

“I Have Not Come to Call the Righteous, But Sinners”

The Eighth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 2:13-22; Isaiah 62:1-5

Jesus suddenly appeared in Capernaum and began preaching a remarkable message. “*The time has come, . . . The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*” Jesus also began calling disciples and he cast out a demon with but a single command before a stunned audience in the local synagogue. Jesus then healed countless people who flocked to him, including a man with leprosy, the most dreaded disease of the age. Crowds grew so quickly that Jesus was forced to retreat into the wilderness to find solitude. People were following him everywhere he went—not so much because they cared about the content of his message, or even that Jesus might be Israel’s Messiah. What mattered to them was that Jesus was a miracle worker who could do for the sick and suffering what no one else could—heal disease. While Jesus was compassionate upon those who suffered, this was not the reason why he came. The miracles and healings were signs of something else. It is when Jesus announces to a paralyzed man, “*Son, your sins are forgiven*” that we get our clearest glimpse yet of the true nature of his mission. Jesus came to save us from our sins and to overturn the curse, brought upon the entire human race when Adam fell into sin.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark. We are working our way through Mark’s account of the initial phase (Mark 1:14-3:6) of Jesus’ public ministry in Capernaum, a small fishing village on shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus only had recently begun his messianic mission to Israel. He called four local men, Peter, Andrews, James and John to be his first disciples. His reputation as a miracle worker-exorcist spread throughout the whole area—so much so that in order to escape from the crowds who sought him out, Jesus was forced to retreat to desolate places to pray and prepare for his work. The buzz about Jesus quickly reached a fever pitch. People followed Jesus everywhere and they watched his every step. And as more and more people began to follow him, the opposition to Jesus’ ministry from the Jewish religious leaders (the scribes and the Pharisees) was becoming increasingly intense.

Casting out demons and healing the sick are powerful and compelling signs in their own right that the messianic age has arrived. But when Jesus made the declaration that a paralyzed man’s sins were forgiven, we have the clearest sign yet that Jesus is both the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah. Jesus came to undo the effects of sin. This is clear when Jesus forgave this man as though he had sinned against Jesus, but especially in what came next. Jesus healed this paralyzed man, who got up and walked away unaided, when moments before he was confined to his sick bed. If it was Adam’s sin which plunged the human race into sickness and suffering, it was the forgiveness of sin which begins the process of the restoration of all things.

In this remarkable event—the healing of a paralyzed man—we see that the Old Testament prophets were absolutely correct when they connected sickness with sin and healing with forgiveness. Israel’s prophets also foretold that when the Messiah came to his people, the lame would leap like the deer and that God’s people would rejoice in what the Messiah would do for his poor and suffering people. This is exactly what happened in Peter and Andrew’s house when Jesus saw the faith of those who took such extreme measures that they cut a hole in the roof while Jesus was preaching and lowered their friend down into the room to make sure that Jesus saw their friend’s plight. Jesus came to rescue us from the disaster into which our first father plunged us. While it begins with his declaration that this man’s sins are forgiven,

Jesus' mission does not end in Peter and Andrew's house. Our Lord's messianic ministry will take him to Jerusalem and to Calvary's cross before the triumph of Easter.

When the paralyzed man got up and walked away, "*This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'*" This too was a sign of the messianic age. Something dramatic was going on in Capernaum. That which Israel's prophets had said would come to pass is fast becoming a reality and the people of this small village were privileged to witness these remarkable events. Yet this was all so overwhelming that the people were struggling to make sense of it all. No one had ever heard of such a thing, much less witness such a thing!

But not all those present were pleased with what they were seeing. The teachers of the law (the scribes) who witnessed Jesus forgive the paralyzed man and then heal him, thought that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy because he dared to forgive sin—something only God could do. We could understand their objection with a bit more sympathy if their objection was purely theological. After all, if Jesus was not who he claimed to be, his words would amount to blasphemy. But as the initial phases of Jesus' ministry continue to unfold, it will become increasingly clear that the scribes are not really interested in preserving God's honor or defending the faith. The scribes were offended because people were flocking to Jesus and could care less about them. Jesus did not ask their permission to do what he had been doing. Jesus was not one of them. This is why the tension between Jesus and those self-righteous religious leaders entrusted to care for God's people but who failed to do so will now fully come out into the open. The green-eyed monster (jealousy) will rear its ugly head.

Although Mark doesn't say so, we can imagine that Jesus' actions in Peter and Andrew's house generated much more interest in Jesus' power and ability to perform miracles. This can be seen in the rather abrupt change in subject between the healing in Capernaum and what follows next.

In the first part of verse 13, we simply read, "*Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.*" It is a reoccurring pattern in Mark's proclamation about Jesus that Jesus withdraws to a solitary place immediately after a demonstration of God's sovereign power. While Jesus may enjoy the solitude of the wilderness as a place to pray and commune with his heavenly father, the wilderness is also a place where Jesus does combat with those forces hostile to God. This is where Jesus was tempted by the devil. And when Jesus finds a quiet place along the Sea of Galilee, as reported in Mark 4 and 6, we will learn of how Jesus will calm storms in this same area. Jesus retreats to these wilderness places not only to rest and to pray, but as an act of obedience. Jesus will do his father's will and nothing will thwart him.¹ In retreating to the wilderness, the image beings to emerge that Jesus is leading a new Exodus of God's people through the wilderness of this present evil age.

When Jesus withdraws to an area along the Sea of Galilee, people apparently found or followed him. Jesus took this as an opportunity to teach them. This is very likely same in area in which Matthew records Jesus giving the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-6) although Mark does not recount this. Mark is not as interested in what Jesus was teaching these people as he is with the authority exercised by Jesus in calling disciples. And so we read, "*As [Jesus] walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth.*" Levi is probably another name for Matthew—the author of

¹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 100.

the gospel which bears his name.² He is clearly a local man and, no doubt, and everyone in the area knew him, given his unsavory and unpopular occupation.

The tax-collector's booth is literally a custom house or a toll booth.³ Apparently, it was Levi's job to collect taxes upon all those who traveled around the north end of the Sea of Galilee heading south from the region called the Decapolis, which was controlled by Herod Philip. We know from archaeological evidence that fish and local produce were taxed when brought into this region. Levi would have worked for Herod Antipas and because of his occupation was regarded as an outcast and a villain—almost a traitor, much like a government agent looking for moonshine in the Ozarks or a motorcycle cop in a speed trap. In fact, when Jews entered such toll collecting service, they were often regarded as outcasts and were even excommunicated from the local synagogue. Such a man was often considered a disgrace by his family.⁴ At the very least, Levi was probably known and perhaps even despised by the other four disciples who were fishermen and who likely had contact with him. But that will all be forgotten.

Levi was hardly someone you'd pick to become a pillar in the church and to eventually author a gospel which is one of the very foundational documents of Christ's church. But this is the man to whom Jesus now says, "*Follow me.*" Mark, with his vivid and direct style simply informs us that "*Levi got up and followed him.*" While Mark gives us few details about how this transpired, it is clear that our Lord's call is authoritative and cannot be refused. Matthew Levi got and followed Jesus, leaving his toll booth behind. He was now part of Jesus' inner circle.

The scene now shifts to Levi's home. In verse 15, Mark reports that "*while Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.*" Levi's career, however despicable, probably paid quite well and so he invites Jesus and his disciples to a dinner at his home. Levi also invited a number of his co-workers, people whom Mark identifies as "sinners," many of whom now also followed Jesus. Mark's use of the word "sinners" here probably does not refer to sinful people in general, as in the sense that we are all sinners. Mark uses the term "sinner" here as a technical term for a class of people whom the Pharisees regarded as people who had no interest in complying with their interpretation of the Mosaic law. "Sinners" did not follow the laws regarding ceremonial cleanliness regarding food (they ate like Gentiles), and they did not pay the tithe to the synagogue. The Pharisees regarded these people as outcasts.⁵

This was an especially touchy issue at the time because both the Pharisees and scribes saw themselves as the chief political opponents of the current regime of Herod, whom they felt was too buddy-buddy with their Roman oppressors. The scribes and Pharisees saw themselves as the descendants of the *Hasidim*, who had zealously observed the law during the cruel and repressive measures of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who desecrated the Jerusalem temple in 163 B. C. Levi, and his friends, would have been

² Since Mark's subsequent list of disciples (Mark 3:13-19) does not mention Levi, it is assumed that Levi is another name for Matthew. For a complete discussion of this see; Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 102 and France, The Gospel of Mark, 131-132.

³ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 102.

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 101-102.

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 103.

viewed as traitors, not only helping the pro-Roman Herod pad his coffers, but these were people who were contributing to the moral decay of the country. Given all the commotion that surrounded the recent appearance of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees were already afraid that Jesus was undermining their authority in the eyes of the people. When they saw Jesus reclining at table in Levi's house, eating with tax-collectors and "sinners," the Pharisees were shocked and angered.

Mark recounts what happened next in verses 16-17. "*When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?' On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'*" It was bad enough that Jesus declared that someone's sins were forgiven—the scribes and Pharisees thought this was an act of blasphemy. And now in their minds as if to add insult to injury, here is Jesus reclining at table in a tax-collector's house with people who were absolutely indifferent to the law and ritual purity, completely ignoring the distinction between "the righteous" and "sinners." This distinction was something the scribes and Pharisees had been teaching as long as anyone could remember. How could Jesus associate with such people, while being so disrespectful of the righteous?

In the first century world, to recline at table with someone and eat a meal with them was in a sense to identify with those with whom you were eating.⁶ If you ate with someone with a social standing lower than your own, you harmed your reputation in the community. On the other hand, it was a good thing to be invited to the home of someone wealthier or highly regarded so as to enhance your reputation. In this case, Jesus is not only eating with people who were at the bottom of the social rung, these people were outcasts from society and despised by almost everyone—except other tax-collectors and sinners. Most, if not all, of these people had been excommunicated from the synagogue and many of them were likely disowned by their families. In the eyes of the Pharisees, these people were not only ceremonially unclean, they flaunted their indifference to the law. And these are the people with whom Jesus is eating, and therefore publicly identifying? The Pharisees were not only offended, Jesus' actions went against everything they believed.⁷ It was scandalous.

Mark doesn't tell us how, but Jesus heard their objection: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus immediately silences them by citing a popular proverb, widely acknowledged by the Pharisees as true. *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.* It was Jesus' mission to cast out demons, heal the sick and call disciples, precisely because in his very person the kingdom of God draws near. It is also part of his mission to eat with sinners and tax-collectors so as to call sinful people to repentance. This too was a sign that Jesus was creating a new Israel, in which redeemed sinners enjoyed the most intimate of fellowship with the Messiah.⁸ As Jesus says in Matthew 8:11, "*I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.*" Therefore, one of the sure signs of the presence of the kingdom is that sinners come to believe in Jesus and trust in him for salvation and then manifest that faith by renouncing their former way of life and repenting of their sins. Now, they enjoy table fellowship with

⁶ S. S. Bartchy, "Table Fellowship," in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall, eds., Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 796-800.

⁷ See the discussion of this in: Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 104.

⁸ Bartchy, "Table Fellowship," 799-800.

the Messiah himself. The great physician has come to those who need him the most.

It is even more shocking that Jesus does not see his mission as to call the righteous. Jesus is using the term “righteous” in a rhetorical sense—those who think themselves to be righteous and therefore unable to consider the fact that they needed to humble themselves before God, acknowledge that they are sinners, and then obey Jesus’ summons to repent and believe. In other words, Jesus is saying that he did not come to call the “self-righteous,” or those who think of themselves as better off than the sinners. This is Jesus’ point in Luke 18:9-14. *“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’”*

Not only does Jesus offend the Pharisees with his actions—you can hear this in their question, “how on earth could someone who was obviously sent by God eat with sinners?” but in doing this Jesus exposed their true feelings. The Pharisees and scribes were mad that Jesus didn’t submit to them and they were jealous of the crowds which followed Jesus. The very fact that Israel’s Messiah would sit and eat with sinners points us ahead to the end of the age and the marriage supper of the lamb (Revelation 19:9), when Jesus will feast with sinners when the kingdom of God is fully consummated. In Jesus, we see that God’s grace is extended to sinners. Jesus’ mission is to call sinners to faith and repentance and grant them a true righteousness, unlike that of the Pharisees, whose righteousness was found in their zeal for external conformity to the law and in their personal satisfaction at having lived up to their own expectations, all the while ignoring God’s expectations, perfect obedience to the law in thought, word and deed.

Having demonstrated that Jesus saw his mission as to call sinners to faith and repentance, Mark now describes the continuing and increasingly intense conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

Although John the Baptist had been imprisoned, there were still a number of his followers in the area. These followers of John had, no doubt, been baptized by him and were perhaps looking to Jesus for leadership now that John was in jail. John’s disciples fasted, just as John had taught them. The practice of John’s disciples happened to coincide with the practice of the Pharisees, although there are good reasons to believe that followers of John fasted for different reasons. In the Old Testament, only one day was designated for fasting, the Day of Atonement (cf. Leviticus 16:1-34). However, by the time of the prophets, it had become customary to fast on a number of occasions—especially occasions of mourning. In the first century, the Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, although no one knows how this came to be or why this became so central to their piety.⁹ In Matthew in 6:16 Jesus speaks of this practice in less than glowing terms and as a manifestation of their self-righteousness. *“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.”*

Fasting now becomes another point of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees. In Mark 2:18-22, we read, *“Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, ‘How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?’ Jesus*

⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 108-122.

answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.'" No doubt, it was the sight of Jesus in the home of the tax-collector Levi, coupled the fact that Jesus and his disciples did not fast like John's disciples nor like the Pharisees, which provoked this question. Jesus replied with a counter-question. Why would people mourn when it was a time to celebrate? You certainly wouldn't fast at a wedding! Although it is appropriate to fast at news of the death of the bridegroom.

Not only does Jesus speak of himself as Israel's bridegroom—making a clear allusion to Isaiah 62:1-5 (our Old Testament lesson) wherein YHWH is said to be Israel's bridegroom—but Jesus came to bring joy to his disciples. He did not come to burden them with a host of man-made rules and regulations! Such regulations, like those the Pharisees had attached to fasting, not only led people to think they were righteous by what they did, but these rules also became an unbiblical standard by which to judge others. "Sinners" were those who didn't follow the rules of the Pharisees. The righteous are those who did. Notice too that Jesus also strongly hints that the present condition of joy brought about by his presence with the disciples, will at some point give way to a time when mourning will be proper. In this, we get a strong hint that Jesus' mission will take him to the cross.¹⁰

In verses 21-22, Jesus goes on to offer another parable which addresses the broader question about fasting and how inappropriate actions (such as mourning when the occasion calls for joy) only bring about more damage. Says Jesus, *"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."* If Jesus' disciples did what John's disciples did, or if they acted like the Pharisees, they'd be like people trying to fix a wineskin in such a way that it would destroy the whole wineskin, much less fail to fix the original problem. To those who cannot understand the nature of his mission—that he is Israel's bridegroom—Jesus will confound them with these questions and parables. In effect, Jesus is defending the conduct of his disciples as well as demonstrating that the Pharisees have missed the whole point of fasting. As revealed in this parable, the arrival of the kingdom of God will stretch the Pharisees' understanding of the kingdom of God to the breaking point, much like what happens when new wine is poured into old wineskins.

What then, do we take with us from this passage which will help us live lives of gratitude before God?

When Jesus eats with sinners he's not only giving us a hint that the messianic age has arrived, he's also reminding us of the great truth which underlies his messianic mission. The kingdom of God is manifest in Jesus' authority over demons, in his ability to heal, but also in his authority to forgive sins. We saw this when Jesus first forgave and then healed the paralytic. We also see this when Jesus called a tax-collector named Levi to become a disciple and eventually the author of one of our gospels. Jesus dared to go to a tax-collector's home and break bread with people whom the religious leaders regarded as outcasts, completely unworthy of God's grace. The Pharisees hated him for it. The ramification of this are profound and many.

First, there is no person beyond the reach of God's grace. Jesus hung out with people everyone else

¹⁰ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 111.

regarded as beyond help. But what is impossible with men is surely possible with God. But these were the people upon whom Christ built his church.

Second, in doing this Jesus exposed the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, who regarded external obedience to the commandments in the form of their own man-made rules and regulations to be the essence of godliness. Jesus exposed this to be patently false. God is concerned about obedience to his commandments, not obedience to the rules of men. While the order of Pharisees has long since passed away, the mind set has not. If Jesus appeared in our own day and age, there's no doubt that he would eat with people whom the self-righteous would regard as unclean sinners. And it would offend them, just like it did the Pharisees. I'm afraid this would come close to home if Jesus ate with people that we thought beneath contempt—drug addicts, the homeless, prostitutes, homosexuals, and so on (add any other category to the list). I am afraid that I would be one of those most critical of Jesus for doing this very thing. The whole point of this is that the righteousness which justifies us, is external to us. It is Christ's righteousness freely given to us through faith, not the righteousness which we invent and present to God. Jesus ate with sinners to make this very point. Those who think themselves to be "good people" who are just fine with God, don't care about Jesus nor his message. But those who are regarded as outcasts, more easily see their sin and their need for a Savior.

Third, yes, Jesus ate with sinners. But he also called himself a physician who came to heal the sick. When Jesus called tax-collectors and sinners to faith because the kingdom had come, his call also manifested itself in the fact the prostitutes and tax-collectors stopped being prostitutes and tax-collectors. Jesus did not simply accept these people in their sin and let them go merrily about their sinful ways. When grace calls unworthy sinners to faith, it also transforms them. Faith in Jesus, manifested itself in the transformation of these people's lives, just as it must in ours. All those whom Jesus calls to faith—however unworthy they are of that call—will also find themselves repenting of their sin and desiring to leave their sinful behavior behind, just as Levi got up and walked away from the toll booth.

Beloved, the kingdom of God has come in power again this morning. We will soon join our Lord in a fellowship meal to which he invites us. None of us are worthy of this invitation. We are all tax-collectors and sinners at heart. And while we remain sinners until we die, nevertheless, Jesus, the physician calls us to faith so that he can heal the disease of sin which renders each one of us terminally ill. Jesus summons us to this table, to hear again that our sins are forgiven, and so that as we leave here this morning our hearts are filled with gratitude so that we desire to obey his commandments—even as we reject the rules of men—so that we bring him honor and glory through our conduct, and so that we can tell other tax-collectors and sinners about the glories of eating and drinking with the great physician.