

TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

Mark 2:13-17

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I. The Scene (2:13-15)

We last saw Jesus in His home on the momentous occasion of not only healing the paralytic, but in forgiving his sins as well. After this episode, Mark tells us that Jesus **“went out again by the seashore.”** Again, as when He called the first four disciples, Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, probably to escape His uncomfortably crowded house. And as we have seen in previous events, as soon as the crowds knew where Jesus went, they followed. Mark then says, **“And He was teaching them.”** As we have also seen on previous occasions when the crowds swelled, Jesus did not tell them to leave, but used it as an opportunity to fulfill His purpose in coming.

1. Levi the tax collector (v. 14a)

This would prove to be an extraordinary day for one man. **“As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth.”** There are a few things that Mark shares about this man in whom Jesus takes such an interest.

First, he was **“the son of Alphaeus.”** This Alphaeus is not to be confused with the man by the same name who was the father of James the Less, who is later also called to be an apostle (3:18). Some believe that Levi and James the Less were brothers on this account. However, this does not seem likely because the Scriptures never mention these two men together as they do other pairs, like Peter and Andrew and James and John. Alphaeus was a common name in this time so it would not be unlikely that the two men had fathers by the same name.

Second, we note that Matthew calls this man Matthew, not Levi as did Mark and Luke (9:9). Of course, this is not an error on Matthew’s part. Matthew and Levi are the same person. Some presume that Jesus changed Levi’s name to Matthew after calling him or that Levi changed his own name with changing occupations, which was a common occurrence. However, it is more likely that Levi had two Semitic names much like Simon Peter or John Mark. Regardless, Levi and Matthew are one in the same and it is this man that later writes the gospel of Matthew. Perhaps Matthew wanted to use the name more common to him after his calling than before, much like Peter, and Mark and Luke want to stress his occupation at the time of his calling.

Third, we are told that this Levi was **“sitting in a tax booth,”** probably along side of the highway running from Syria in the north to Egypt in the south. It is not Levi’s heritage or name that is of most importance here, but his occupation. Levi was a tax collector, an occupation that was utterly despised by the Jews. If you were to think of the most despised job today, it would fail in comparison to the animosity the Jews had for this occupation. Tax collectors worked for the Roman government. Their job was to collect taxes or tolls that would be sent back to Rome to pay for their wars and the expansion of their empire, an empire that ruled over the Jews during this time. So for a Jew, a tax collector, or “publican,” was viewed as a collaborator with the Roman government, a “Benedict Arnold” of sorts. These men were so hated that the Jewish Talmud says, “It is righteous to lie and deceive a tax collector.” Of course, this is not the Scripture, but you get the idea of how much these men were loathed. They were considered

thieves and cheats because they would not only take the taxes required, but would take more than was required for their own benefit. They were considered liars and therefore were not permitted to give evidence in court. They were banned from the synagogue or the temple and were literally ostracized both politically and religiously. They were public and social outcasts; much like we saw was the case with lepers.

2. The call and response of Levi (vv. 14b-15)

This is what makes what we see next so remarkable. Jesus, passing by the toll booth and seeing Levi, does not rebuke him for being a swindler and a cheat, but says, **“Follow Me!”** For those standing around, this would have been as amazing as when Jesus looked at the paralytic and said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” It was one thing for Jesus to have called four fishermen to follow Him, men respected in their occupations because they earned their livings in a respectable manner. But a tax collector? It was one thing for Jesus to heal the leper of the horrible disease. The leper did not choose to be a leper. But this man Levi chose his occupation. Did Jesus not know that this man was a thief, a “pariah” as Derek Thomas calls him? Did He not know that this man was in cahoots with Rome, stealing their money to support their cause? What was Jesus thinking?

We must remember the mindset of the Jews concerning the Messiah at this moment. They viewed the Messiah, their Deliverer, as one who would set them free from the bondage and oppression of Rome. Now Jesus seems to be collaborating with them in calling Levi. We know, of course, that Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. I believe His purpose on this occasion was to show, as will be evident in a moment, that He did not come for the purpose they construed in their minds. His calling of Levi was to stun them, to help them realize that His Messiahship and His kingdom was not of this earth. His purpose was not to set men free from the bondage and serfdom of this world, but to free sinners from the chains and bondage of sin, of which this man was one of the uttermost.

And what was Levi’s response to Jesus’ call? **“And he got up and followed Him.”** Just like Peter and Andrew and James and John, Levi immediately follows him. As Edmond Hiebert points out, “Jesus knew that Levi’s heart was hungry and ready to accept something higher.”¹ Jesus saw something much more than others saw in this man. He saw a ready heart and this is demonstrated by Levi’s immediate obedience. He forsook all to follow Jesus. Unlike the four fishermen who could return to their business later, which in no way minimizes their obedience, Levi walked away from his job, not only never to return to the tax booth, but forever unable to return.

But there is something further we see in Levi’s obedience. Notice verse 15. Levi throws a party. Luke says that Levi “gave a big reception for Him in his house” (5:29). And who did he invite? **“Many tax collectors and sinners.”** This represents a group that Jesus could not approach in the synagogue because they were not allowed. They were social and religious outcasts, representing the scum of the community. **“Sinners”** would have included thieves, murderers, drunkards, prostitutes and all sorts of irreligious people. The gathering, as well as the guest list, demonstrates the depth of Levi’s commitment. He had no reservations or regrets in following Jesus. Leon Morris remarks, “Clearly Levi found it an exhilarating thing to forsake wealth for Christ. And he probably wished to introduce some of his associates to his new Lord.”² I like what J. C. Ryle said, “A converted man will not wish to go to heaven alone.”³

¹ Edmond Hiebert, *The Gospel of Mark*, 73

² Leon Morris, *TNCT: Luke*, 132

Levi wanted to get the word out. He wanted all of these lowly sorts to meet the man that had set him free. If He could do it for Levi, He could do it for them. And a glorious thing happened, **“they were following Him.”** This is the first instance we see in Mark of a group **“following Him.”** We have repeatedly seen the crowds *coming* to Him for physical healing. But these followed Him. Tax collectors and sinners were coming to Christ because of the zeal of Levi and his exuberant faith.

II. The Complaint (2:16)

Of course, this did not go without notice amongst the religious elite. We were introduced to this group last week when we saw the beginning of Jesus’ conflict with the religious leaders of His day. The scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the Sanhedrin all would continue to be a source of conflict for Jesus. These groups often disagreed on many things, often at odds with one another and despising each other separately. But these minorities banded together as one in their animosity towards Jesus. The cause of these religious leaders was to do away with this man named Jesus, who they were beginning to consider an imposter as Messiah.

1. The issuers of the complaint

The complaint on this occasion was put forth by **“the scribes of the Pharisees.”** In the previous text it was the scribes that questioned Jesus’ authority to forgive sins. There we noted that Luke said this group also contained Pharisees. Here Mark calls them **“the scribes of the Pharisees.”** The indication here is that not all scribes were Pharisees. There were also scribes among the Sadducees, who had a less strict interpretation of the law than the Pharisees.

The scribes in any group were the rulers of the law. They would make judgments and rulings on both the interpretation of law and in the way that the law was binding in each situation. This particular group, **“the scribes of the Pharisees,”** had a very strict interpretation of the law. Eventually they determined that the law contained 613 commandments (248 positive and 365 negative ones!)⁴ that had to be kept for one to be considered righteous. Can you imagine trying to remember all of those laws each and every moment of every day? Talk about bondage! This was exasperated by the legalistic tendencies of this group. Other restrictions outside of the law itself were introduced in an effort to help a person keep these commandments, to maintain their righteousness. They would build a “hedge” around them to protect the faithful from falling into sin. As long as a person adhered to the law, and these extra requirements introduced by the scribes, then a person was considered right with God.

By way of illustration, let us put on the cap of a modern day Pharisee. The Scripture says that it is sin to be a drunkard, to be drunk with wine. That is the Law and there is really no other way to interpret it. Now a right thinking scribe of the Pharisees would immediately begin to formulate in his mind a way to guard against breaking this law. The obvious answer is that one should not partake of alcoholic beverages. After all, if one does not drink, one cannot get drunk. So, a good scribe today would make this a law and call it a sin to have a glass of wine. However, this is to interject into the law a requirement that is not in Scripture. But a good scribe would not stop there. If it is sin to have a glass of wine, then we must protect the people from wine altogether. So our scribe would introduce another law that says that it is unlawful to eat in a restaurant that serves alcohol or shop at a grocery or pump gas at an establishment that sells

³ J. C. Ryle, *Day by Day with J. C. Ryle*, 250

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Mark*, 29

alcohol. Further, it would be considered sinful to watch a television network that advertises beer commercials.

Do you see how legalistic the scribes of the Pharisees were? What they were doing with these petty restrictions was not merely guarding a person from breaking the law, but from even the temptation to break the law. They are to be commended for helping a person guard their hearts, even against temptation. Their mistake was in calling temptation sin. And their greatest error was in making the keeping of the law along with all of these legalistic requirements attached to it a requirement for righteousness. This is the group that Jesus now encounters for a second time, and they approach Him and His disciples with a question concerning the lawfulness of associating with these tax collectors and sinners.

2. The question of lawfulness

“When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to *His disciples*, ‘Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?’” Their question exposes their legalism. Among the list of “don’ts” associated with their imposed regulations was a refusal to buy food from or eat in the homes of people such as this. These people, who were excluded from the synagogue, would not have been able to tithe properly for this food nor would they have been able to receive any of the purification necessary for fellowship. In the eyes of the scribes, these people and everything associated with them was contaminated.

Therefore, the actions of Jesus and His disciples on this occasion were scandalous in the eyes of these scribes, but especially for Jesus. The rabbis had laid down a rule, “The disciples of the learned shall not recline at table in the company of the people of the soil” as they were called, a reference to their filthy unrighteousness. Reclining at one’s table was symbolic of fellowship, and Jesus’ actions on this occasion show that He in fact and practice identified with people such as this, tax collectors and sinners. This was simply incomprehensible for the scribes. A Teacher of the law was breaking the Law, their law, emphasis on *their law*. In associating with these men, in accordance with *their law*, Jesus and His disciples were ceremonially unclean. For them, it was an open and shut case.

Notice that they do not speak directly to Jesus. Their question is directed to the disciples. This was their effort to try and get the disciples to see things their way. In other words, their question was almost a statement, “Choose you this day whom you will serve.” But these disciples had already made their choice.

III. The Response (2:17)

Notice that although the cowardly scribes had directed their question, rhetorical in their minds, to the disciples, it is Jesus that offers the response on their behalf. **“And hearing *this*, Jesus said to them, ‘It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’”** Jesus responds first with a well-known proverb of their day. It is not those in good health that need a doctor, but only those who are sick. The sick come to the doctor in hopes of being made well, and the doctor must have an intimate, close relationship with the patient. Otherwise, he cannot properly diagnose the illness and offer a ready cure.

But just in case they missed His proverbial jab, Jesus clarifies His intent. His purpose was spiritual, not physical, **“I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** Jesus is telling the

scribes that He calls only the spiritually sick, like these sinners at Levi's party, not those who think they are well like these self-righteous scribes. Sinclair Ferguson shows two important lessons that Jesus was teaching these religious hypocrites.⁵

1. He was rebuking their misdirected zeal

They were concerned for the glory of God and for moral purity, which, as we have noted, was commendable. But God's concern for His glory and purity among men had led Him down through history to visit his sin-diseased people to heal them. If the Pharisees were really anxious to see men become holy, then their separation to God should have led them to a loving commitment to the people, to show them God's way.

This is why Matthew, in his retelling of this significant event in his life, notes Jesus command to these men, "But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:13). They were straining the gnat and swallowing the camel. Their petty legalisms had carried them down a road of missing the forest for the trees. Their misdirected zeal had caused them to miss the nature of Christ and His purpose in coming.

2. He was exposing their false holiness

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, nor the type that Jesus demonstrated. I like Ferguson's illustration here.

Think of the modern-day surgeon. He 'scrubs up' before his operation. Why is he so careful to be clean? In order to help those who are diseased or physically deformed. True holiness is like that. It is not contaminated by my eating with these sinners. Rather, it seeks to make them whole and holy too.

So Jesus reminds them of His purpose, a purpose which He straightforwardly puts to them later, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (10:45). His service, and the service of His disciples then and now, requires them to go to the sick, to reach out to the sinners. The self-righteous religious leaders of His day never came to grips with this truth.

Conclusion

1. To whom shall we go?

John 6:65-69 – And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."⁶⁶ As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?"⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life."⁶⁹ We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."

2. To whom shall we go? Luke 15:1-10

⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Mark*, 30. The material that follows is from Ferguson with some added comment.