

## Mark 2:13-17

## Introduction

1. When one visits the Holy Land, there are many so-called traditional sites where Jesus was, but there are few sites that one knows with certainty that he visited.
  - a. One of the most special places in the Holy Land for me is the shore of the Sea of Galilee near the village of Capernaum.
  - b. Based on the multiple witnesses in the Gospels, one knows that Jesus truly walked here.
  - c. It is an awesome experience to walk that gravel shoreline and look out over the waters knowing that you walk perhaps in the ancient footprints of Jesus.
2. In today's passage, Jesus once more walks beside the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum.
  - a. He encounters and calls another disciple, Levi.
  - b. He hears and responds to the Jewish leaders' complaints about his association with sinners.
3. Today's passage is the second of five confrontations between Jesus and Jewish leaders in Galilee recorded in Mk 2:1-3:6.
  - a. Remember in last week's study of Mk 2:1-12 that they complained about his apparent blasphemy of God when he declared the forgiveness of a paralytic's sins before healing him physically. Even if Jesus was only speaking in behalf of God and not as God, it was still blasphemy for these leaders.
  - b. In this passage the leaders complain about Jesus' association with sinners and believe that he has defiled himself based on the company that he keeps.
4. **Read Mk 2:13-17.**

## A. The Call of Levi (13-14)

1. Jesus again went out beside the Sea of Galilee as he had done earlier (cf., Mk 1:16-20).
  - a. As before, he drew a "large crowd."
  - b. Jesus began to teach the crowd. Teaching/preaching the good news was his primary mission.
  - c. Nothing is said here about Jesus healing anyone, but he may have also healed some of the sick.
  - d. As he had done before, he walked along the shore.
2. During his walk, he encountered Levi son of Alphaeus.
  - a. Levi was a tax collector (Gk., *telon*).
  - b. James Brooks shares, "Levi is mentioned elsewhere only in the parallel in Luke 5:27,29. He is not on Mark's list of the Twelve in 3:16-19 or any of the other lists. In the parallel in Matt 9:9 the person is called Matthew, and the traditional view is that Levi and Matthew are different names of the same person. . . . The problem is quite perplexing. While the traditional association of Matthew with Levi has merit, there is no altogether satisfactory solution" (James A. Brooks, *Mark*, 61).
  - c. The name *Levi* in Hebrew means "to accompany; to walk with."
    - 1) This was the name of one of the sons of Jacob.
    - 2) The Tribe of Levi was given special duties in the Tabernacle/Temple (cf., Numbers 3).
    - 3) The priests all came from this tribe alone. They were the descendants of Moses and Aaron.
    - 4) Isn't it ironic that Jesus calls Levi, whose name means "to accompany," to follow him, to walk with him,
  - d. As Brooks pointed out in his comments above, we believe this disciple is the one whom we better know as Matthew.
    - 1) The Greek name Matthew comes from another Hebrew name, *Mattiyahu*, which means "gift of Yahweh; gift of God."
    - 2) Perhaps Levi underwent a name change like Simon, who became Peter, and Saul, who became Paul, based on his association with Jesus.
    - 3) We can't know with certainty since the Bible does not make this point clear, but I believe the Levi of this passage is the disciple Matthew, the writer of the Gospel bearing his name.
  - e. Levi was far from being a priest. He was a tax collector.
    - 1) Tax collectors were hated by the Jews.
    - 2) You can only imagine the hatred of Jews for one of their own who became a tax collector, and worse than that one from the Tribe of Levi, the priests.

f. Levi was most likely in a toll booth by the water's edge in Capernaum.

1) He was most likely a tax collector not directly for the Romans but for Herod Antipas, the Roman puppet-king of the region of Galilee.

2) He was as the shore to collect taxes on fish and other goods entering the region by boat.

3) He was most likely acquainted with the other four disciples of Jesus, who were fishermen.

3. Jesus called Levi to be a disciple which was as scandalous an action as touching a leper (cf., Mk 1:41).

a. Jesus interrupted Levi with the simple words, "Follow me" (Gk., *akolouthei moi*)

b. This call was similar to the one Jesus had issued to Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John beside the Sea of Galilee perhaps near this same spot (cf., Mk 1:17).

c. Levi's response was the same as that of the earlier disciples.

1) "Levi got up and followed him" (14).

2) Levi paid a high price to follow Jesus. He left his job and his wealth behind (cf., Lk 5:28)

2) There was no going back to his old job. He was now a double outcast—from his people and from his Gentile masters.

## **B. A Questions about Eating with Sinners (15-16)**

1. We don't know if Jesus invited himself, as he sometimes did (e.g., Zacchaeus – Lk 19:5) or if Levi invited him, but Jesus went to Levi's house for dinner. (15)

2. Mk 2:15 is the first time the term "disciples" (Gk., *discipulos*) appears in this Gospel. Mark uses this important term 58 times. It's basic meaning is "learner" (Brooks, 62).

3. Levi had invited many of his friends to join him.

a. His friends were mostly tax collectors, since no one else in the area wanted anything to do with him.

b. Daniel Akin writes, "Tax collectors were notorious in that day and were hated by the Jewish people as traitors and abusers of their own people. They were a mafia-like organization in the first century. They served Rome, the Gentile occupying power of Israel. They were like dishonest IRS agents who overcharged the people for their own profit. The Jewish writings known as the Mishnah and Talmud set them beside thieves and murderers. They were expelled and banned from the synagogue. The touch of a tax collector rendered a house unclean. . . . Levi was a social pariah who was spiritually bankrupt, having sold his soul to sin and self. His was a soul in need of a touch from Jesus" (Daniel L. Akin, *Mark*, 48).

c. In addition to the tax collectors were also some called "sinners" (Gk., *amartoloi*).

1) The title "sinners" literally means "ones who have missed the mark."

2) However, in context it is a technical term used by the Pharisees to describe anyone who did not live in rigid obedience to the Law as the Pharisees tried to do.

3) In fact, the majority of the people living in Capernaum, the common people of the land, would have been classified as "sinners" by the Pharisees.

4) A better term for them might be "outcasts."

d. The Jewish leaders felt that these tax collectors and sinners were unfit for association let alone for breaking bread with around the table.

1) Eating together in Hebrew culture is an act of intimacy and friendship.

2) Eating with these outcasts would defile a righteous person in their view.

e. William Lane summarizes, "They criticized Jesus because he failed to observe the distinction between 'the righteous' and 'the sinners' which was an essential component of their piety. As a teacher of the Law he should have recognized that it was inappropriate for him to recline at table with the men gathered in Levi's house. . . . Jesus' disregard of time-honored custom offended them" (William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 104).

4. The Gospel narratives reveal that Jesus made a habit of associating with such sinners (e.g., a Samaritan woman at a well, a woman caught in adultery, lepers, and even a woman whom he allowed to anoint him at the dinner table). All of these associations were scandalous in the eyes of the Jewish leaders.

a. The kingdom of God came to earth each time Jesus shared table fellowship with these outcasts.

b. At this meal Jesus, the Messiah, served as host for sinners who came to him for forgiveness.

c. It is a kingdom picture of the future Wedding Feast of the Lamb in heaven (cf., Rev 19:6-10).

5. The Jewish leaders, identified here as “teachers of the law (Gk., *grammateis*) who were Pharisees (Gk., *Pharisaion*)” saw Jesus and his disciples eating with these sinners.
  - a. This is the first mention of the term Pharisees in Mark.
    - 1) The Pharisees were descendants of the Hassidim, who had preserved the Law during the period of Greek domination and the brief rule of the Jewish Hasmonean Dynasty before Roman occupation.
    - 2) They strictly followed the Law in an attempt to live a perfectly righteous life.
    - 3) The term “teachers of the law” refers to those who were legal experts in the Jewish Law.
    - 4) One could be a “teacher of the law” and not be a Pharisee. And a Pharisee was not required to be a “teacher of the law.” However, the text says those who objected to Jesus’ association with sinners were “the teachers of the law who were Pharisees.”
  - b. The Pharisees asked Jesus’ disciples a question.
    - 1) Notice the subtlety of their approach. They were too timid or perhaps too devious to approach Jesus himself. They asked his disciples instead.
    - 2) Perhaps they sought to instill doubt in the disciples about the righteousness of Jesus or maybe to upset Jesus with reports about what people were saying about him.
  - d. Their question: “Why does he (Jesus) eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (16)
    - 1) Jesus was guilty by association in the eyes of the Pharisees.
    - 2) While Jesus associated with sinners, he did not engage in sinful actions or condone their sins. Instead, he offered them forgiveness through repentance of sin and faith.
    - 3) Sin and sinners were the reason Jesus had come with his central message: “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk 1:15)

### C. Jesus Answers the Question (17)

1. Just as Jesus had known the questions in the Jewish leaders’ minds about his words to the paralytic (cf. Mk 2:8) in last week’s passage, so he knew or perhaps overheard the question that the Pharisees had whispered to his disciples.
2. Jesus provided an answer with a common proverb that would have been known to the Pharisees: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (17).
  - a. This was a well know proverb with which the Pharisees could not disagree.
  - b. This proverb is logical. Those who are sick need a physician.
  - c. Jesus’ point to the Pharisees was that it would be crazy for a physician, Jesus, to avoid those who are sick and in need of healing, the tax collectors and sinners.
  - d. However it was also gives ironic insight about the Pharisees, who saw themselves as “the righteous.”
  - e. The Pharisees were far from righteous by Jesus’ kingdom standards.
  - f. They too were sin sick, but they just didn’t admit it.
3. Warren Wiersbe writes, “Jesus did not consider these people ‘rejects,’ even though they had been excommunicated by the religious leaders. Matthew’s friends were *patients* who needed a physician, and Jesus was that Physician. We have already seen that sin may be compared to sickness and forgiveness to having your health restored. Now we see that our Savior may be compared to a physician: He comes to us in our need; He makes a perfect diagnosis; He provides a final and complete cure; and *He pays the bill!* What a physician!” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent!*, 35).
4. The response of the Pharisees to Jesus’ answer is not recorded in this passage, but we know from other Gospels accounts, that they did not like or accept his answer (cf., Lk 15:1-7).

### D. Lessons for Us

1. Like Jesus, maintain your focus on your primary mission. Jesus came to teach the good news, and that is what he did from the beginning to the end of his ministry.
2. Like Jesus, call others to join you in the kingdom walk of faith. Their past walk in the world is not as important as their future walk with the Lord Jesus.
3. Don’t be a modern day Pharisee who sees yourself as better than others. You must admit your sin sickness before Jesus can deal with your illness through his gracious forgiveness and love.

4. We are all sinners saved by grace. Patients in need of the healing of Physician Jesus.  
Wiersbe shares, “But there are three kinds of ‘patients’ whom Jesus cannot heal of their sin sickness: (1) those who do not know about Him; (2) those who know about Him but refuse to trust Him; and (3) those who will not admit that they need Him. The scribes and Pharisees were in that third category, as are all self-righteous sinners today. Unless we admit that we are sinners, deserving of God’s judgment, we cannot be saved. Jesus save only sinners (Luke 19:10)” (Wiersbe, 35).
5. When you first come to Jesus, there is no better time to invite your friends to join you in faith. Matthew invited his new friend Jesus to his home to meet some of his old tax-collector friends and other sinners.
6. Like Jesus, seek out the lost, those who are “sinners” in the eyes of the self-righteous. Don’t worry what others say about you but only what Jesus has commanded.
7. Like Jesus, don’t be distracted by the sidetracking comments and rumors of the self-righteous. Stay on track with your God-given mission. Know your mission. Complete your mission.
8. Like Jesus, as you build friendships with “sinners,” resist being drawn into sin but remain faithful to your call from God.
9. As a Christ follower, you cannot remain isolated from the world in the safe-space of your church and effectively reach those who are in need of a Savior.
  - a. Move out to your shorelines and walk in the world sharing the good news with those whom you encounter that desperately need to hear the good news before it is too late.
  - b. No one is guaranteed tomorrow. Eternity is only a breath away.