



Speaker:
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Sinners Sought and Saved

◀ Series: The Gospel of Mark • 7 of 7

6/17/2020 (WED) | Bible: **Mark 2:13-17**

Today, we're continuing in Mark's gospel and the second chapter. Through this record we are, as it were, following Jesus on his ministry. This morning, we shall focus on verses 13 to 17.

We read firstly that Jesus went to the seaside and all the people followed him. We can immediately draw two principles from this one event. Firstly, Jesus was happy to minister in all types of environment, both indoor and outdoor. And remember that he engaged in delivery of doctrine as well as making evangelistic pleas. So we could legitimately hold our services of worship likewise in different places if we so wished. We meet every week in a building. It's practical. There's no reason to meet elsewhere. But Jesus' example should at least remind us that there is nothing special about the church building. I'd therefore encourage you to avoid describing this place as "the house of God".

The second thing we see here is that Jesus *taught* again. I mention this only to add weight to the argument I made last time, which was that the preaching of the kingdom of God was the chief aspect of Jesus' ministry. We should understand that for us too, the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is of the highest importance. It should be, and quite rightly has been, central to Reformed acts of worship down the centuries.

We read in verse 14 that as he made his way from one place to another, he came across a tax collector called Levi. This man, a son of Alphaeus, was working. He was sitting at the "receipt of custom". That is, the place where customs charges were collected. Just to explain the setup here: the Roman authorities would invite applications from people to collect taxes on their behalf. The highest bidder would win the contract. You will remember Zacchaeus. Well he was one of these chief tax collectors. And having won the contract, he would employ others to carry out the everyday collections. There were three customs stations in Palestine: in Caesarea, Jericho, and here in Capernaum. These were important centres of trade, and taxes would be taken from merchants as they passed through.

I'm sure you're aware that these publicans, or tax collectors, were highly despised by the people, and for two main reasons. Firstly, they were agents of the occupying power, and were therefore regarded as traitors to their own people. Secondly, there was inadequate regulation to prevent tax collectors from extorting excessive levies from the people. As long as the tax revenue was coming in, the chief tax collectors would not be concerned that the workforce was taxing people excessively. Likewise, the Roman authorities were not concerned about how their revenue was generated. This faulty system allowed the tax collectors to charge whatever they could get away with. The system was utterly corrupt.

You hear me saying this a lot, but one habit of preachers that I wish could be done away with is their desire to find some obscure new perspective on a passage that is based on conjecture but it is preached as if it were factual. Sadly, I think all preachers have to contend with the temptation to be thought highly of. And bringing out points no-one else has spotted is one way he can gain the reputation he desires, even if those points are questionable.

I hope you will see that I try to be confident on those points that the Bible makes clear and cautious with other details that may be only slightly implied. This unfortunate habit of preachers was brought to my mind because of Levi. He's been accused of being an outright robber. Now I'm not disputing that it's likely that he had spent his career fleecing people. But we can't say (1) Tax collectors were known to be corrupt, (2) Levi was a tax collector, therefore (3) Levi was corrupt. We simply don't know.

Neither do we know his level of knowledge about Jesus Christ. It seems inconceivable to me that there would be anyone in the whole of Capernaum who had not heard the ins and outs of all that Jesus had done in the town. Levi may have been to hear Jesus teach. He may have witnessed Jesus performing miracles. And I say this because we don't know whether the call of Levi was of the same type as that of the four fishermen. I did acknowledge, when we went through the calling of those unlikely recruits, that Jesus *could* call in more direct ways. I said he could simply call someone who had never heard of him and they would follow him. This may have been the case with Levi, or it may not.

The important point about this incident is that Jesus calls, and his sheep hear his voice and follow him. Regardless of any contact that Levi had with Jesus previously, it is quite notable that he immediately left his station and followed Jesus. He was leaving behind what was likely a lucrative business. All to live on next to nothing and follow Jesus.

And we marvel at the change in this man's position. As a tax collector, he was regarded as being on a par with thieves and prostitutes. Yet Jesus was to take this sinful creature and make him one of the very twelve apostles of Christ! I should tell you that this man was none other than Matthew, who was to himself pen an account of Jesus' life that would become the first book in the New Testament of the Bible. What a transformation!

I remember an uncle of mine once pleading with me to give up following Jesus and go back to being "normal". He wanted to see the old Paul, who was foul-mouthed and drunken. Consider that the religious leaders in Jesus' day hated him and his followers more than they did the tax collectors. Did they ever plot to kill tax collectors? No. It makes me wonder whether these Pharisees and scribes would have preferred Levi to have returned to his career of corruption. The lesser of two evils.

Levi took Jesus back to his home for a meal and invited others too. So we had Levi, Jesus, disciples of Jesus, and townspeople who wanted to hear Jesus speak. And among these people were other publicans. It sounds like Levi had invited some of his work colleagues to the meal too. And, as usual, there were scribes and Pharisees. For a group of people who despised Jesus, they were amongst the most diligent in attending any

gathering where Jesus was present. Tragically, the motives of most of them were wicked. To them, this man Jesus was making grand claims, but his origins and his appearance didn't match what they expected in their messiah. They seemed convinced from the very outset that he was a charlatan. And their regular attendance at these meetings was for most of them a means to ensnare Jesus.

From what the religious leaders said at this point, it seems they were **observing** the meal only, because they began to criticise Jesus' choice of friends to eat with. In the eyes of this religious elite, men belong to one of two classes: righteous or sinners. You were righteous if you adhered strictly to the Law of Moses. Anything less than this made you a sinner. Although the publicans belong to the class of sinners, according to the Pharisees, they were so despised that they were worthy of a separate mention.

You must understand that eating together had more significance in that day than it does in ours. For example, the Jews did believe that when the Messiah came, he would throw an immense feast for all his people. And you will be aware that the idea of a great feast of God is part of Christian doctrine too. I think a lot of believers mistakenly think that when the scriptures speak of feasting with Jesus that it refers to some end-time event. We should realise that Christian believers in this gospel age are *already at* the great feast, the great supper, of Jesus Christ. We are *at* the feast. Our feet are well and truly under the table. It is our daily communion with Christ that is likened to a feast. This is why we have our Lord's Table commemoration. It's in this token meal that we show forth the reality of the worldwide feast that we are daily part of. The marriage supper of the lamb is not about sitting down eating chicken legs and pork pies. It's far more beautiful and spiritual. The Feast of God is that whereby we "feed" as it were on Jesus Christ each day. Figuratively, we "drink his blood" each day. And who knows whether in the world to come there will be feasting of a more literal kind?

On the understanding of the Jewish leaders then, to eat and drink with these undesirables was an indication of the low level of morality Jesus and his disciples possessed. If you've been a believer for some time, you will have experienced a similar thing. Unbelievers in the world will often be found pointing out flaws in Christians. These accusations are not always without foundation. Christians sin. Daily. And the people of this world, feeling that their sinfulness is being exposed by the existence of people who claim a higher moral standard, want desperately to discover some sin in believers. In their distorted view of what counts as righteousness, they see Christians as those who are by their works claiming a higher level of virtue, if you like. And the only way the worldling can feel better about themselves is if they find flaws in Christians. In their imaginings, they are bringing down the Christian to their level. And as you know, the world seems to take comfort in having many people in their company—the company of sinners. There's no sense to it, but the more people there are that are like them, the safer they feel.

When I hear unbelievers rant about faults in the church, or sinful acts committed by Christians they know, I will try to undermine that defence mechanism. I'll tell them that, after judgement, **they will face God alone**. Appealing to the sinfulness of others will not excuse their sin one bit. God's attitude will be *Never mind other people; what did YOU do with Jesus Christ?* What a shock it will be to those people who spend their lives today holding on to this false comfort. They perhaps reason that if there is a judgement to be faced, this is the card

that they will play. They will point to more extreme sin in the worst people of this world and then they will point out the hypocrisy even among those who claim to be God's people. But it will all be dismissed, unacceptable as evidence.

I said to you last time that the offence taken by the religious leaders here would become more vocal. Last time, it amounted to inward thoughts only. This time, they approach his disciples and express their disagreement.

Although the Pharisees' understanding of God's holy law was deformed, there is a valid principal here. We DO need to be careful in our association with the world. We are *in* the world. We work with the people *of* this world. Our *relatives* are unsaved. Perhaps *those of our own household* are outside of Christ.

And of course we have no desire to separate from these people. We want to have friendly relationships with the people we work with. We love our relatives, friends and family. But the Christian needs to be wise. For example, we might be invited to a special gathering of family or friends, such as a wedding. At most of these events, we know that there will be people drinking to excess. There are Christian principles which would direct us to avoid the event, and there are other Christian principles that would direct us to attend. So we have to make a judgement.

We have had some tremendous opportunities to witness to friends and family at such events. Yet we know that there comes a time when people have been drinking for some time and that conversations become pointless. We find a wise course of action is to accept the invitation and stay for a few hours, and this saves us from the feeling of discomfort that can come when surrounded by behaviour that comes from excessive drinking. As an aside, please remember to act charitably towards other brethren who take a different view on this issue.

If it helps, there is a difference in principle between associations with the world that are sinful and associations that are not. Jesus attended feasts—what we'd call "parties". There's no way around that. He took part in social gatherings containing all kinds of sinful people. He sat chatting to thieves and prostitutes. The middle-class snobbery that we see in today's evangelical churches was absent from the thinking of Jesus. And remember that Jesus could see into their hearts and therefore knew the true depths of their sin far more than we could. If he *had* possessed any of those sinful prejudices that we see in some Christians today, having this deeper knowledge of the people's sins would have made it far more awkward for him to be in their company. Unbearable even. But this was a special kind of person. He deliberately targeted horrible people! And by "horrible", I mean "in the eyes of God". For if you have not yet gone to Jesus Christ for cleansing, and you are still in your sin, you are in the sight of God a nasty and horrible person.

Jesus, as I say, went to parties. Some have tried to make out that every gathering that Jesus attended was free from any alcoholic drinks. Their hard line on drinking alcohol forces them to come to that conclusion. With respect to my brothers and sisters who hold this view, I have to maintain that it is pointless to try and make a Biblical case for total abstinence. In the scriptures, **the sin associated with alcohol was in excessive**

consumption of it. Remember that the definition of a poison is any substance which, when taken in sufficient quantity, causes harm. Alcohol is not inherently evil. It has psychological and medicinal benefits when used in moderation. The crucial point here is that Jesus never sinned in *getting drunk*. For comparison, listen to what Jesus said in one of his parables. If you turn to Matthew's gospel, chapter 24 and verses 48 to 51, we read, "But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, 'My lord delayeth his coming', and shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; the lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." You get the picture here. **The evil servant did not merely attend a social gathering where some people drank too much. He IMMERSED himself in the drunkenness.** It's clear that by his behaviour he identified himself as being no different from the drunkards. As Christians then, it should be easy for people at the next wedding function you attend to see that you are different. If you avoid alcohol, or drink a small amount of it; if you don't eat like a gannet; if you guard your conversation, to keep it sanctified; it will be noticed. Most will think you are strange and wish that you would be more like them. But a consistent walk in the presence of the world is a powerful testimony to the life-changing power of God.

What then was Jesus' attitude to publicans and sinners? I'm going to read two scriptures for you in order to help us understand. The first can be found in Matthew chapter 18 and verse 17. "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, **let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.**" So Jesus was happy to use the tax collector as a symbol of wickedness. Yet a bit further on in Matthew's gospel (chapter 21 and verses 31 and 32) it says, "...Jesus saith unto them, 'Verily I say unto you that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.'" Do you see then that Jesus fully acknowledged the existence of sinners? But he came to *save* sinners! And in the grand irony of his mission, he saves bad people and condemns so called "good" people. He takes the scum of the earth and thoroughly rinses them in his own blood. Their sins are forever forgiven. And they can be declared righteous, allowing them to spend eternity in the presence of God himself. Meanwhile, the most likely candidates for eternal salvation are left behind to face eternal doom.

Jesus' response to this latest round of criticism was very remarkable. This statement is one of those that has always impressed me with its directness and power. Jesus uses the analogy of physical health. He makes a statement that no sane person could disagree with. He reminds them that people who are well do not need to go and see a doctor, a physician. You would only visit the doctor or the hospital if you had an illness or had suffered some accident. And it's this simple, universally held, truth that he applies to spiritual matters. That is, **you only need healing from sin if you have the disease of sin.** Sinless people don't need saving - *sinners* do.

Jesus presents himself as the great Physician of Souls. He announces that he is on a holy crusade to save sinful men and women. He presents himself as the ointment which can heal the of boils of sin, the antidote to the poison of unrighteousness.

In trying to understand Jesus' point fully, a few possibilities occurred to me. One possibility is that Jesus' response is more of an explanation, containing only mild rebuke. That is, he was saying to the scribes and Pharisees, *Look I came to urge repentance on sinners. Surely this is something you would be in favour of, no? You want people to turn from sin, don't you?* On this view, he would be assuming the salvation of the religious leaders. On the basis of other scriptures that we read, it's clear that this was far from Jesus's view, so we have to reject this possibility.

Another interpretation that seems reasonable is that Christ was simply saying that those who are already saved do not need to be born again...again! And this is true for us today. In my everyday ministry to you, I speak as one Christian to another. Sunday services are not primarily evangelistic. If you make a decent profession, and I am persuaded that you have been born again from above, my duty is to feed you with Bible truth. To continually lay down the original foundations of repentance towards God, faith in Jesus Christ and baptism would be silly. It's now about *discipleship*. So I accept that Jesus may have meant that those who have already trusted in him don't need this message.

I should just add that I do deliberately include some evangelistic elements in all my sermons. I need to ensure that the gospel is at the heart of every message, in the hope that believers will be edified, and unbelievers will be convicted of sin. Who are unbelievers?

- Churches contain young people from Christian families, and it's usually impossible to know their spiritual state.
- Amongst the adult professors there are those who **pretend** to be believers.
- Congregations welcome visitors to the meetings, and many of these will be outside the kingdom of God.
- And as the messages go out on the internet to the four corners of the world, we have no idea of the spiritual state of the listeners. And if your sermon could be the only one they listen to in their whole lives, it is extremely important that you make sure that they hear all about Jesus Christ and the way of salvation.

Thirdly, then, Jesus could have meant something quite different. I favour this interpretation, so this is the one I'll run with. The sense here is different. There is a strong rebuke. On this view, Jesus is using a type of sarcasm. He is saying, *Perfect people don't need to repent. So if your sinless, you're not on my radar. This call to repentance doesn't apply to you. You don't need God's salvation.*

I've used this line of reasoning in open-air evangelism. I've announced to the crowds that, if they're perfect, if they have never committed a single sin their whole lives, then this message doesn't apply to them. They should move on! I trust that the point is not lost on them. I expect that there's no individual out there who believes that they've never done *anything* wrong. So it's my hope that they will conclude that the message we have is **for them**. Tragically, most still believe that our witness is irrelevant to them.

The evidence from the scriptures shows that the religious elite reacted the same way. The logical conclusion they should have arrived at was that they were NOT sinless and therefore NEEDED salvation by Christ. In the era of the incarnation, as in our own day, the majority remain in the darkness.

Jesus came to rescue sinners. The promise of salvation to all who come to him is declared to all. It is not our business to restrict our witness because we know that most hearers will choose to remain in their sin. Now you will know that I'm very much opposed to that style of evangelism which leaves sinners with the impression that God is their friend. That salvation is merely the gaining of a closer relationship with one who is already their father. We preach neither "God loves you" nor "God hates you". It is our job to see to it that the message of repentance and faith is declared as widely and as frequently as possible. And an evangelistic message that does not mention the reality of sin, the need for a perfect righteousness and a coming judgement, is thoroughly faulty.

And as uncomfortable as it is to many Christians, there is no degree of wickedness in a man that will put him beyond the pale of God's salvation. He HAS saved, and WILL CONTINUE to save, the vilest creatures that the human race has ever produced.

If I reminded you that Christ even saves murderers, you would nod approvingly. But I suspect that if I were to produce a long list of sinful behaviours, gradually becoming more and more evil, some of you would begin to squirm. We have all heard of individuals who have committed crimes that are unimaginable in their depravity. Some are so bad that I wouldn't be able to bring myself to mention them. Instead, I'll give you a small sample from the scriptures themselves.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul gives the believers a sample list of sins that will exclude a person from salvation. He begins with sexual sins. We have, included in his list or implied in it, the whole raft of deviant practices that we see even today. Those who continue their whole lives practicing these things will never enter the kingdom of God.

- There are those who sleep around.
- Those who idolise their own bodies.
- Those who are fixated with the bodies of others.
- Those who are married but have extramarital affairs.
- Those men who sleep with other men.
- Those women who have carnal relations with other women.
- Those who dress up as the opposite sex.
- Those who have surgery to *appear to be* the opposite sex.

We could go on to mention child abusers, people involved in bestiality, those who view pornography, and so on. Paul's list continues to mention those who steal, whether objects of value, intellectual property, or through depriving their employers by trying to avoid work. He mentions those whose minds are continually dwelling on acquiring some new possession. Dreaming about the new car, the new house, or getting their

children into careers that will provide bragging rights for their parents. His list ends with those who get drunk, those who slag other people off, and those who try to get money from other people in a sinful way. Just a tiny list of examples of sins that will bar you from God's kingdom should you refuse to abandon them.

But crucially, Paul ends with this. If you want to read it yourself, will find it in 1 Corinthians, ch. 6 and verses 9 to 11. That final verse says, "AND SUCH WERE SOME OF YOU [rpt]: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are JUSTIFIED IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS, and by the Spirit of our God." After telling people there were thousands of lifestyle choices that would exclude someone from God's kingdom, Paul reminds his hearers that some of them used to practice those things! The dark habits that, if persisted in, would result in eternal damnation, were variously practiced by the Christians in the Corinthian church and in the church of God throughout time. The church of God has contained former revilers, robbers and rapists...former slave owners, sodomites, and slanderers....former torturers, terrorists, and tyrants. Eternity will reveal the scale of this marvel, whereby the Holy Congregation of God will be seen to contain some of the worst dregs of human society, while in hellfire will forever reside many of those who the world thought respectable and virtuous.

Sinners who wish to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life need to trust in Jesus Christ. He is the one who gave up his life for others. On him was laid the sins of all his elect people, including those sins that today I was unwilling to even mention. And entry through the gates of this New Jerusalem, the Church of God, requires that the sinner identifies himself as thoroughly vile in God's sight.

He or she must identify themselves with the very worst in society, even if they have not practiced the same sort of wickedness. **It will not do for a sinner to approach God by admitting their sinfulness but arguing that they are not as bad as others.** That is unacceptable and exposes you as a religious hypocrite who has no part in God's salvation. I seem to remember in the Bible a certain Pharisee approaching God in this way and walking away from the prayer as damned as when he began it.

We must **all** acknowledge that we are no better than any sexual predator, animal abuser or genocidal maniac. **AND BY REMINDING OURSELVES OF THAT UTTERLY DEGRADED POSITION WE WERE IN, WE CAN MORE GREATLY APPRECIATE THE HEIGHTS OF HONOUR AND GLORY TO WHICH WE HAVE BEEN ELEVATED.**

All believers are products of a miracle. We are **all** trophies of God's grace. And it thrills my heart when I consider what God has done in saving me, my wife, members of my family, friends, and all others who belong to the great church of God. The Great Physician has healed us. He called us with a calling that was, thankfully, irresistible. A calling that did not give up because of our continual rebellion against it.

In other words, a call that was based on true, immeasurable, and eternal love.

Amen.