints and get them back into circulation.*"

Fellow follower, lets ask Jesus to melt us down so that we get back into circulation. If you're saved, it's time to shine.

*Don't be ashamed of your past
If you're shattered like a piece of glass
The more broke you are the more the light gets through
Show your wounds and your flaws
Show them why you still need the cross
Let them see the work He's doing in you*

*That even in the darkest place
His love can make you radiate*

Invitation: “Glow in the Dark”