

Mark 2:13-17

February 4, 2024

From the very beginning of the Christian Church, Christianity has had its haters. Cresus, a Roman philosopher in the 200's AD, criticized Christianity for many reasons, but one major issue he had with was this: Its first teachers, the 12 disciples, were simple working-class men without advanced education. How could they be the first teachers of your religion? How can you trust anything they say? An early Christian scholar and theologian from Egypt, named Origen, wrote an entire book reacting to each of Cresus' attacks, and when Cresus says, "how can you trust the message of Jesus' ordinary, under-educated disciples, Origen responds by saying, "How can you not?" *"Now, who, on seeing fishermen and tax-gatherers, who had not acquired even the merest elements of learning... preaching boldly not only among the Jews about faith in Jesus, but also preaching Him with success among other nations, would not wonder where they derived this power of persuasion...? And who would not say that the promise, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men,' had been accomplished by Jesus in the history of His apostles by a sort of divine power?"*

The point he's making is the fact that Jesus' disciples were not highly educated philosophical gurus doesn't discredit Christianity, it's actually evidence that it's true- because they and those who preached after them were able to convert hundreds and thousands- which means there must be something supernatural and true in their message. Today, we are going to see Jesus inviting one his most fascinating disciples, Matthew, to leave his life of sin and trust in him as his God and Savior all with these life-changing words: **"Follow me."** And we are going to see that those words from Jesus are both **1. A call to sinners, and a 2. Scandal to the righteous.**

1. To give you an idea of the kind of man Levi, or Matthew, same person, was, let's first talk about tax collectors. In Jesus' day, Israel was occupied by the Roman Empire, and they sent their soldiers to patrol the area, and since Rome "graciously" provided Israel with order and protection, they demanded taxes. They would offer tax-collector contracts- rights to collect taxes from a certain area, like Capernaum, and sell them to the highest bidder. When a person gave all his money to have that contract, he would tell the people what they owed, often lying and saying they owed more than they did, collect whatever was needed for the Romans, and whatever was left over, he would get to keep for himself. And if people thought that the tax collector was collecting too much and didn't want to pay the amount, the collectors had the Roman soldiers to back them up. A tax collector could get as rich as he wanted, and no one could stop him. They had the nicest houses, best clothes, richest food and wine, extravagant parties, the envy of all their neighbors. But it came at a price. To purchase this life, they sold their souls. They would lose all their friends, their families would disown them, they would be shunned and despised by everyone they knew. They weren't allowed to participate in public life or worship in the synagogue. It was acceptable and encouraged to spit on their shadow as they walked by, or to at least walk across the street to avoid them. And they deserved it. They were traitors, working for the oppressor Romans and collecting the money that fed Roman soldiers. They were extortioners, cheaters, thieves that got filthy rich by choking every penny they could from their own brothers and sisters. That's the kind of man Matthew was.

And yet, when Jesus saw him in the tax booth, knowing exactly who he was, exactly what he did, exactly how much pain he was responsible for, he said, "Follow me." And Matthew after years of shame, guilt, and realizing that all the money in the world could never replace the friendship and acceptance of God, and desperately seeking forgiveness for what he did, immediately got up and left it all behind. He knew what

he was leaving behind. A comfortable life, a warm bed, luxury and power. And He knew what Jesus was saying to him. When Jesus said, "Follow me," he was saying, "I know what you've done, and I forgive you. I know who you are, and I can change you. I know what you have, and I can give you so much more. Leave the tax booth. Leave your life of sin. Follow me." And Matthew, after years of being excluded from the Synagogue and hearing that he could be forgiven or accepted by God, knows that this is too powerful and beautiful to keep to himself. He invites the only people that would ever step foot into his house- other tax collectors and other outcasts of society, sinners, prostitutes, drunkards, brothel owners, thieves, to come to his house and hear this Jesus because if Jesus could forgive and accept and change Matthew, he could do the same to them. And that's what happened. They ate with Jesus and they followed him. They were forgiven and changed too. And Jesus ate with them- the ultimate sign of brotherhood and friendship and family. Do you know what this means? There is no sin so evil, depraved, or disgusting that Jesus can't forgive. There is no sinner so lost, so broken, so blind that Jesus can't save. There is no one so unlovable, so un-Christian, that Jesus can't say, "Follow me."

2. Yet, "Follow Me" isn't just an invitation, it's a scandal that infuriates the self-righteous. The ones that catch Jesus eating with these people are the religious experts and moral teachers who are constantly telling everyone "don't be like the tax collectors," and then to see Jesus share a meal, and therefore his friendship with them, is scandalous to them. It makes them sick. It offends them. Why? Because it contradicts their teaching and beliefs- that these people are beyond help and beyond God's grace. Of course, they would never dirty themselves by walking into Matthew's home, and they don't actually address Jesus himself, but his disciples. "Why is he doing that? That's wrong. If he claims to be a holy man, a religious teacher, a moral example, then he should have nothing to do with these kinds of people." Jesus overhears them, and his response is beautiful, brilliant, and horrifying all at once. "It's not the healthy that need a Doctor, but the sick. I came to call sinners, not the righteous."

It's beautiful because it's the heart of Christianity itself and what makes Jesus different from any other food. Jesus didn't come to shame the sin sick, the greedy, the immoral, the sinners, he didn't come to condemn them, or even to give them the right rules on how they can be better. He came to heal them. He came to call them to himself. He came to embrace them and love them and die for them so that they could truly be embraced and dine not just with him on Earth, but with Him, his angels, and all the saints in perfect glory forever. Yes, even them, because Jesus was here to die for them! It's brilliant because it completely traps the Pharisees in their own hypocrisy. He's saying, "You're right, they are evil, broken, sinners. They are sick. They need help. You're absolutely right. So any good spiritual doctor is going to spend time with those who are sick." What he's also doing is exposing them for their spiritual laziness and failure as biblical teachers. "Oh, these people are sinners! You're right! I shouldn't be eating with them! You should be! You should be the first ones to call them to repentance. You should be the first ones to engage them.. But in order to do that, you would have to love them, and you don't. You hate them because you're convinced that you're better than them."

It's horrifying because it displays the crushing, terrible irony of damnation. When Jesus says, "The healthy don't need a doctor, I didn't come to call the righteous," he's telling the pharisees, "You are closer to Hell than they are." All people are sinful, all people are sin-sick, all people need to be forgiven by God, and the Pharisees should have known that better than anyone, because the Old Testament says it all the time. The Pharisees are just as broken, just as evil, just as guilty before God as these sinners, and the fact that they

refuse to do their job, to lovingly and sincerely call sinners to repentance, because they are so filled with self-righteous pride, proves that they are just as close to the fires of Hell. And they have no idea. The problem with the Pharisees isn't that they take sin too seriously- Jesus does too- it's that they don't take their sins seriously enough. And they think that because of their religious habits, their dress, their education, their "better" sins, that they didn't need God's grace nearly as much as others.. Ironically, it wasn't their sins that threw them into Hell, but their righteousness- the fact that they fooled themselves into thinking that because they were comparatively better than everyone else, they were okay, and they were willing to kill anyone who insisted that they weren't, which they did.

I've been a pastor here for more than half a year now, and I think these words from Jesus might be the most relevant for our time and place. No, we don't have a group called the Pharisees that need to be taken down a few notches, but their spiritual cancer still lives on. It sounds like this: "Well, I just try to be a good person. Just try to be a good person, and God will have mercy on you. All that religion stuff is silly, we should just try to be good people." If that's the case, Jesus has nothing for you. You've damned yourself.. If that's your theology, by the time you figure out that your good is not good enough for God and the sins that you pretended didn't exist are clear before a holy God, it will be too late. It's not because Jesus isn't loving or good enough to save you, but because you are too good to be saved. Do you know someone like that? So do I. One of you asked me a great question a few weeks ago: "How do you respond to that?" How do you help someone admit that they aren't good enough, that they need to repent, that they need to trust Jesus' goodness, not their own? Firstly, we need to realize that only the Holy Spirit can do that, it's not our job to change people. But God does use us. Here's some tips.

- a. Ask questions. Especially when they say the American creed, "I just think that if you try to be a good person..." ask, "Why do you believe that?" Just ask. Make them actually think about it. Many times, people have never actually considered why they believe what they believe, they just believe it. Ask them why they believe that! Better yet, if they say, "The Bible says so," you can take them here and show that Jesus would say otherwise.
- b. Help them see that they maybe aren't quite as good as they think they are. One question I sometimes ask is this: "If you had a microphone attached to your neck, and every time you made a moral statement like, 'people shouldn't live that way,' 'lying is so wrong,' 'people should do this, not that,' how would you personally live up to your own standard of what is right and wrong? Most people, when they actually think about it, realize that they haven't. Then say, "If you can't even live up to your own standard of what a good person should be, what makes you think you can live up to God's?"
- c. Be honest. Tell your story. If you're a Christian, you know how much God expects of you and how often you've rebelled against him. You know exactly what you deserve. But you also know exactly what God has done for you. You know that Jesus, even while you were still a sinner, chose you, loved you, was tortured and murdered in your place, and now declares you to be absolutely perfect, even though you are sinner. Christians don't say, "You know, I have everything figured out and you ought to be more like me, a Christian." No. They say, "God's grace is so amazing that he saved a wretch, a fool, a sinner like me without me deserving it. If he could have mercy on a wretch like me, why not you? That's what Matthew did. And it worked. Amen.