

Mark 2:13 Then He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them. **14** As He passed by, He saw Levi the *son* of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him. **15** Now it happened, as He was dining in *Levi's* house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him. **16** And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, "How *is it* that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?" **17** When Jesus heard *it*, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (NKJV)

None of the other gospels tell us anything additional between last week's text and this week's text, so we can move right along.

We find that Jesus goes out to the sea. Evidently the shore of the sea at that point had a gently sloping bank that would create sort of a natural amphitheater. And the sea would allow a backdrop that would allow Jesus to keep everyone in front of Him and to his sides. No one would be behind Him. And, if he needed to, he could set out in a boat to keep the crowd from pressing in on Him.

He may have been teaching as he was walking, which would be common for Rabi's of His day. And naturally, partly because the leper wouldn't obey a direct command, Jesus is surrounded by a multitude.

Now, somehow, with this mob following Him, Christ went past the tax office.

This was likely a Roman customs house where fishermen had to bring their fish to be taxed. You see, we Americans aren't the first people to have to deal with the tax man. Here is an income tax that happens, just like ours. Before you even see the cash, it is gone. So we at least have good company. Now, if you were the 4 fishermen disciples, how would you feel about Levi- the guy who makes sure you pay your taxes on the fish you work all night catching?

Now the word used to describe Matthew shows that he was an entry level collector. Like any bureaucracy, there were the little guys and the big guys. Matthew was a little guy.

Now there are some things we need to understand about being a tax collector.

First, they weren't really hired by the government. Each tax collector had to purchase a territory where they would collect taxes. Now, once they had purchased that territory from the Roman Government, they had the backing of the Roman military to collect those taxes. So people were going to pay their taxes. And the tax rate was not fixed. As unjust as we may feel our taxes are, at least they are fixed on an annual basis. In Israel, the tax man was required to give **Rome** a certain amount. But he could **collect** as much as he wanted. The difference between what he owed Rome and what he collected was his to keep.

So, in a sense, all tax collectors were guilty of extortion- taking people's money by force. Now how would you feel if you were assigned an IRS agent, and that agent was free to charge you whatever he determined. You had no say and no form of appeal and no right of law to point to. You paid up, or the soldiers gave you a visit. Here is a man you would despise and yet you would be nice to. That is the life of a Roman tax collector.

Now I have been known to complain about the IRS. But after reading this, I am beginning to feel lucky. At least the agents can't raise the taxes to become wealthy themselves.

Now to the Jews, these **tax collectors** were traitors. They had sold out their own people for money. Now, if you were one of these people and you were already a spiritual and social outcast due to your decision to get rich by being a tax collector, how important do you think obeying the laws of God would be to you? To any fellow Jewish law-keeping countryman, you were lower than dirt. So it would be easy to adapt the attitude, I am already completely rejected, why even try to be moral.

This dynamic was sure to create a group of people who had no regard for the law or God. And if they did, they surely would not have cared about the Pharisees traditions that were **added to** the law. The tax collectors would be the prime example of a sinner because they were very likely to have no care for what the law says. They were viewed by the religious rulers, and probably by the people as a whole, all through the Gospels, as the worst of sinners.

This gives us better insight into how loaded this event was.

Now Levi is this man's Hebrew name. Matthew is his Greek name. We don't know when he got his Greek name. But it means Gift of God. I will bet you, when he was a tax collector, that was not what his fellow countrymen called him, at least when he could hear them.

And Jesus said to him (Matthew or Levi), "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him.

Now we need to keep in mind that this is probably not the first time Matthew saw Christ or Christ saw Matthew. I would venture to guess that they had spoken. But if not, Matthew had heard enough and seen enough of Christ to know that Christ was different. Christ had spiritual power and spoke words of authoritative truth. He had the power to heal and the power to forgive sins.

Now there are a couple of things, once we know the background, that jump out at us. If you were Matthew, what would you have thought?

Here you are, one of the most ostracized people in the city of Capernaum. You were a known sinner. You had abandoned the law of God. No card-carrying synagogue-gathering Jew would socialize with you. You had nothing to your credit except a whole lot of money that you had gained, mostly, in an immoral

method. So here you sit, doing your job. Notice that Matthew is not following Christ to hear Him speak. He is sitting at his desk doing his job. So here Matthew sits- the least likely candidate for a spiritual leadership position that you could ever imagine. **He** probably thought this to be true, and so would everyone else in Capernaum. But who does Christ choose? The least likely candidate. The one person in all Capernaum who would know for sure that he did not deserve this honor. You can just imagine his shocked look. You can almost see him look around behind him, look back at Jesus, and say- “Me?”

We might ask, at this point, why? Why would Jesus choose Him? But maybe the better question is “**Why not?**” In reality, from God’s perspective, isn’t this really the picture of every person He ever draws to Himself? Isn’t this you and me? How well did we keep God’s moral law? How well did we avoid sin? How fit were we for spiritual leadership? Or spiritual following for that matter? We were all morally bankrupt. There is no difference in terms of merit from the worst person and the best person. Because all of our righteousness is like filthy rags. But we can’t say that there is **no difference at all** between the best and worst people. Often, the people who are the worst have a much better acknowledgment of their need than the best people do. So, **why not** chose Matthew? Of all people, this person knows he has a need.

So what did Matthew do? He got up and followed Christ.

Luke 5:28 So he left all, rose up, and followed Him.

Now we find that when the fishermen left their boats, they are able to go back to their boats when Christ is gone. This isn’t going to work for Matthew. He is not going to be able to go back to his desk collecting taxes. There was a long line of people waiting for that vacancy. When he left his old life, there was no going back. Matthew knew this was a career move, a life decision. And he did not hesitate. He didn’t wait. He knew that he was being asked by his Lord to follow Him, and that was a greater calling than anyone or anything would ever provide for him.

We are wise to follow Christ like Matthew. He provides a wonderful example for us. And all of Christ’s calls on our lives should be greeted in the same manner. We would do well to respond like Matthew whenever God calls us **to stop doing something** as well as **to start doing something**. We do well to obey immediately and completely, in such a way that there is no going back.

. 15 Now it happened, as He was dining in *Levi's* house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him.

I really like it that the first thing that Levi did was throw a party. The way this is worded in this passage, and in the others, lends us to believe that this was a party in Jesus honor. In fact it could even be said that Christ was the host. Did Christ tell

Matthew that this was the first thing he should do? That could well be. We don't know.

But he throws a party. **Now who is likely to come to a tax collectors party?**

There would be little sense in inviting the religious elite. That would be a waste of time. They wouldn't come. That would kind of be like the lepers throwing a party. Who would come? The only people who would come to a tax collectors party are those who are also disenfranchised from the Jewish society. Tax collectors and often prostitutes are lumped together.

That would be like Brad being invited as the guest of honor at an adult filmmakers convention. It would really be that kind of a shocking thing to the normal Jew.

How would we respond?

There is a commercial I've seen. Maybe you have too. It shows two doctors standing over a hospital bed with a patient in it. One of the doctors has the electrical paddles used to restart a person's heart. A fly is buzzing around. The doctor hits the fly with the paddle and fries it. He looks down at the fly laying on the patient with the paddles still held in his hands. Just as the wife and little child come into the room to see patient, the doctor says "That killed him". The jaws drop on the mother and the little girl. The punchline of the commercial is "Don't judge too quickly".

That would have been good advice for the Pharisees to follow and it is often good advice for us to follow. Things are not always like they appear.

So at this party we have Jesus, Matthew, all the friends of Matthew, and the disciples of Christ. These were probably people who had left their normal lives to follow Christ, to order their lives around travelling with Christ.

What an odd mix of people that would be.

But that is what happens when a person comes to Christ. The church has been built, for the most part, by word of mouth, by personal testimony. Matthew is bringing all these people to a party honoring Christ. Many of them are just glad to come to a party. Probably there are an awful lot of people at this party who are uncomfortable. There are probably upstanding Jews who are known to have said very bad things about tax collectors. There are probably tax collectors in attendance who have personally wronged some of these upstanding citizens. Christ's church and His ministry opportunities are full of all kinds of human drama. But in this case there is only one significant fact. Christ is the guest of honor.

And I bet this was a pretty good party. Matthew was probably rich. And given that he had left everything to follow Christ, he obviously has some idea of the value of Christ. So he probably would pull out all the stops to honor his Savior. The four fishermen have probably never been to such a party in their lives. And with every party, you will always find a party pooper.

16 And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, "How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?"

When the scribes and Pharisees saw it. Now how exactly did the Pharisees see it? It is because they, too, were following Christ. But not in a good sense. They were spying on Him, trying to find dirt on Him that would allow them to undermine His ministry.

This reminds me of a report I read where a woman reported her neighbor for indecent exposure. When the police looked into it this older woman had to climb on top of all her furniture to reach a very high window so she could see this man in his gated back yard.

Yes the Pharisees made sure to see Jesus.

Now he was eating with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors probably came first in their list because there was no worse of a person than a tax collector.

Sinner came next because they were **almost** as bad as a tax collector. And like we said earlier, these are people who ignored the law of God.

So the Pharisees and scribes take Jesus's disciples aside and ask the very knowing question. How is it that he eats and drinks, luxuriates, fellowships, with these kind of people. Their very question is just like the devil's statement when he asks Eve **Genesis 3:1 "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" (NKJV)**

The question, all by itself, is designed to create doubt in the mind of the hearer. They are at their demon inspired work of destroying the hearers of the good message.

They are asking, if Christ is of God, what possible motive could he have for hanging out with these sinners? And like so many of these types of questions, an honest answer will only drive the questions underground.

They are implying that either Christ has no discernment or He has no wisdom. Isn't that always how people attack valid ministries? They don't go directly to the source because they could not hold up their end of a truthful and legitimate argument. They always take people aside to cast doubt on the minister, always avoiding direct confrontation.

17 When Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

We will delve into this passage further but let's look at it as a whole first.

Here are the three things that Christ includes in His response. This is from the *The New Testament Commentary: Vol. I - Matthew and Mark*.

First, his office being analogous to that of a physician who visits the sick and not the well, sinners are the very persons whom he should visit.

Second, God himself had said in the Scriptures, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice"—a Hebraism, which means, "I will have mercy in preference to sacrifice." ([Hos. 6:6](#).) The mercy shown to these publicans and sinners by mingling with them for their good, was more acceptable to God than the sacrifices of the altar. (See the context in Hosea.)

Third, "I am not come to *call* the righteous, but sinners." His call was a call to repentance, and therefore sinners alone were those to whom he should go; and the greater the sinners, the greater the need that he should be among them. It is impossible to conceive a more complete vindication, or one more happily expressed.

Now, let's start with the first point.

Do you know of any doctor who has ever done a house call for someone who was well? I don't. Doctors go out of their way only for sick patients. The following quote is from Warren Wiersbe.

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 Saviour 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!

Mr. Wiersbe goes on-

Jeremiah rebuked the priests and false prophets of his day because they were worthless physicians who gave only a false hope to the nation. "They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace'; when there is no peace" ([Jer. 6:14](#); [8:11](#)). They applied their weak medicines to the surface symptoms and did not get down deep into the basic problem—the sinful heart ([Jer. 17:9](#)). We must beware of such worthless physicians today. End quote.

I was listening this week to some of the quotes of our modern day so called ministers. Joel Osteen says that we have the power inside of us to provide all kind of wonderful outcomes. In essence, we no longer need God. We are cured if we choose to believe it. And yet, our master physician let us know that our admission of sickness is our only hope of receiving a cure.

Christ made it very clear. Only those who come to the realization that we are lost and without hope, that we are sick and without a cure, only those will come to Christ for the cure they so need. He did not come to save everyone. He did not

come to cure everyone. He came for those who are sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they need a Savior, that they have a sickness that only God can cure. It is Matthew, the very person this story is about, that tells us

Matthew 9:13 But go and learn what *this* means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

The phrase, "Go and learn what this means" was commonly used to tell someone to go learn what they ought to know already. It was a very clear rebuke. In this case he is telling the religious experts what they must know if they are to be religious experts. Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. This passage emphasizes the law's moral standards over the ceremonies. By making that huge mistake, these people end up being harsh, judgmental and self righteous. Jesus referred to this passage a couple of times.

Jesus is exhibiting mercy to these sinners. This is the mercy the Pharisees should be applying, but they are not. So Christ is putting these religious leaders in their place. He is showing them what they should know, but don't. What they should do, but don't.

We do well to pay attention to this as well. We do well to follow Christ's example, rather than the Pharisees. We do well to do all we can to get the good news to the most notorious sinners given that is clearly what Christ did.

And then the last point Christ made was this:

I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

There is so much to learn from this verse.

First, there are some that Christ did not come to save. We must hold this verse in reserve as we study the mission of Christ. If Christ came to save everyone, then why would He say this clear statement? He certainly came to save those in our world. But according to this verse, there are specific people He came to save and there are those He did not. He did not come to call the righteous.

Now, who are the righteous?

Well, they certainly are not people who are truly righteous. We know that no one is truly righteous apart from the ministry of Christ. So this is referring to people who regard themselves as righteous. You see, God does not save good people. Because good people think **they deserve to be saved**. Grace is impossible to appreciate in people who think they are good. That is kind of the beauty of it. You never have to, nor could you ever, deserve Grace. It is impossible. The very definition of Grace means that it is unmerited. You cannot deserve it.

So the opposite is also true. If you hope to deserve it or think you deserve it, you will never get it. People who see themselves as righteous have a major problem. They think they deserve grace. One thing is for sure. In that current state Christ did not come to save them. He came to save some, but not them.

So who did He come for? Sinners. Now when Christ uses the word Sinners, immediately the Pharisees would have thought that Christ is talking about those who have openly abandoned God's law. They thought they had identified the sinners. The sinners were someone other than them.

Who do you think sinners are?

When you look in the mirror, do you see the person staring back at you as a sinner? If you don't, you are not qualified for salvation. Until you see that person as a person every bit as bad as Matthew the tax collector, Christ has not come for you. But the good news is, when you see yourself as a sinner, you can, right now, be saved for eternity. In fact, it does not matter how bad of thing you have done. If you know you are a sinner, you can be saved.

Our world has opted for a different gospel. It is a message that avoids the word sin. It avoids offending the sensibilities of its listeners. But ultimately it is not a gospel at all. Because none of its listeners will ever be saved by it. Mike used to say that the only reason to come to Christ is because of sin. And I believe that more every day. Christ only came to save sinners and only of the kind that know and admit their sin. The righteous sinners do not have a chance, unless God miraculously changes their hearts.

As I was studying I came across this quote. And it is really a good one.

"It would be true to say that this word of Jesus strikes the keynote of the Gospel. The new thing in Christianity is not the doctrine that God saves sinners. No Jew would have denied that. It is the assertion `that God loves and saves them *as sinners*.'... This is the authentic and glorious doctrine of true Christianity in any age" (Hunter, pp. 40-41, emphasis his).

Expositor's Bible Commentary, The - The Expositor's Bible Commentary – Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke.

Isn't this good news to us. Christ hung out with the tax collectors. Christ taught them the gospel. He knew that He had a better chance with them receiving His message than any of the self righteous religious leaders.

And, before we leave this passage, we need to look at the progression in the book of Mark so far.

We started with Christ healing the worst illness- an illness that resembled sin. Leprosy.

Then we see him forgive sin, but in order to prove He is able to forgive sin, He heals the impossible illness of being paralyzed.

Now Christ moves to no physical healing, but He forgives what most people in His culture would have been an **unforgiveable** sin. He forgives the tax collector and associates with notorious sinners, presumably in an effort to teach them and to present them with the true gospel.

What we get through all of this is HOPE. There is nothing that Christ cannot do for sinners like us. And he chooses to save, not those who **think** they are the **best**. But those who **know** they are the **worst**. How could it get any better?

Salvation appeal?

And for application- do we follow Christ like Matthew did? Will we say yes to any command without hesitation because we know the value of our Lord. That is the acting definition of worship. Displaying by our lives our God's worth.

Also, are we slow to judge the ministry that people have to some of the most sordid type of characters? It may often not be what we think.

And lastly, are we willing to reach those people who we are uncomfortable with, people who have chosen lifestyles that we cannot relate to? And are we willing to face some unpleasant consequences for doing so? That is what following Christ is like.