

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

I Came To Call Sinners

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Mark 2:13-17

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 2:13; that’s on page 837 in your pew Bibles. This is a very familiar passage, partly because it is recorded in multiple Gospels¹ so as you read through the Bible you encounter it a couple times. It is also familiar because its gets preached a lot and sometimes poorly – sometimes this text is recruited to support things I don’t think it is intended to support. So we are going to be careful today and we’re going to make sure that we measure our assumptions against the actual words of the text. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

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.” (Mark 2:13–17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

Well as always we read these stories in Mark’s Gospel primarily to learn about God. Jesus is God

¹ Matthew 9, Mark 2, Luke 5.

in the flesh – I mentioned last week that God doesn't send us an airtight argument, he sends us an airtight person. We look at Jesus and we see a picture of God that is better than anything we could ever have hoped for, asked for or imagined. So the first thing we want to ask this morning is:

What Kind Of God Do We See In This Story?

The first thing we see, of course, is:

1. A God who seeks out sinners

That is the main point of this story! God is a seeker of sinners! The Gospel is not about how good people work their way up to God – the Gospel is a story about how a good God comes down to us. Now, this is not something that the Jews of Jesus' day were expecting. They expected sinners to seek out God and not without some justification – there are verses in the Old Testament that make it sound like people will be attracted to God – people will seek out God. Consider for example Isaiah 2:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, 3 and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:2–3 ESV)

So it does kind of sound like people are going to come to God – therefore the Jews were not a missionary people and they did not have a "missionary" view of God. And yet Jesus says:

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10 ESV)

Now this is not a contradiction it is additional content. The Old Testament says that people are going to come; the New Testament says that Jesus is going to come first – he is going to take the initiative. He's going to find you, call you, save you and lead you by the hand; because if he didn't then you would never find your way.

But thanks be to God – he comes.

The second thing we see here is:

2. A God who forgives and who fellowships with sinners

Now I think I mentioned off the top that this passage is sometimes ‘over preached’. We sometimes will hear this passage preached as if it endorses indiscriminate fellowship with sinners in bizarre places. Sometimes this text is presented as if it is sending people out to the bars and the strip clubs and the casinos in order to “hang out” with sinners, but that is not what this text is saying. Let’s notice a few things. First of all let’s notice that this social event happens IN the house of a disciple – not at the strip club. Let’s notice also that the people who are there are described as followers of Jesus. Look at the words:

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**. (Mark 2:15 ESV)

Many what? Many ‘tax collectors and sinners’ – **followed him**. This was a thoroughly disreputable gathering OF SINNERS WHO HAVE BEGUN TO FOLLOW JESUS. This is not Jesus hanging out at the strip club handing out tracks to inebriated customers, this is Jesus having fellowship with followers – who happened to have been called out of lives of remarkable sin.

Sometimes we can be so eager to use this story as a defence of our bad choices that we manage to miss what it is actually saying. William Lane brings the beauty of this text back to the foreground. He says:

“The specific reference in verse 17 to Jesus’ call of sinners to the Kingdom suggests that the basis of table-fellowship was *messianic forgiveness*, and the meal itself was an anticipation of the messianic banquet.”²

What this story is saying is that very great sinners will be sought by God and forgiven and included in the coming Messianic Kingdom. That’s the message and that message is repeated by Jesus in many different ways and in many different places. That is the exact same message that shows up in all of Jesus’ various parables about the banquet. Do you remember the parable Jesus told about the King who was having a banquet and not everyone who was invited came and so in order to fill the hall the King sent out his servants saying:

² William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 106.

Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ 10 And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. (Matthew 22:9–10 ESV)

So in this parable Jesus says that at the King’s Banquet – which was a Jewish way of speaking about the eternal kingdom of God – there will be people from every level of society – rich and poor, good and bad – all manner of backgrounds are going to be represented because of the King’s generosity and initiative.

But Jesus was equally clear in that parable that the King’s Banquet was not a “come as you are” affair. You had to properly dressed. Do you remember how that parable ends?

“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. 12 And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ (Matthew 22:11–13 ESV)

The King takes the initiative. The King is generous. The King welcomes sinners to share in his fellowship – but only if they are covered in the Robe of Righteousness which he himself provides.

So let’s go back to William Lane’s comment about our story in Mark 2. Let’s hear that again:

“The specific reference in verse 17 to Jesus’ call of sinners to the Kingdom suggests that the basis of table-fellowship was *messianic forgiveness*, and the meal itself was an anticipation of the messianic banquet.”³

So what are we seeing in this story? We are seeing a God who takes the initiative, who calls sinners, who forgives sinners and who welcomes forgiven sinners into his eternal fellowship. Thanks be to God!

Now as always we want to ask the question: what would it look like for us to follow Jesus in this manner? That we are to do so is beyond question. I mentioned that the Jews of Jesus’ day did not understand themselves as a sent people. They expected sinners to come but they did not expect to be sent to them. Jesus changes that. Jesus brings additional light on that and he says to his

³ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 106.

disciples:

As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. (John 20:21 ESV)

That's pretty clear! Go and do what you have seen me do. So let's ask the obvious question:

How Should We Imitate Jesus In Engaging With Sinners?

1. We should take the initiative

Jesus did not wait for Levi to come to him he went looking for him and I think we should do the same. We should plan for contact with unbelievers. I think the longer you have been a Christian the more necessary this is. If you have been a Christian for 15 or 20 years you may now be at the point where you have no non-Christian friends, so you are going to have to be intentional. You can join a class at the community college, you can sign up for Rotary, you can volunteer at the local school or nursing home or you can coach a team or host a neighbourhood bar-b-q. There are lots of ways to reach out and make contact with unsaved people, but if you are not intentional it generally will not happen. To be like Jesus is to take initiative.

The second thing we need to do is be intentional.

2. We should be intentional

By that I mean that when you are with sinners you should remember why you are with sinners.

Jesus said that in answer to the criticisms of the scribes; he said:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:17 ESV)

Jesus says that I am with sinners because I am like a physician. I am with sinners in the way that a doctor is with sick people. I am not just “hanging out” I am on mission!

That needs to be said.

Let's be very clear here: Jesus did not "hang out with" sinners. If you read the Bible it becomes very clear very fast that Jesus generally hung out with a small group of quite religious people – the 12 disciples. He spent a great deal of his time with them. There is no doubt that the members of his intimate community were followers of God. Jesus said that! He said:

48 "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:48–50 ESV)

So Jesus was very clear here. He said: "The members of my intimate community are those who do the will of my Father in heaven." Jesus was not "best buds" with sinners. He was with them for a purpose. He was with them as a doctor is with the sick.

The Bible does not advocate casual, purposeless friendship with unbelievers. It just does not. In fact it warns against that very thing.

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." (1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV)

So let's just put that out there: to follow Jesus is to engage sinners intentionally – as a physician engages with sick people.

The third thing we see here is that when we engage with sinners we need to be honest with sinners.

3. We should be honest

The level of honesty in this story actually makes me uncomfortable. I'm a Canadian, not a 1st century Jew and I am not sure that I am capable of this level of bluntness apart from God's grace. I mean, look at what this text actually says. It says that Jesus was having fellowship with some new followers who have come out of a very sinful personal background. Maybe they are in Levi's backyard, having some kind of bar-b-q – I don't know but some party crashers come by and they question the legitimacy of the gathering and Jesus responds – while sitting at the table with these sinners - and listen to what he says in their hearing:

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.” (Mark 2:17 ESV)

OUT LOUD – in the hearing of the people at the table – Jesus says ‘I am with these sinners as a physician is with those who are sick.’ As a Canadian I can’t believe he just said that! If I am was sitting beside Jesus as one of his disciples I would be shrinking down with embarrassment at this point. “Jesus! You just called these people sick sinners! WOW! That’s not politically correct!” You can’t do that Jesus, but he did!

When Luke tells the story he is even more explicit. Luke has Jesus saying:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:31–32 ESV)

TO REPENTANCE! So not only does Jesus say that all of these people with him at the table are sick sinners – he also says that they have been called to REPENTANCE. “I’m not here to hang out,” Jesus says, “I’m here to call sick sinners to repentance”.

Wow!

That’s a level of honesty I will need prayer to achieve. But let’s state the obvious, if you are not prepared to be that honest with sinners then you should not engage with them. It would actually be worse for them if you just hung out and appeared to affirm their lifestyle without ever actually explaining to them how this behaviour offends God, hurts people and damns souls to hell. If you aren’t HONEST with them about that then I think you are culpable in their ultimate damnation. Because God says that in the Bible. He says:

If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. (Ezekiel 3:18 ESV)

So if you are going to build a relationship with an unsaved person you will be held responsible if you are not honest with them about their spiritual peril.

The final thing we see here is that if we are going to be like Jesus then we should fellowship with forgiven followers.

4. We should fellowship with forgiven followers

Remember that is what we see Jesus doing in this story. He is at the table of Levi with other notable sinners and tax collectors who have begun to follow him. Dennis Nineham writes:

“in the ancient world table-fellowship was regarded as a sign and pledge of real intimacy”.⁴

So Jesus is making a statement here – and a pledge. He is saying this will be the manner of my eternal fellowship. So if we are going to follow Jesus then we need to extend fellowship to forgiven followers – no matter from where or from what they have come.

Now every word of that is important and it is not hard to imagine how the early church might have got this wrong. They might have thought then that any sinner should be welcomed in the church regardless of the state of their relationship with Christ or their public behaviour as professed followers of Christ. They might have thought that - so Paul corrects them and says to them very clearly:

I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:9–13 ESV)

The meaning of this text is pretty clear; the Pillar Commentary puts it this way:

Such people are to be excluded from the Lord’s Table and other meals when the church gathers for fellowship.⁵

So let me go back to what I said, because I said that every word of it matters. I said that if we are going to follow Jesus then we need to extend **fellowship to forgiven followers** – no matter from where or from what they have come.

We must extend fellowship – table fellowship – Eucharistic fellowship – to forgiven followers. You have to be forgiven by the Messiah to eat with the Messiah – remember the fellow who

⁴ D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Penguin New Testament Commentaries. (London: Penguin Group, 1992), 95.

⁵ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 218.

didn't have his robe on – you have to be covered by the blood of Messiah to eat with Messiah. And you have to be following. You can't claim to be in relationship with Jesus while ignoring and rejecting the Word of the Lord.

But thanks be to God – many people who were rejecting the Word of God have been called, forgiven and restored – Paul goes on to say that very thing in the very next chapter. He says:

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–11 ESV)

Your church is made up of forgiven followers! You were once wicked and vile sinners – you were sick, but you've been healed. You've been forgiven and you are entirely welcome at the table and at the banquet of the Lord. There are no second-class citizens in this kingdom; there are only forgiven followers.

Now in the few minutes we have left I want to apply this text specifically to the issue of our engagement with the LGBTQ community.

A Specific Application To The LGBTQ Community:

I don't think you can preach this text and not attempt that application given our particular cultural context. Many of you may know that this is a live discussion in our denomination. Our churches are wrestling with what it means to follow the example of Jesus in reaching out to cultural outcasts with the saving message of the Gospel. Some have gone too far – and some have not gone far enough. So let's talk about what it would look like for us to apply this teaching to our engagement with the LGBTQ community.

I think it would mean first of all, taking the first step.

1. Take the first step

Gay people in our community assume that we don't like them. Maybe they've heard that on TV,

maybe they saw a story on the internet about Westboro Baptist Church and the mean things they say and maybe they just assume that all Christians are like that. Therefore, you need to take the first step. You need to reach out in smiling friendship to the LGBTQ people in your neighbourhood. You need to say hello, you need to shake hands and you need to ask them if they'd like to get a coffee sometime. Let me state the obvious: coffee is not communion. You can and should and must initiate kind hearted social contact with members of the LGBTQ community.

Secondly, if we are going to do like Jesus on this one then we need to risk being mischaracterized.

2. Risk being mischaracterized

If you sit in the coffee shop with an openly gay or transgender person in this town there is a chance that people will see you and think the wrong thing. There is a chance that some of your Christian friends will wonder whether you've begun to compromise your Biblical convictions. That's ok. Jesus went through that too. You will survive. That is nothing compared to the bullying and abuse that some LGBTQ people have had to deal with so, consider that a very small price to pay.

Thirdly, we must commit to being present with LGBTQ people.

3. Be present with LGBTQ people

We aren't going to win gay people from a distance. We aren't going to "slogan them" into the kingdom of God. We are going to have to build relationships and establish trust. Most of the scholars that I've read have said that it is highly unlikely that this was Jesus' first encounter with Levi. Capernaum is a small town. Tax collectors set up their booths on the side of the road where goods were being moved to market. Meaning, Levi would likely have TAXED the fish that were caught by Peter, Andrew, James and John. These men knew Levi and he knew them. But obviously something about this group was interesting to Levi. Maybe they spoke to him differently than everyone else, maybe Jesus had chatted with him a number of times while Peter was getting the boat ready – we don't know but it certainly looks like there was a previous

relationship behind this dramatic calling. There generally is and in this particular case in our particular day there almost certainly will need to be. Bridges have been burnt and they will need to be built again.

Fourthly and finally, if we are to be apply this text to the specific issue of our engagement with LGBTQ people we will need to commit to faithfulness and honesty.

4. Be honest with LGBTQ people

The Scriptures are in fact very clear:

Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–10 NKJV)

If you are going to be faithful, honest and truthful then you have to tell them that you cannot be a Christian and a practicing homosexual. In the same way that you cannot be a Christian and a practicing thief or a perpetual drunk – you have to repent of your sin in order to be saved. If you aren't willing to tell people that then you are not following the example of Jesus Christ.

Now, are there some churches in the Evangelical world who have gone TOO FAR in reaching out to the gay and transgender community? Absolutely! There are churches who have taken initiative, they have taken risks, they have built relationships but they have not been honest – more than that, some of them have told outright lies and have called sin not sin. There are churches who have gone too far – but let's be honest – there are also lots of churches that have not gone far enough.

And there is no right way to get this wrong. Its not like its better to skip #1 than #4 – no its equally bad! Not reaching out is just as big a sin as is selling out. You have to do it all – you have to do 1 through 4 - if you want to be like Jesus.

General Challenge:

Now, let me end with a general challenge. You may not have any LGBTQ friends or neighbours

so let me keep this very general. No matter who your neighbours are you can be sure of this: they are sinners in need of a Saviour – because we are all sinners in need of a Saviour. So go and tell them about Jesus! Go into the highways and byways and tell people that the king is merciful and generous! Tell them to renounce their sins and to take up the robe of his righteousness and to come home – to enjoy the fellowship of the Lord forever.

That is our job, so very practically, here is the challenge I want to give you:

In the next two weeks I want you to make a social engagement with an unsaved friend or neighbour. I'm talking about an actual appointment – tickets to a show or an invitation to dinner. Something specific that you arrange. And at that meeting I want you to be intentional and honest and kind. For the kingdom of God is at hand.

Let's pray together.