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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. 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?” 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)

Introduction

As we saw previously, 2:1–3:6 contains five pericopes (narrative sections) in which controversy looms large. Conflict is a predominate theme in these verses.

Though there remains at this point a sense of secretiveness to those who do not grasp the story line (unbelievers), nevertheless, we who do know the outcome are aware that Jesus is upping the ante. He seems to be deliberately confronting the religious elite, those who are *supposed* to be shepherding the people of God but are not. The first controversy was when Jesus claimed (and demonstrated) his ability to forgive sins. In this next section, Jesus demonstrated that he forgives sinners—so much so, that he was willing to associate with them. He came alongside them to both forgive and form them into a unique community—the community of the forgiven.

Again, we saw previously that controversy arose over what Jesus claimed—the ability to pronounce (and provide) forgiveness of sins. In the passage and controversy before us, the controversy is of a different, but related, nature: whom Jesus forgives. He forgave the outcasts of a self-righteous religious culture. Sometimes, this seem scandalous.

The religious leaders—scribes and Pharisees—became deeply disturbed, even offended, as Jesus fraternised with those who, in their minds, were the moral and religious outcasts of society—“tax collectors and sinners.” After all, if Jesus was from God—if he was Messiah—then surely he would not associate with the riff-raff of society. But here he not only associated with them over a meal, but added one of their “kind” to his entourage of disciples. Scandalous! But this is precisely the story of salvation. It is scandalous to those do

not believe because they do not believe that they need salvation. But it is an amazing story to those who do.

In a sense, almost everything Jesus did and said was scandalous to those who would not repent and believe on him. This remains the same today – at least for those who, like these scribes and Pharisees, were self-righteous. I recall, during my early days in South Africa, witnessing to a woman who claimed that she had never sinned. For her, the thought that she might have wronged a holy God and therefore need salvation was absolutely scandalous.

The self-righteous are offended by the message and ministry of Jesus precisely because he is merciful only to those who are not righteous. He heals only those who acknowledge that they are not well. He forgives only those who see themselves as sinners. He delivers, it would appear, only those who are desperate. As Wessel highlights, “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.”

May we find great joy in this scandalous salvation.

The Saviour Communicating

We could characterise v. 13 as Jesus fishing for men. We see him casting his net wide near the Sea of Galilee. He was teaching the crowds: “He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.”

Note that Mark seems to be providing us with a pattern. The crowds gathered, and Jesus retreated to a place more solitary. He then returned to the city, only to be swamped again. So he retreated again. And the crowds gathered again. So here.

The word “again” indicates that this was not Jesus’ first time along these shores. Verses 16–20 provide evidence of this. As he walked the shore, the crowds gathered. Why they did so, we are not told. Nevertheless, we can make an educated guess that many wanted something from Jesus, probably something tangible, probably something physical – like healing. But, as in the previous episode, they would get what they really needed: the word of God, the gospel of God. Jesus was “teaching them.” He may be touching them as well (to heal, to deliver), but teaching was his priority. Jesus took the opportunity to communicate truth – the gospel truth – to the crowds.

The priority of declaration and proclamation should be ours as well. We also should be doing so – again and again.

The Saviour Commanding

After Jesus taught the crowds, he was again on the move, and this time his movement led to the issuing of a command: “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” (v. 14).

As he walked he came upon a tax booth, where the local tax collector farmed revenue from the locals.

Some have suggested that the shore would be a strange place for a tax man to set up shop, but, in fact, Capernaum was known as a major fishing centre and the Roman government placed a tax on the fishing industry. It was either catch and release or catch and pay up.

As many of you may be aware, the Jews hated the idea of being taxed by the Romans. Tax men were not as well loved in those days as they are in ours!

The Jewish economy, at least the old covenant economy, was sustained by tithes and free-will offerings. The covenant people of God were to care for one another’s needs in this way, including essential government service. Hence, the Roman taxation system was viewed with suspicion at best and contempt at worst. Such a financial arrangement was tantamount to slavery. At the least, it was interpreted as slavery with pagan Rome acting as master. They had to pay their taxes, but they did not have to like it!

The Roman Empire was, of course, a Gentile Empire, and this was deeply offensive to a Jew. Gentiles were considered unclean. Further, Levi would have been under the direct rule of the administration of Herod Antipas, an Edomite-Jew. This would have exacerbated the normal contempt for tax collectors.

With this understanding, we can appreciate how the Jews would view a *Jewish* tax collector. It was considered the height of treason.

Such an individual would have been banished from the synagogue, from their family, and from their community because, it was thought, they were ultimately cut off from *God*. They were considered horrible people, rejected by God and, therefore, to be abhorred by others.

A further contributing factor was that most of tax collectors were dishonest. They were thieves. The term translated “tax collector” is, literally, “tax farmer.” The tax collector used his position to harvest a personal crop of financial profit. He would collect the requisite amount for the Roman Empire, but in addition, would add surcharges for his personal financial benefit.

From Despised to Disciple

It was extremely scandalous for Jesus to enlist such an individual to follow him in his world-changing, God-centred, people-loving, kingdom-proclaiming mission. To make such a *distrusted*, because *dishonest* and therefore *despicable*, person one of his disciples was simply scandalous! But this is precisely what Jesus did. He still does.

Who are the tax collectors of our day? Perhaps hardened criminals, corrupt officials, those who betray us, etc.

The King commanded, “Follow me.” Levi “rose and followed him.” With his response to the command of the King, Levi the tax collector became Matthew, the disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Matthew 9:9). Scandalous – wonderfully so!

But in fact, this was not the first time in history that a Levi was graced by God (see Genesis 34:25ff with 49:5–7 and Deuteronomy 3:8–11).

Scandalous Joy

Because of self-righteousness fuelled by biblical ignorance, we can be sure that the crowds were shocked – probably horrified, if not down right angered – by this. Yet the angels in heaven were rejoicing in the presence of God.

In the previous scene, the Lord touched one who was ceremonially and hygienically unclean. Here, he associated with one who was considered morally unclean. It is with such that the King was building his kingdom.

A Pilgrim’s Progress

One wonders whether this was Levi’s first encounter with Jesus. I doubt it. The word “again” in v. 13 may indicate that Jesus often frequented the shore of Galilee, and therefore Levi may often have heard his teaching.

Perhaps as the Lord proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom, commanding repentance and belief, Levi listened, first with dismissal, but then with authority. The authoritative words of the Lord began to sink into his soul. He began to feel the weight of his sins – against others, yes, but ultimately against God.

Whatever the case, I think we can fairly conclude that Levi wrestled with what following Jesus would mean for him. Luke interestingly says that Levi, in response to Jesus’ call, “leaving everything, ... rose and followed him” (Luke 5:28). Edward rightly noted, “‘Following’ is an act that involves risk and cost; it is something one does, not simply what one thinks or believes.” What other logical, rational option is there when the King commands?

The King and I

Someone said to me recently that perhaps we all need to be reminded that Jesus is not only our Saviour, but also our King. I agree. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Master. Jesus is King. Therefore, when he commands, we obey.

The command to discipleship is radical. It goes to the root of our loyalty and love. If we belong to him, loyal love will characterise us. We will be willing to leave our old life.

The command to discipleship is equal for every believer. The expectation is the same. There are no exceptions; every believer is a disciple.

Jesus is King; therefore, he commands, he does not cajole. His loving command, rooted in his holy character and in his loving sacrifice, “demands our soul, our life, our all.” It is when we lose sight of who Jesus is and what he has done that self-indulgence runs amok over self-denial. Sadly, too many professing Christians are guilty of this. And many of these will face a rude eternal awakening.

The Saviour Communing

In vv. 15–16, we find Jesus communing.

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. 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?”

(Mark 2:15–16)

Bad Company

The scandal was not contained. In fact, it continued to grow as Jesus seemingly intentionally heightened the tension by his acceptance of an invitation to dine at Levi’s home – along with others who, in the eyes of the “spiritual,” were also among the social deplorables. Jesus was deliberately in bad company. As France says, “The guest list is not at all what most Jews would have expected.” But, “Jesus’ determination to proclaim the good news of forgiveness where it was needed, and thus to create a new community of the forgiven, led him into conflict with it.” It also created conflict with “good” company.

Banqueting with the Bad

The word picture here must not be missed. Though translations vary, it seems that Jesus went to Levi’s house (though it is possible that it was Jesus’ house) where a meal was prepared. Levi had invited his friends to join them. Ferguson calls this a “conversion party.”

No doubt, this new disciple was keen to introduce his friends to the Lord. He had not been saved long enough to learn the “rules” of isolation and ghettoism. The fundamentalist subculture had yet not become a part of his psyche, and so he exercised loving, kind, compassionate and hopeful hospitality. And he did this *before* they were converted. Christians have a lot to learn from this young disciple.

Jesus, writes Mark, as “reclined at” the “table.” This was a relaxed and comfortable posture. Jesus was quite at home among these otherwise shunned people. He comfortably communed with them.

Edwards nails the point when he writes, “The scandal of this story is that Jesus does not make moral repentance a precondition of his love and acceptance. Rather, Jesus loves and accepts tax collectors and sinners as they are.” How the scandal was growing. Wonderful!

On-the-Job Training

A couple of observations are necessary at this point.

First, note the reference to “his disciples.” Jesus was providing on-the-job training. He was fishing for men and he took the disciples with to teach them how. Incarnational living! Compassionate concern! Loving nearness! Scandalous slander! Whatever it took, Jesus was secure enough in his identity and his relationship with the Father that he was willing to be misunderstood. There is much here for us to consider. Let’s learn this from Jesus.

We need to look for opportunities to get nearer to the crowd. The longer we are saved, the further from the crowd we tend to become. We should be approachable and likeable.

Second, observe that “there were many who followed him.” This refers to the tax collectors and sinners. As mentioned, Jesus was likeable and approachable. The result was that many followed him to the banquet.

Jesus never compromised who he was. He was never less than who and what he was. He was always holy and sinless. And it was this that made him attractive; at least to those who knew they were not. There is a very real sense in which those who know their need for forgiveness and who carry great sense of guilt should feel accepted in our presence. It should be acceptance without affirmation. That is, sinners must be loved while their sin is sin hated.

Someone has observed that perhaps the tax collectors hung around the immoral outcasts, the more deplorable of society (at least in the eyes of the self-righteous) because no one else would hang with them. These people were forced, as it were, into the arms of one another. If we don’t show people hospitality, are we not somewhat culpable for bad company?

The Scorn of the Self-righteous

The celebration of Levi's conversion was probably growing as the Lord lovingly interacted with these guests. Perhaps some were converted.

Regardless, the Pharisees noticed what was taking place. These shepherds of Israel were none too happy. How sad. Those who should have rejoiced the most criticised the worst. They were scandalised by the love of Christ. They were offended by the power of the gospel. They were horrified by the help Jesus was offering to the otherwise hopeless. Beware the danger of being offended by grace.

Who Were the Pharisees?

The word "Pharisee" means "separate." This group arose around the time of the Exile and gradually became a strong influence in Judaism. They were men who devoted themselves to the study and the application of the law of God. That, by the way, can be a very good thing (see Ezra 7:1–10)! However, the Pharisees wrongly presumed that they *could* keep the law of God, that they were acceptable to God by their own merit of law-keeping.

Even though their lives were spent studying holy things, the Pharisees, largely, had no real understanding of the holiness of God. They divided God's laws into two groups, totalling 613 of them. They then added other laws as a fence around these to ensure there would be no trespassing. The fences became more important than what was being protected – rather like focusing one's full attention on a fence with no appreciation for the beautiful garden that is being protected. They were so close to the trees of God's holy words that they could not see the forest of God's holy character. They became self-deceived about their ability to please God. Such people don't see their need for the Saviour. In fact, the suggestion is scandalous to them.

Some of these additional laws had to do with contact with those in society whom the Pharisees deemed to be "unclean." Tax collectors and sinners were in this category.

Further, when it came to eating, cleanness was a huge issue. For Jesus to be eating a meal in the presence of such "unclean" people was tantamount to ritual, if not moral, defilement. Add to this the scandal of Jesus reclining, and no doubt touching, such people – horror of horrors! So they did what is characteristic of most Pharisees: They complained, with a good deal of innuendo. And, of course, they did so behind his back – or so they thought. As we will shortly see, Jesus heard their criticism and responded. But first, let's consider and apply.

This was an absurd question: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" This reveals their deep spiritual blindness. They clearly didn't grasp why Messiah came to the world. They clearly didn't appreciate their own sinful condition.

Too often, we are scandalised by Jesus and his mission because we lose sight of why he came. We then lose sight of our sinfulness, and we lose sight of his commitment to save sinners – the sinners we are tempted to detest.

The Saviour Calling

As in the previous episode, Jesus did something contrary to that which was religiously traditional: He called the Pharisees out on their grumbling: “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’” (v. 17).

Jesus responded to this criticism with a retort. Some have said that this response of Jesus is the most powerful on record. That may be true. If the Pharisees were sensitive enough to understand, they would have been humbled.

Perhaps this was a proverbial saying of the day. Regardless, the point is clear. “Jesus is saying that you would expect to find a saviour among those who need to be saved” (English). The criticism by the Pharisees was a self-revealing and a self-condemning one. By their self-righteous attitude, they were excluding themselves from the benefits of the Saviour. Sadly, they had become so adept at misreading their own spiritual temperature, that they assumed they were far healthier than they were. “Without doubt the Pharisees were just as sick as the tax-collectors, but they assumed the role of the healthy” (Grogan). This is always fatal.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Reading through the Gospels, the Pharisees strike us as good, bad, and ugly.

In one sense, they are good. As Tom Hovestol shows in his excellent book, *Extreme Righteousness*, the Pharisees had a lot of noble qualities—qualities that many in the evangelical church today would commend. For example, they lauded right doctrine. Hovestol writes, “If only a few statements were changed, most of us would readily sign the Pharisees doctrinal statement.” After all, Jesus did say that they sat in Moses’ seat of authority and therefore ought to be heeded (Matthew 23:2–3). Further, “they revered, studied, memorised and sought to interpret the Scripture accurately.” When it came to their lifestyle, Jesus himself testified, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

Most of the Pharisees were hard-working middle class people who saw themselves standing for wholesome traditional values. For example, on at least three occasions, Pharisees extended hospitality to Jesus (Luke 7:36–50; 11:37–54; 14:1–24). In John 9, we have the record of some Pharisees who apparently defended Jesus (9:16). Commendable Pharisees include

Nicodemus (and, most likely, Joseph of Arimathea) and Gamaliel, not to mention the apostle Paul!

Hovestol summarises the Pharisees as “zealous for the Scriptures, scrupulous in their giving, dedicated to living untainted by the world’s evil and conscientious in obedience to God’s commands.” In other words, when you think about it, in many cases, they are just like us!

Before we too quickly condemn their behaviour – and it is deserving of condemnation – we should probably do a bit of eye surgery. Perhaps a log needs to be removed!

Is it not true that we, too, are guilty sometimes of assuming we are healthier than we are? Are we also guilty of using the wrong thermometer? Do we not sometimes mistake the external fence for the heart of the matter? Are we not guilty of measuring ourselves against others?

The only way that we will receive the benefits of the Saviour is if we realise how desperately we need him. As Grogan says, “Awareness of our need is all-important. Self-righteousness bars the door to the Saviour.” Humble yourself. Look closely into the mirror of God’s word. Stop blame-shifting and making excuses. Ask a friend to help “diagnose” you. Humbly sit under God’s word. Study the cross of Christ. Pray through Scripture. Fellowship with fellow honest sinners. We need to examine our attitude to other sinners. Ferguson is pointed concerning the Pharisees, and perhaps us as well, when he writes, “If their so-called ‘holiness’ expressed itself only in criticism of sinners and not in caring for them, it was not the kind which God wanted, not the type that Jesus exhibited.”

The church must preach God’s word. It must be faithful with the gospel if the healthy will be made sick enough to be saved!

Essential Communion

Many have observed that this scene in the house was intended by Mark to picture the banquet of Communion, with the ultimate banquet in view. Perhaps. “Possibly Jesus saw such meals with the bad as a foreshadowing or foretaste of the banquet in the dominion of God. Perhaps he saw such meals as a dramatization of the coming dominion. More clearly, Jesus saw his ministry as something distinctive and special, and its positive results as something worth celebrating” (Witherington).

What we can be sure of is that, as these tax collectors and sinners ate with the Lord, deep and humble contrition of their condition would have overcome them – yet with great hope as well. At the least, no one would have made themselves the centre of the conversation. When we commune with the Lord, he is at the centre. After all, it is not about you!

Paul Tripp helpfully writes,

Communion with Christ is fuelled by humility. Communion with Christ is fuelled by sadness and celebration. [The sick are ministered to by the Physician.] Communion with Christ is propelled by an accurate sense of who you are and what you need, and a celebration of the One who gives it. Awareness of sin and the promise of salvation are what daily drive you to Christ, not to rush through a passage in his Word and say a quick prayer but to sit at his feet and grieve your sin and give praise for the grace that meets you in it. Assessments of arrival crush personal worship.

In other words, those who know their true condition will be more at ease in the presence of Jesus. After all, he saves the sick.

Are we too healthy to be healed? Is this why you have little desire to gather, to pray, and to read and study God's word? Are you too healthy? Are you too righteous?

Conclusion

We need to note that Jesus came to our world with the stated purpose of seeking and finding the "least, the last and the lost" (Witherington). He came to call these to himself, to forgive them, to reconcile them to God, and to restore them once they come. Yes, his call goes out to all – by the mouth of the church – but only those who are sick will heed the call.

Have you heard? How will you respond? Do you see your need for the great Physician? Do you see the great love of the great Physician?

A Crucified Physician

When Jesus began his public ministry in Nazareth he confronted the synagogue with a prophecy. "And he said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Physician, heal yourself." What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well'" (Luke 4:23).

I am not sure when this was said, but, chronologically, Jesus had not yet been to Capernaum. This was a prophecy. In Mark 2, Jesus was clearly claiming that he was the Physician who heals sinners. Perhaps this prophecy was fulfilled upon some unrecorded return to Nazareth. Perhaps Jesus was sick or weary in body and people taunted him. Or perhaps this prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus hung on the cross. Certainly, the tone of such mockery was heard at Calvary.

Thank God he did not heal himself! Thank God that Jesus did not deliver himself! Rather, he remained on the cross that sin-sick people like us – the least, the last, and the lost – would be healed – delivered from the curse of God’s wrath, which we so deserved.

The Father, of course, did deliver Jesus, but only after sinners broke his body and shed his blood. In that murderous act, the self-righteous, who thought they were so healthy that they did not need the Saviour, carried out an act that gave to sinners the Saviour! This was sealed by his resurrection three days later. The empty tomb in Palestine, and the Christ-filled throne room of heaven, testifies that he is still calling the sick.

Non-Christian friend, do you hear his voice? Do you sense your sickness? Do you confess that you are not righteous? Then be healed, be delivered and declared righteous today.

Christian, do you feel unwell as you contemplate the devastating sickness of sin that weighs on your conscience? Then come to the Saviour – again. Yes, again – and again, and again. Do you hear him calling you? Enter the door and find healing in the great Physician – again.

Finally, congregation, we are surrounded by the sin-sick. People all around us are dead and are dying in their sins. Some know it, and others do not. As Edwards comments concerning the actions of Jesus, “The gospel is not something merely spoken but lived, an incarnation. Hence Jesus is not sitting home taking calls but actively going about making them.” Let us learn from him. Let us follow him by opening our lives, even our homes, to reach the least, the last, and the lost – that is, to reach people like us.

Who knows but that a Levi may become a Matthew, to the glory of God, and to the good of the world. That is a scandal we should all desire.

AMEN