

November 21, 2010

God Has Friends in Low Places

Mark 2:13-17

INTRODUCTION

There have been a lot of ‘Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater’ moments already in the Gospel of Mark. We will see another one today. In this text there is another challenge from the religious establishment. In that challenge it is clear that the scribes believed that Jesus had made a mistake—either an intellectual mistake (no clue what He was doing) or a moral mistake (deliberate disregard for what He was doing)—but the text eliminates that possibility because Jesus directly refutes them with a statement of his purpose. In other words Jesus is not giving us an example for how to think about being gracious to sordid characters should they show up. Jesus is giving us a foundational principle for the very identity of the church: that the church is the one club where the first qualification for membership is that you are disqualified and you know it.

- THE GOSPEL TO THE UNRIGHTEOUS
- THE GOSPEL TO THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS

The Big Idea is that Jesus didn’t come for those who “don’t need him” but for sick traitors.

Let me briefly draw attention to the same fact that Mark labors in every section: *He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them (13)*. Now this was open-air preaching. This was the original Way of the Master!

Let’s review: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1)...I send my messenger (1:2)...And he preached (1:7)...Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God (1:14)...And Jesus said to them, “Follow me (1:17)...he entered the synagogue and was teaching (1:21)...And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out (1:38)...And he was preaching the word to them (2:2). You cannot begin to understand the Christian faith until you come to reject what the culture today has taught you about words.

DOCTRINE

I. THE GOSPEL TO THE UNRIGHTEOUS

A) The Traitor Called Out of the Scene of the Crime {14}

1. First things first. The traditional view is that **Levi is Matthew**. The basic reason is that Matthew is called a tax collector and the other Synoptic Gospels record this incident which, taken together, make it less likely that they have two different people in mind. On the other hand, Levi is only mentioned in one other place by name [cf. Lk. 5:27]. If Levi was the same person as Matthew, then this means that there were three sets of brothers among the disciples—Simon and Andrew, James and John, and now Matthew and one James who is called “the son of Alphaeus” [cf. Mat. 10:3, Mk. 3:18, Lk. 6:15] just as Levi is here. We may ask why Matthew is not called that in those other passages. One easy explanation is that there were not two Matthews so no need to distinguish, but there *were* multiple James(es), so there’s the reason. Either way, it’s not exactly a problem since there were many tax collectors that followed Jesus, it says here, and if they are two different people who were dramatically called out of this lifestyle to follow Jesus it affects nothing whatsoever.

2. Now **tax collectors** were despised for two main reasons: first, they were in the pocket of Herod, who was in turn in the pocket of Caesar; second, there was no fixed rate and so it became easy for these collectors to lie, cheat and steal to make a profit on the backs of the people. They were not trusted and they were regarded in the same class of “unclean” as lepers, corpses and prostitutes.

3. So Levi was at the scene of the crime, so to speak: *And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth (14a)*. What did Levi do at the tax booth? He counted up his loot. He strategized about how to best take advantage of more people for his own pleasure. He plotted against the people of God and therefore against God himself. But Mark continues: *and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him (14b)*. The same thing as with the first four disciples—Jesus speaks and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive!—no explanation, no checking Jesus brochures, not one second goes by before the dead commercial, earthly-pleasure-seeking corpse jumps up and starts following in a trance! The Old Testament promised that when Jesus came He would do something like this: “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God” [Ez.

11:19-20, cf. 36:26-27]. I'm sure these sinners who had some memory of their heritage understood and believed that God would do this one day—He would just tap people and make them his people again, and cause them to get up and walk the way He walked—yes, God would certainly do this, but for *me*? What must Levi had been thinking on his way home, waiting for Jesus. Bunyan's words recounting his own state before the gospel took root are helpful:

I thought now that everyone had a better heart than I had. I could have exchanged hearts with anybody. I thought none but the devil himself could equal me for inward wickedness and pollution.¹

Alright, that was “just Bunyan,” but what does the Bible say? Well consider the man who wrote two-thirds of the New Testament: “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” [1 Tim. 1:15]. Is that just exaggeration? Would you say that those things describe you?

So, Jesus says, “Stop collecting these taxes and then follow me?” *No?* He says, “My disciples left their boats and now look at them—do what they're doing now, and then follow me?” *No?* He simply called him into the total, immediate life of Christ.

B) The Best Friend of Sinners {15}

1. When tax collectors and sinners were lumped together—*many tax collectors and sinners (15b)*—**sinner** was not simply a catch-all category for the rest of the human race. It was a catch-all category for those who were outcasts of God's physical people. Take for instance that infamous prayer of the Pharisee, where he was not like the “extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” [Lk. 18:11]. So when you hear the word “sinner” on the lips of a first century Jew what you're hearing is exactly what *we* mean today by liberal, blue-stater, maybe divorcee, seeker—there's no such thing as a “seeker”! (actually, yes there is—Holy Spirit regenerated and led seekers)—you see how deep our need is to throw the baby out with the bathwater here! “The church is a hospital for sinners!” “NO—it's a training ground for the saints!” Why are those two mutually exclusive again?

¹ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Whittaker House, Springdale, PA 1993, fp. 1666); pp. 45-46

2. Notice the intentional program of Jesus here for his church for all time: *And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples (15a-b)*. The word “recline” used here refers to a more intimate banquet for guests rather than just a bunch of people sitting on bar stools or picnic tables. So we’ve talked before about what that looks like, but what we need to see here in addition is that there was intentionality to the meal. It didn’t throw Jesus off that people who were just committing treason a minute ago were serving in the next. But the reality is that no matter what went on inside, the whole place was defiled on the outside anyway. The very homes of tax collectors were considered unclean. If you accidentally touched the outside of their property, you would be considered defiled!

Now how did the disciples feel about this? Well Mark never describes their reaction. The assumption is that they willfully trusted their Master in this revolutionary act. Are you a disciple of Jesus? Well then you are to do the same. As the Master in one of Jesus’ parable says, “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” [Lk. 14:23]. Jesus actually made this a big rule in his kingdom: “the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you” [Mat. 21:31], talking to the people who were too clean, too together, too far up the road to open up the road.

3. It says that *there were many who followed him (15c)*: in other words there were more people coming into Jesus’ fold and they were messy, embarrassing, trouble-filled people. Mark stresses the **many** here. We don’t know how many were at this dinner at one time, but the point is that a lot of unprepared, inconvenient people—sinful, jagged-edged square pegs—were bursting through perfectly round, well-controlled holes in Jesus’ church. How does our church match up to his? I don’t even think this was a “nice problem to have” for Jesus. This account is screaming to us that this isn’t a problem at all, but a purposeful ideal of embracing as many sinners as we can get our hands on.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God [1 Cor. 1:27-29].

This is consistent with the way God saves. Is the way we do church consistent with the way God saves? Is the way we welcome people in, serve them, speak to them consistent with the way that God saves?

II. THE GOSPEL TO THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS

A) Two Defining Qualities of the Self-Righteous {16}

It says that they **saw** and **said** something: *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? (16)*

1. The self righteous always SEE the problem with others first and define the kingdom by comparing their own horizontal righteousness as with others’ horizontal righteousness—and that point of comparison becomes the starting point of the self-righteous person’s entire worldview. Not to be too simplistic, but one way to think about this is that the self-righteous person always sees sinners as glasses-half-empty rather than half-full. Everything is always a problem that Jesus can’t fix or at least fix fast enough.

2. The self-righteous always SAY it when they see it. They said to the his disciples something that was meant to undermine his authority to be sure, but also something designed to prevent these people access to the kingdom. The self-righteous are not content to merely harbor judgmental feelings about other sinners; they have an inner-need to force others to join them in getting rid of those that make them feel this **discomfort**. But what is the source of this discomfort? Calvin suggests that the sight of truly distorted sinners making a move toward God makes us feel insecure. It levels the playing field too fast for comfort. He says about these scribes peaking and poking into the house that night:

While they flatter themselves, they cannot endure to be placed in their own rank, and think that injustice is done them, when they are classed with transgressors.²

But Isaiah says about Jesus that He “was numbered with the transgressors” [53:12] and that when He sees his wretched, broken, pathetic, undisciplined, inappropriate brothers and sisters in need, the author of Hebrews says that “he is not ashamed to call them brothers” [Heb. 2:11]. Isn’t it interesting how much we think we have higher standards and keep better company than Jesus! Isn’t it interesting how much more nervous we are of others than Jesus is?

Since all of us have the residual workings of self-righteousness in our hearts, we need to know that you and I both have a tendency to be uncomfortable with too many dirty people getting access to Jesus around us. We hear stories of other people starting biker churches or visiting prisoners or making their homes and their services accessible to the simple and the sloppy, and so we say ‘Oh, that’s so inspiring—Praise Jesus that...*somebody else* did that!’

² Calvin, p. 402

This may not be something you have ever thought of; but you need to because the Bible is constantly warning us against it.

B) Two Defining Qualities of the Friends of Jesus {17}

1. Those that Jesus makes his friends are sick and know it—*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick (17b)*. This does not mean that those whom Jesus does not make into his friends are not sick; it's just that they remain deluded and go on thinking that they're healthy. The church is a hospital for the sick and training ground for the saint—and if you think that means “two classes” of Christians you're still not hearing. The sick sinner is now a saint ready for service as Matthew put his gifts into this service right away.

2. Those that Jesus makes his friends are traitors and know it—*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (17c)*. Again, this does not mean that those whom Jesus does not make into his friends are not traitors; it's just that they remain deluded and go on thinking that they've been doing God's work all along.

3. And Matthew's Gospel adds these words of Jesus: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” [Mat. 9:13]. The common word in both Gospels for what Jesus does first to a sinner is to **call** (*kaleo*). It is the same word used about how Jesus creates a disciple. In other words, there are not two classes of people in the church—disciples who have their act together, and sinners who do not—but one group that is called out of being sinners to being disciples. To the person who doesn't know this, Jesus gives a homework assignment (in Mat. 9:13) and the assignment comes from the prophet Hosea: “I desire mercy and not a sacrifice” [6:6]. He says “Go and learn what this means”—and, in a sense, and then we'll talk!

Christianity says that it is impossible to be **too good** to need Jesus or **too evil** to be restored by him. He came to call the unrighteous, the sick, the filthy, the unworthy. Don't relegate this to some secondary doctrine! If we do not welcome people in the same way that Jesus welcomed people we are to that extent *not Christians!*

APPLICATION

To the Skeptic – Maybe you think Christianity is all about religious people dividing up society by force, placing those just like us on one side and those most unlike us on the other. Then you need to read the Bible. What you'll find is religious elites opposing Jesus at every turn and Jesus taking in people that are most irreligious and profane. Now Jesus doesn't

leave them in that condition. But what we need to see here is that Jesus purposed to choose an agent of a superpower state and bring him together with those who were against him in one family in a bigger world than the world where we take offense and identify evil as evil. That doesn't mean that we do not still call evil 'evil'—we certainly do—but God is doing something infinitely bigger than creating a people whose highest aspiration is to divide up the geo-political map into red and blue. I would challenge the skeptic to read the Scripture and see for themselves that such a horizontal kingdom is not Christianity.

To the Saint – How do we go about picking our friends as Christian? Have you ever thought about that? Is there a biblical doctrine of choosing friends? I think there is and I think that this passage goes a long way to helping us to it.

Think of the people you are perfectly comfortable leaving on “the other team” or “the bad guys.” You see what happens is that Christians take a biblical truth—namely, to be separate, to not love the world—and take that off the reservation until we have a sub-culture of our own, completely insulated from the people that Jesus has called us to bring in for him to rescue. What we see in parts of Scripture like this is that it is not enough to simply nod your head and allow for unprepared sinners to come in here; you have to delight in blasting the door open for unprepared sinners to come in here, like Jesus does. If you don't delight in going out and getting and moving forward sinners, if it doesn't drive your ministry, if it isn't your passion like it was Jesus' passion, you're going to waste your life staring at yourself and a handful of people who are walking at your pace.

To the Sinner – Some people would say that it's never appropriate to use the word “friend” about God in relation to sinners. After all isn't God the supreme terror to sinners? Well, yes, actually. But this is just one more way to throw the baby out with the bathwater! The bad news is worse than you thought. God has all power and no one who has betrayed him will escape his judgment—*unless* He wants other things for you. Listen to Jesus here: “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you **friends**, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” [Jn. 15:15], and the Psalmist says that, “The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant” [Ps. 25:14]. Now don't get me wrong: this is not a “chummy” relationship where we are flippant with God as if He's just another one of our buddies. But his friendship at least implies that He looks with pleasure upon us, shares himself with us, that He is for us, whereas before He was against us because of our sin.

CONCLUSION

Friend of God: the question is not *whether* God has friends. We've just seen in Scripture that He calls sinners his friends. The question is *how* God comes to have friends. How is it possible that a traitor, unfaithful, unclean, unloving to people, a rebel shaking his fist at God, making profit and collecting corruptible things that do nothing but point people away from God—how can such a creature possibly be made into his friend?

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” [Jn. 15:13].