

## MARK 2:13-17 CBC 9.5.2021

**Please read Mark 2:13-17 ...**

Last week we saw Jesus being confronted with a paralysed man (Mark 2:1-12). We probably expected Jesus simply to say, “*You’re healed*” – but first He said “*You’re forgiven*”, because it’s forgiveness that brings us into a relationship with God and therefore it’s the most important and precious thing in the world.

Do you think *you* need to be forgiven? Do you think Jesus is interested in forgiving you? Today we’re going to see that Jesus will forgive anyone. And we’ll see that it’s not empty words, because when Jesus forgives someone, He also gives them a new life.

### **Jesus Calls and Changes People**

Once again, Jesus is teaching God’s word to a large crowd (v.13). And (v.14) He calls Levi the tax collector to follow Him. Levi is also known by another name in the New Testament: he’s Matthew, the author of the first gospel.

It’s striking: Jesus calls a man who many would think shouldn’t be in the band of disciples at all. Tax collectors were hated because they worked for the enemy – the Roman occupiers. They did it for the money – not just their wages, but the extra they charged you and kept for themselves. They cheated you, and there was nothing you could do about it because the Roman army protected them.

So you couldn’t punch a man like Levi on the nose – but there were plenty of other ways to let him know he was the most hated guy in town. You (and everyone like you) could shut him out from normal society quite effectively. You certainly wouldn’t invite him for dinner!

So there must have been an audible gasp when Jesus said to Levi, “*Follow me!*” The one thing people *didn’t* want Levi to do was follow them. They wanted to leave him behind as quickly as possible.

Surely there are nicer people Jesus could choose? But this is the gospel. The lesson is simple: Jesus didn’t come for people who are sorted. He came for sinners. People still imagine that Jesus chooses good people – most people think they *are* good people! But really it’s shocking that Jesus calls any of us. None of us is qualified for the kingdom of God by our character or behaviour, because we’ve all chosen a pathway that leads us *away* from God.

So we should be very glad when Jesus chooses Levi, because what hope would we have if Jesus was only choosing people who were good enough for God? We need someone to take us as we are and lead us by the hand into God’s Kingdom as forgiven sinners, and that person is Jesus. That’s why He came. The church isn’t a club for the self-righteous. We’re not here because we’ve got our act together, but because Jesus has got it all together and has invited us to join Him. We’re here to celebrate amazing grace. And since God has accepted us, we should also accept one another – gladly.

Someone might object, “*Levi got off lightly – he cheated people and wasn’t made to pay – it isn’t fair!*” But Levi’s redemption doesn’t come cheaply. It’s going to cost Jesus His life – that’s where

Mark's gospel is taking us. Jesus came to give His life as a ransom to save sinners like Levi. Jesus paid a high price for him. And we should be glad that Jesus is willing to pay for the sins of another, because that's the only reason any of us can be saved. We've all cheated God many times – and because of Jesus we don't have to pay. He paid for us. So don't grumble about Levi getting a new start – be grateful.

So Jesus called someone no-one else wanted. He welcomes outsiders: not just those who don't yet belong to the church, but those we can't imagine ever belonging to the church. He said to Levi, "Follow me" – and perhaps to Levi's own astonishment, he *did* get up and follow Jesus and join in His mission. Because Jesus not only calls people, He changes them.

It's mind blowing when you think about it. This is a man whose lifestyle gave you no hint that he would be interested in spiritual things. You would expect a very rude or sarcastic response! But he follows. It's a miracle of grace. Grace opens his eyes and moves his heart and changes his thinking and his desires.

How do we know this? Because he brings Jesus home. And it doesn't stop there. He wants to introduce Jesus to his friends so he holds a 'conversion' party to celebrate his new life. Wow! In the past, Levi would have thought Jesus would be a party killer. He wouldn't have wanted Jesus there. Now he wants his friends to meet Him.

It isn't just empty words when Jesus calls us to follow Him. He makes us new people. Otherwise we'd be stuck forever in our idolatries. But Jesus sets us free. If Jesus works in you to give you a new heart, you'll be following Him all through the week, and you won't need to be prompted all the time because you've been transformed and you've got this life inside you.

### **Welcoming sinners, not sin**

But this is where Jesus begins to make some people uncomfortable. Levi wants his friends to meet Jesus. That sounds OK ... but who are these friends? More people like Levi. The people summed up in v.15 as "*tax collectors and sinners*" – code for bad company. And I don't know if it shocks you or not, but Jesus is quite *comfortable* with these people. They are the people that He came for.

Jesus actually seems to like them! The snob in me wonders how He does it. What did they talk about? Surely His interests were miles removed from theirs. How did He stand their language? Their attitudes? Their drunkenness? I just want to withdraw from people who are so different from me.

But there's nothing like that about Jesus. Years later, when Levi (Matthew) wrote his gospel, he remembered that Jesus' enemies had called Him "*a friend of tax collectors and sinners*" (Mt 11:19). They meant it as an accusation – Levi saw it as something wonderful.

Equally amazing: these people seemed to welcome Jesus as much as He welcomed them! They felt comfortable around Him. People in our culture aren't usually keen to be stuck with the vicar at a party – yet here is Jesus, Mr Holy Himself, and these people love His company! They don't feel awkward or judged, the way I too often seem to make people feel. Jesus shows us that real holiness is not unattractive – it actually draws people. It's compelling.

How does Jesus manage that? I don't believe for one moment that our Lord was soft on sin. He didn't tell people their sins were OK. He didn't join them in their sin to prove that He was a regular bloke. Jesus dined with sinners, but He didn't *sin* with sinners. He clearly preached repentance. Yet sinners loved Him, and somehow knew that He loved them and was truly glad to be with them. And that His love was *heartfelt* – not through gritted teeth, grimly trying to do the right thing while wishing He didn't have to!

So here we see Jesus doing a very difficult thing: welcoming people without approving of everything they do. We tend to fall one of two ways. Either we're **blenders** or **battlers**. Either were so concerned not to put people off that we never challenge them – we blend in; or we're so anxious not to compromise on holiness that we quickly become confrontational and prickly – we go into battle. And people simply feel judged by us but not loved.

The way of Jesus is neither of these things. If you're someone who seeks to blend in when you're with people who don't yet follow Jesus, so that you never ruffle any feathers – listen, you're being very unloving. It isn't loving to leave people in the darkness, to never shine a light, to never warn anyone that they're heading for disaster if they carry on ignoring God. That is NOT the way of Jesus.

But equally, it isn't loving to be a self-righteous prig who cuts himself off from the very people who need Jesus. It's not loving to look down your nose at other people. Some folk are so self-consciously holy that they set people's teeth on edge. They've got a relational style akin to paint-stripper. And it sets back the cause of the gospel. That's not the way of Jesus either.

The way of Jesus challenges people to leave their life of sin, but does so in a relationship of genuine, deep love. We need to pray for God's help to live like that – to be like Jesus in what He models in v.15. To mix with ordinary people and accept them without approving everything they think, say and do.

There's something here I haven't got ... I know I can be awkward and abrasive around people whose lifestyle I don't like. And I need God's help to be like Jesus. Jesus met people where they were, and by the power of forgiving love challenged them and changed them and led them into a new life. You probably need to join me in praying for God's help to be like Jesus.

Because – hear this – if our holiness consists only in *criticizing* other sinners rather than caring for them, it's not the kind of holiness God wants. We see this in vv.16-17. There were Pharisees who could see what was happening, and they were shocked. They didn't think someone announcing God's kingdom should be associating with these terrible people. For the Pharisees, who you ate with was a way of drawing boundaries, showing who was in God's kingdom and who was definitely out. And in their eyes, Levi and his pals were out.

And they asked this astonishing question, "*Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?*" That's got to be one of the most arrogant questions ever asked. Because the only way that you can be upset at Jesus eating with sinners is if you've concluded that you're not one. That's a terrifying example of how blind we can be to our own sin. Thank God Jesus eats with sinners, or He certainly wouldn't be eating with any of us. If Jesus didn't eat with sinners, He would be eating alone!

Jesus' reply is simple but brilliant. v.17: Those who are well don't need the doctor. The doctor is for those who are ill. "*I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*" Jesus is talking about spiritual

sickness – something we all suffer from. But there are two kinds of people: those who are sick and who know it; and those who are just as sick but in denial. They insist they're fine. They're righteous. They don't need Jesus as a Saviour because they don't think they need to be forgiven. That's for other people. Lesser people. My friend, if you think like that, you exclude yourself from God's kingdom, which is a kingdom of grace for forgiven sinners, not the self-righteous.

And the reason Jesus came is to call sinners. He doesn't wait for us to wake up and call Him; He came to call us *so that* we'd call on Him! Before we even knew our need, He came. His heart of compassion drew Him to us. And while we were still sinners, He died for us.

You can't begin to measure this love of God. God saw us in our sin and knew that we'd be broken in life and utterly miserable in death – and He said "Let's do something about this. Will it cost me? Yes. Will it cost everything? Yes. Will it even cost my beloved Son? Yes. We'll do it!" And because God said yes to rescuing us, Jesus lived and died and rose again to bring us home.

## **Conclusion**

What's your response to Jesus? Do you know you're a sinner who needs a Saviour? Then come to Him! Do you see that there's still a lot of self-righteousness in your heart, that causes you to despise the very people who need the same grace that's been shown to you? Then come to Jesus again and confess it. Ask Him to help you, to change you more and more, to give you a heart of compassion. And thank God for this amazing Saviour, who doesn't write us off, but calls us and patiently changes us.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, we thank You that our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. May your Spirit lead us to Jesus today, whether for the first time or for the umpteenth time, to find forgiveness and the grace to change. Give us hearts of compassion, like our Lord. May the beauty of Jesus grow in us more and more to draw others into Your family. For Your glory's sake. AMEN.

## **FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION**

- What's your response when Jesus says He came to call sinners?
- Are you a blender or a battler? How can you become more like Jesus?