

Jason Upchurch - Mark 2:13-17 - The Good News of that Jesus Only Saves Wretches

This morning we come to a beautiful section of the life of Jesus because in it Jesus shows grace to worst of sinners. He shows grace to a man named Levi who is a tax collector. I'll say more about tax collectors in a bit, but know for now that it's hard to fathom someone more hated in Jesus's day among the Jews than tax collectors.

But in order to get your mind prepared for that idea, let me ask you: who would you point to as the biggest sinners in our day?

1) Drag Queen story hour perverts is what comes to my mind. Adult men, who are blatantly denying their God-given gender, grooming the most impressionable children to the applause of their parents. And these "story hours" aren't even story hours anymore, they're essentially strip shows. That's probably the lowest of the low for me.

2) Child sex traffickers. People who steal children and women for the sexual slave trade.

3) Politicians who lie and cheat and steal on the backs of their constituents. Making massive profit when they should be concerned for the public good.

4) Murderers. Maybe it's mass murderers or serial killers or abortion doctors. Some of the coldest video I've ever seen is testimony of abortion doctors defending what they do as though it's some sort of public service for the masses. Their consciences are so seared they think darkness is light and light is darkness.

Whatever that is: think of the lowest of the low. The wretches of society. And imagine that God could come and transform that person in a moment. Through the grace of Christ, they could be transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God's love. And could God use their redemption and their life in ways he would never use us.

Are we okay with that? That's what this section is about: God loves to take wretches and use them for his glory.

Now, let me give a little big-picture context before we unpack our passage. The biggest thing I think we need to notice in the flow of Mark's gospel is that there is a rising opposition to Jesus from the religious leaders.

Last week we saw the healing of the paralytic who was lowered down into Jesus's home and Jesus pronounces that his sins are forgiven. Do you remember who grumbled at Jesus when he said that? It was the scribes. **Read 5-8**

So the scribes were grumbling. In our passage it's the same: the scribes of the Pharisees don't approve of what Jesus is doing. **Read 15-16**

They are questioning Jesus's morality because he's associating with the wrong crowd.

In the very next section there's a question about fasting. Fasting is when you deprive your body of food and instead pray when you would be eating. This was commonplace in Jesus's day; everyone fasted. Most Jews fasted at least twice a week but Jesus didn't fast. Notice who doesn't like that. **Read 18**

The Pharisees don't like that. Now here we're not told that it was precisely the Pharisees who came to Jesus. We're told the people come to Jesus. But it seems like the reason they do is because of the influence of the Pharisees.

The next section is Jesus and his disciples walking through grain fields on the Sabbath eating grain. Again there it's confrontation. **Read 23-25**

Another confrontation with the Pharisees. The very next pericope is Jesus healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Jesus does it and look who's upset. **Read 3:6**

Well that escalated quickly! It went from them questioning in their mind, to discussing it quietly, to them publicly accusing him to now they are plotting to kill Jesus.

What Mark is painting is that the showdown between Jesus and the religious leaders is escalating.

Now, because this whole show down is brewing in the background, allow me to talk about the religious leaders for a few minutes.

When I say "religious leaders of Jesus's day," you need to understand that that's a very big umbrella statement that encompasses a wide variety of people. And the religious leaders often disagreed with each other. So it's a catchall term but it's helpful to know who the players are.

There are 2 groups here in our passage. **Read 16**

So we have the Scribes *of the* Pharisees. If you have NIV it says "the teachers of the Law who were Pharisees" which makes it seem like 1 group, but it's actually 2 groups and I'll sort that out in a minute. Let me start with Pharisees.

The word Pharisee basically means a "separate one" or a "divided one." These were the religious fundamentalists of Jesus's day. And although we have a negative connotation about them now, most people in Jesus's time highly respected them. They were the fundamentalists, the conservatives, the good guys. They held tightly to the Law and taught it faithfully. Of all the religious leaders, these were probably the closest to Jesus theologically and they acted something akin to pastors in local synagogues.

The problem was that they held to the Law so much that they even made laws on top of the Law so people couldn't possibly violate the Mosaic Law. It's almost as if they made a fence of man made laws around the Mosaic Law. The problem was that they would elevate their own laws to the level of God's Law - they said man-made Laws were as important as God's Law. That's a no-no.

We don't know exactly when the Pharisees were formed, it may have started 100-200 years before Jesus during what is often referred to as the silent period. But Josephus says that by Jesus's day there were maybe 6,000 of them in Israel. Paul was a Pharisee - and even identified as a Pharisee after he became a Christian. Nicodemus was a Pharisee as were other Jesus followers later on.

It's only through the ministry of Jesus that we really understand that they we're hypocrites. They pretended to be righteous on the outside, but inward they were dead spiritually.

Scribes were technically a different group. Some of you have lawyers or teachers of the Law. The word is "grammateis" where we get our word grammar. Technically speaking scribes were trained professional copyists. If you wanted an official record of something you hired a scribe. They had the training to write and the tools needed to do it.

In fact, most of the original manuscripts of the NT were written by scribes and probably most of the copies of the Bible that circulated in the early church were written by converted scribes.

See, the average person might be able to write, but you would want someone to professionally and legibly write down important things. There were no laser printers or copy machines. You had to copy stuff by hand. So the scribes would make copies of the OT. That was their job. And as you can imagine, someone who copied the OT over and over became very knowledgeable about the law of Moses. This is why they're often called lawyers. Not in the way we think of lawyers, precisely, but they knew God's law. And they taught God's law.

And scribes could come from all over. You could be a Pharisee who happened to be a scribe. You could be a Levite - a priest - who happened to be a scribe. You could be a Sadducee. And here it seems the specific

audience Mark is pointing out is a group of scribes who were from the bigger group of Pharisees. These were scribes from among the Pharisees.

Okay, let's look at our passage. Remember the big theme here is God wretches and uses them for his glory.

1) Jesus saves wretches. **Read 13-14**

So it turns out this is a common thing in Jesus's ministry. It seems he is frequently out near the Sea of Galilee, walking by and gathering crowds to preach and teach. If you remember from the last chapter this is where he called the first 4 of his disciples.

Part of that is that the Sea was the place of commerce and activity because much of the town was involved in some form of fishing. But there were likely roads going alongside the sea as well so it was really crossroads in a lot of ways.

Here, Jesus is going along and he comes across Levi the son of Alphaeus who is at a tax booth.

Just like now, one the least favorite things a citizen can do is pay taxes. No one really likes to pay taxes. But in ancient times the problem was amplified because the Jews were really subjected to Roman occupation.

Israel was not an independent country, they were ruled by Rome - a pagan country. And although Rome gave the Jews a fair amount of flexibility and space, they were nonetheless brutal.

And one of the things that irritated the Jews was paying taxes to Caesar. Not only because they were paying a tax to a pagan foreign government, but the actual money they used had a picture of Caesar on it which by Jewish definition was a violation of the 2nd commandment - no images.

Added to that the very act of collecting taxes was often filled with corruption. Tax collectors were notoriously greedy. You became a tax collector by bidding for the job: telling Rome how much you'd pay them for the post. So you had to raise that money and you had to charge enough to cover your own expenses over and above the basic tax. And tax collectors usually charged a lot more than necessary but the Jews were required to pay. It really became extortion.

Usually these tax collector positions were filled by Romans because what Jew would bid to charge his fellow Jews exorbitant taxes and then take a cut on top? To do that would be to undermine your countrymen and defraud them at the same time. What Jew would do that?

Well, enter Levi. He is a Jew doing that exact thing. He's sitting at a tax collectors booth. In our modern understanding this is probably more like a customs booth. He would see the amount of goods coming in from the sea or along the road, he would inspect the merchandise and then charge based on the load.

His name is Levi which might indicate that he's from the tribe of Levi meaning he may also be a priest which would indicate even more betrayal. Rather than being someone who is charged with leading the people of God, he is robbing the people of God.

Now as you may have guessed, he is also called Matthew - as in the writer of the gospel of Matthew. He is one of the apostles.

Matthew's gospel records this is exact same event and uses the name Matthew rather than Levi. People in the ancient world often had multiple names: Joseph was also called Barnabas, Simon called Peter. Here Levi called Matthew.

He is the son of Alphaeus. **Look at 3:16-19.** Here we have a list of the apostles. **Read**

Here he is named with the common name we are used to: Matthew. But it seems as though he may also be the brother of James, both have Alphaeus as their father - a rather unusual name.

But this guy is the lowest of the low. If you read throughout the gospels there are 2 phrases used often “tax collectors and sinners” - basically saying that they were the scum on the bottom of the barrel.

The other phrase used often of them is “tax collectors and prostitutes.” You remember the Pharisee and the tax collector in **Luke 18**? Where the Pharisee is praying to God “I thank you the I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or like this tax collector here.”

This call of Jesus on Levi's life is incredibly controversial. He is the lowest of the low. He's the drag queen story hour guy of our day, he's the child trafficker, he's the Judas before there was a Judas.

And yet Jesus calls him. “Follow me.” That's a command and Levi - just like the 4 disciples before him - follows it immediately.

Why does Jesus call Levi? Because Jesus is in the business of redeeming the worst of the worst for his glory. He's interested in making sinners trophies of his grace.

You ever watch the Barrett Jackson auctions on TV? Where these people buy these classic cars that have been restored and enhanced for ridiculous amounts of money? What's amazing is when you see some of the before and after photos of the cars. The ones that are most impressive in my book are the ones that needed the most work. The ones that were completely stripped down to nothing because nothing was salvageable and they were sanded and painted and rebuilt from the ground up not to a former glory, but a machine that is completely exceeds anything that ever came off the factory floor.

That's what God does in salvation. He's the master mechanic, the master restorer. Taking the lowest of the low - prostitutes and tax collectors and homosexuals and criminals - and by his mercy and grace alone fashioning them into vessels of honor for his glory.

God fashioned Levi also known as Matthew to lead the people of God as an apostle and write down 28 sacred chapters of Holy Scripture that we turn to over and over for our own edification.

He still uses the lowest of the low. That's what he does in calling sinners. And the chain doesn't stop there.

2) Wretches call wretches to Jesus. **Read 15-16**

What do you do when Jesus saves you? You throw a party and invite all your friends to meet him.

We've now moved from the tax booth to Levi's house. Luke's version makes it clear that this is Levi's house. And it is a formal dinner situation.

It seems as though Levi has thrown a party in celebration of what Jesus has done for him and invited all his friends. A lot of friends. Many tax collectors and sinners were at Levi's house.

We shouldn't be too surprised that people whom we consider to be great sinners have a lot of sinful friends. Sin begets sin, Proverbs encourages us over and over again to stay far away from fools lest we become like them. Matthew was part of the tax collector underworld. Tax collectors associated with themselves because many times no one else would. That's pretty common.

But I love his response: he's been called to follow Jesus and he in turn calls the only people he knows. He calls his friends and associates to come find out more about Jesus.

This really becomes the evangelistic paradigm in the gospels for the average person. When we think of evangelism we think of Paul preaching in crowds or arguing with the religious authorities. We think of church planting or whatever.

Throughout the gospel people just go tell their friends and people they know. The woman at the well goes homes and tells people what Jesus did. The leper just goes and tells people what Jesus did. Demon-possessed men just go and tell people what Jesus did.

It's the simplest and most effective evangelism strategy there is: if Jesus has saved you, just go tell others what he's done for you. Matthew and his colleagues knew where they were on the social pecking order. They knew what the religious leaders thought of them. That's why the Pharisees scoff at Jesus: he eats with sinners and tax collectors.

No self-respecting Pharisees would ever eat with such sinful people. That'd be like me going to have lunch with the drag queen story hour crew. Or eating with strippers or gang members. Who would do that?

Jesus. Matthew. Listen, we do need to be careful with the people we hang around. Sin does beget sin. But, we are called to be in the world, not of the world. We are called to engage the world for the gospel. You know how sinners will hear the gospel? We have to go tell them. We have to be around them. Not be influenced by them, but seek to make Jesus known among them.

That can be hard. I've seen people who hang out with very questionable people and end up falling into their same sin. Can't do that. It's a balance.

Here Matthew's heart is simply to show Jesus to the people he knows. It's one wretch calling other wretches to Jesus.

3) Jesus only saves wretches. **Read 17**

This is the mic drop of the dinner party. See, tax collectors were there, the sinners were there, the Pharisees were there, Jesus was there. And Jesus drops a bomb.

Jesus doesn't save good people / nice people / religious people.
Jesus doesn't save people who are "human and make mistakes."
Jesus doesn't save "*everyone's a sinner / nobody's perfect*"
Jesus doesn't save academics / know it alls / church folk.
Jesus doesn't even save people who are a little sinful.

Jesus only saves wretches.

He only saves those who are sick. That's the illustration he gives. If you think you're healthy why would you go to a doctor? You wouldn't; you don't need a doctor if you think you're healthy. So Jesus doesn't call healthy people.

You ever have those people in your family or at work that when they're sick they're like "I'm not sick, I don't need medicine or a doctor." And you're thinking "What's all that stuff running out of your face?" Or why are you unable to walk straight?

Well, if they don't acknowledge they're sick, there's nothing you can do. They're in denial.

Jesus doesn't call people who are in spiritual denial. He doesn't call people who don't think their sin is that bad. He doesn't call people who think others are wretches but they're not that bad. He doesn't call people who love pointing out other people's sinfulness.

Not only does he not call them, that's not even his mission. **Read 17**

If someone thinks they're fine spiritually, Jesus doesn't call them. By the way, that's why one of the biggest parts of telling people the good news about Jesus is also telling them the bad news about their sin. They're not going to seek a physician until they know they're sick.

See even in the story it's easy for us to point to the sinners and tax collectors and talk about how bad they were. But you know who really needs a doctor in this whole scenario?

Everyone. Matthew needs one. His friends all need one. And the Pharisees need one.

Until someone comes to the point where they stop continually looking at other people's sin and look at their own sin and they're own need for a physician they'll never actually be saved.

But if you acknowledge your sin - not in relation to anyone else - but only in relation to God. If you understand your need for forgiveness and salvation, understand your own depravity of mind and action, then Jesus can work.

Jesus says a couple things here that are important: Those who are well have no **need** of a physician but those who are sick.

Once a person understands their sickness - they're sin - they get that they need a doctor. They realize the biggest problem in the world is them and their own sin.

And then Jesus says these great words: I came not to call the righteous but sinners.

A lot of times I think people are so ashamed of their sin that they don't want anyone to know. They don't want anyone to find out. So they hide it, they deny it, they cover it up, they justify it, they pretend it doesn't matter.

No what Jesus wants is confession. Full acknowledgement. For those who do, that's who Jesus calls.

What do we mean by call? What does it mean that Jesus calls sinners? We mean save. Forgive. Cleanse. Adopt.

Do you need a physician? Are you sick? Then Jesus is the great physician. He might not heal you of your physical ailments - not in this life anyway. But he'll forgive your sin. And use you for his glory.

To the wretches he says: follow me.

Pray