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**“A Dinner with Sinners”**  
**Mark 2:13-17**

**Introduction**

What a difference a couple of thousands years can make. Some things definitely change and some things rarely change. Our Scripture passage in Mark 2:13-17 illustrates this so well.

*“He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” ” (Mark 2:13–17)*

What has changed since the days of Jesus in first-century Israel? One thing has dramatically changed: the reason why people wanted to kill Jesus then and the reason they would kill him today. John MacArthur points out that if Jesus were actually alive today, people would want to put him to death for the opposite reason they actually did 2000 years ago. In the first century, Jesus was killed because he was not religious enough, not holy enough, not demanding enough, not legalistic enough, not condemning or judgmental enough, not separate enough? His chief persecutors were those who thought he was not strict enough.

Is that why the culture hates Jesus today? No. People hate Jesus today for the exact opposite reasons. He is too holy, too demanding, too rigid, too intolerant, too condemning, too restrictive. People today hate Christianity because they see the gospel as condemning good people; 2000 years ago they killed Jesus because religious leaders understood that they he forgave really bad people—because he was a friend of sinners.

Different times, different cultures. First century Israel was very religious and extremely moral. 21<sup>st</sup> century Western civilization: very irreligious and extremely immoral. Keep that in mind as we progress through this story.

Now there is something in this story that never seems to change. There are actually several but by way of introduction I will mention one: taxes.

There are three main characters in this story: Jesus, Pharisees, and tax-collectors and their ilk—the outcasts. Oh, there are the crowds and there are the disciples also, but major players are Jesus, the Pharisees and the tax-collectors. Tax-collectors have never been universally loved, not because they have been generally bad people. It's just they are the face of what we dislike doing—paying taxes. We will talk about this more later as we introduce one of the best known tax-collectors in the Bible: Matthew who wrote the first gospel. But I just want you to know that taxes are one thing that never seems to change.

I have never met anyone who loves paying taxes and the higher they go, the worse it gets. The 2010 US federal budget is 3.55 trillion dollars. I asked Matt Shesman to help me understand how much money that is. And he came up with these figures. Let's say that you began on the day Jesus Christ was born and spent an equal amount of money every day up until today. You wanted to spend 3.55 trillion dollars. You would be able to spend nearly \$5 million every day all the way through the life of Christ, the era of the early church, up till the fall of Rome, entering into the middle ages, all through the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the founding of America, the Civil War, through the Great Depression and through two great wars. Every day, \$5 million dollars.

Less, just think about the fiscal year 2010 for the USA budget. 3.55 trillion dollars means we spend \$9.7 billion every day, or \$450 million every hour, or 6.75 million every minute and \$112,500 every second! Think of the energy it takes to spend all that money or even better think of all the energy it takes to collect it. And so it is—mention having to pay your taxes or mention the IRS and watch people's blood pressure go up as they reach for their heart medicine.

I don't mention that to make any particular political statement though many people today do think this is scandalous, especially considering how taxes are collected and how and where the money is spent.

That's a discussion for another time—but it helps set the stage for this story that presents Jesus calling a tax-collector to follow him and receive true salvation, about his public response to this summons, and the official religious response on that day. In a word, this story is scandalous. We see a scandalous calling, scandalous fellowship, and a scandalous assertion, all three of which flow from what is perceived to be scandalous grace.

### **A scandalous call**

Last time we met Jesus in Mark he was pronouncing forgiveness of sin and healing for a paralyzed man before a standing room only crowd inside a house in the town of Capernaum. Houses in those days were not well-ventilated, bright, or particularly well-decorated. It was time to get out and get some fresh air and go

down by the lakeshore on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus head out there and it wasn't long before wave after wave of people kept coming to him and he just kept teaching them as they came, maybe even teaching them as kept walking, feeling the wind in his face, watching the birds above, and looking up to the hillside that hugged the coastline. Jesus is likely continuing to preach and teach the message of Mark 1:15, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*" " (Mark 1:15).

Mark 2:14 continues, "And as he passed by, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth." Jesus is likely leaving the shoreline itself and heading back into town and he sees Levi, who later becomes known by his second name Matthew, which means "gift of God." Levi was named by his father Alphaeus (a very common name back then) after one of Jacob the Patriarch's son. And he is sitting at a tax booth, what we might call today the customs office. He is a high-profile citizen in this town.

Travelers coming into Capernaum would arrive from the territory of Herod Philip and the Decapolis to the east and north and would be taxed by agents such as Levi, who were employed by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea. The Romans had a complex form of taxation even in the small country of Israel. There was a yearly tax due for just being alive for all men and women roughly from ages 12-65. There was a property tax and then taxes on goods produced—10% on all grain; 20% on all wine and olive oil. In some places, likely on this lakeshore town, there was a tax on fish—so perhaps Matthew had taxed several of the disciples who were fishermen. Finally, there was a 1% income tax. Those were fairly fixed taxes.

But Matthew was responsible for the second major category of taxes—taxes on transportation and goods in transit. These were much more variable, much more at the discretion of the tax agent. Matthew had the authority to tax people for using the roads and docking in the harbor. He set sales tax rates, extracted duties on imports and exports. He taxed people on their carts, on what they were carrying, and sometimes even on the number of wheels on their carts.

So if you were in business and enter Capernaum by road or water with any goods, you would have to stop and be taxed at this customs office. What if you didn't have enough money on you to pay the tax, No problem, Matthew would make a loan to you with exorbitant interest. It was in most ways a system open to greed, graft, and built-in extortion.

Matthew was likely sitting on some elevated platform or bench which was the principal feature of the toll-office on this day, interacting with the sailors who were unloading on the shore as well as merchants coming into Capernaum on the great road that lead from Damascus to the Mediterranean Sea.

There were two categories of tax collectors. The Gabbai collected all the more or less standardized taxes: income, poll, and property tax. The Mokhes collected all the tolls and taxes on trade, etc. There were the grand Mokhes who were the big-time bosses who had houses built up on the hills overlooking the towns and who were almost invisible. They didn't do the dirty work but were the bosses of the little mokhes who were especially hated by the Jews because of their harassing and extortion-type techniques.

How did one become a tax collector like Matthew. Well, the Romans sold various districts and areas like service or fast food companies sell franchises. They would put a franchise up for grabs and whoever came up with the selling price or sometimes highest bid got the right to collect taxes. They were told how much to collect and whatever they collected above that was theirs to stash away—and most of them made a great income off this.

But being a tax-collector in Jesus day also meant you were the most hated Jew in town. You were despicable, hated for your extortion and your ties to the Roman government directly or indirectly. Tax-collectors could never serve as judges or witnesses in court, were excommunicated from the synagogue, and often disowned by their families. If a tax-collector touched something in your house it was ceremonially unclean. As one man writes,

Jews were forbidden to receive money and even alms from tax collectors since revenue from taxes was deemed robbery. Jewish contempt of tax collectors is epitomized in the ruling that Jews could lie to tax collectors with impunity (*m. Ned.* 3:4) — a ruling, incidentally, with which both the houses of Hillel and Shammai (who normally stood poles apart) agreed. Tax collectors were tangible reminders of Roman domination, detested alike for its injustice and Gentile uncleanness. Not a few Jewish extremists, including one among Jesus' own disciples (3:18), considered submission to the Roman yoke, as well as its system of taxation (see 12:13–17), an act of treason to God.<sup>1</sup>

With that background, we now have ears to hear this scandalous call, “And he said to him, 'Follow me!’” That's scandalous grace! Follow me. The word “follow” is only used to describe disciples of Jesus, never those who opposed him, found nineteen times in Mark's gospel and virtually synonymous with saving faith! To follow Jesus didn't just mean that one merely subscribed to his teaching or beliefs but that he would act on those beliefs which often involved great risk and cost.

This call to Matthew from Jesus is shocking! What? Scandalous? Beyond comprehension. No self-respecting teacher would want this type of character on his roster. He would cause the biggest stain on your character and reputation!

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<sup>1</sup>Edwards, J. R. (2002). *The Gospel according to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament commentary (83). Grand Rapids, Mich; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos.

The people who heard the call were shocked. Matthew was shocked likely. The disciples were. The Pharisees. All very shocking. And what happens? Matthew “rose and followed him!” Aorist tense. Decisive, determined break! He got out of that box fast! And came to Jesus which in the eyes of the Pharisees makes Jesus now unclean! That is why they hated him!

This was so costly to Matthew. The fishermen who followed Jesus could have gone back to their business. No problem. Not Matthew! Within minutes likely, there was a new little mokhes who occupied his seat and owned his franchise. He couldn't go back! Probably received his new name, which was probably a good thing—because everyone knew who this little mokhe was. He was undoubtedly the last guy in Capernaum whom people expected to be accepted by Jesus!

But that's grace. Glorious grace! God receives sinful men! “*And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,*” (Romans 4:5) “*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*” (Romans 5:6). This is the glory of the gospel, the glory of grace—not that God gives salvation to people who earn it or that He gives it to people who achieve it, to people who are good enough, righteous enough or holy enough. No God grants salvation to the unholy, unrighteous, ungodly—to sinners who repent and believe!

Do we understand this? The gospel isn't for good people! It's for bad people! It's not for sinners who think they are OK. It is for sinners who know they aren't OK. It isn't for people who think they are righteous, but for those who know they aren't righteous!

The gospel is for those who know they are sinners, who admit they are sinners, who desire forgiveness and turn to Christ, recognizing that He is the only source of righteousness and forgiveness. This is the exact opposite of every other belief system today and it was antithetical to apostate Judaism that stressed you had to be godly first before God would accept you. Jesus turned that whole system on its head. He justifies the ungodly!

Now, I don't think this was the first time that Matthew heard Jesus speak or heard about Jesus. As the local tax-collector sitting at the crossroads of all commerce in Capernaum, he probably had heard about Jesus from many travelers. It is possible as well that he was already longing to follow Jesus, having studied the OT scriptures on his own (after all Matthew quotes the OT more than any other gospel). But never in his wildest dreams did he imagine Jesus would call him to follow Him! But that is what happened and what still happens today.

Levi, the traitor, the extortioner, the robber, the outcast, the greedy, abusive, vilified sinner, becomes a disciple, an apostle and eventually one of four gospel

writers! He lost his career but gained forgiveness. He lost his income but gained heaven. He lost earthly security but gained a glorious inheritance. Centuries ago a number of workmen were seen dragging a great marble block into the city of Florence, Italy. It had come from the famous marble quarries of Carrara, and was intended to be made into a statue of a great Old Testament prophet. But it contained imperfections, and when the great sculptor Donatello saw it, he refused it at once. So there it lay in the cathedral yard, a useless block. One day another sculptor caught sight of the flawed block. But as he examined it, there rose in his mind something of immense beauty, and he resolved to sculpt it. For two years the artist worked feverishly on the work of art. Finally, on January 25, 1504, the greatest artists of the day assembled to see what he had made of the despised and rejected block. Among them were Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Pietro Perugino, the teacher of Raphael. As the veil dropped to the floor, the statue was met with a chorus of praise. It was a masterpiece! The succeeding centuries have confirmed that judgment. Michelangelo's *David* is one of the greatest works of art the world has ever known.

Christ saw in the flawed life of Levi (tax collector) a Matthew (gift of God). He still sees men and women with his consummate artist's eye today. The Scripture says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10). He sees in us what no one else sees. Scandalous calling!

### **Scandalous fellowship**

What happens next? Matthew invites Jesus to his house (Luke 5:29) and throws a banquet, a formal banquet, to honor Jesus—his new Master—and to give his friends an opportunity to meet Jesus—which confirms that this Jesus associating with one sinner wasn't a fluke—it was his *modus operandi*—the way he would minister often.

*"And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him."* (Mark 2:15). Jews often sat at a table for an informal meal, but this was a big spread so they would recline on couches with faces inward toward the table and feet pointing out. Matthew was supposed to be the host, but in every gospel we see that Jesus really becomes the host.

Who was there? Tax collectors (OK, we know who they are) and "sinners" (in quotation marks as the NIV has). Outcasts! Who were the sinners? The Jewish writings had a long list of who the sinners were: gamblers, moneylenders, people who raced doves for sport (interesting), those who traded on the Sabbath, thieves, violent shepherds. In other words we might say "the really, really bad sinners." That's who was probably here: the outcasts. I mean who would associate with tax-collectors in that day? Prostitutes, other tax collectors, and thugs who the tax-collectors who paid to intimidate people who didn't pay up!

However, in another sense, the religious leaders used the word “sinners” as well to refer to anyone who refused to follow the Law as interpreted by the Pharisees. In other words, anyone who wasn't as holy as they were. The ceremonially unclean.

So now this scandalous action of Jesus metastasizes. First, he calls a sinner, but now he fellowships with more of them who were now following Jesus! This is too much for the Pharisees who either are in the great room of Matthew's house, a safe distance away from the sinners but within earshot of the disciples (there's at least seven now: Philip and Nathanael from down south, Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Matthew) or they address the disciples as they leave the house that evening. They are grumbling (Luke 5:30 say, “Why does he [that Master of yours] eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Now who were the Pharisees? We meet them last week in the story of the paralytic as they challenged Jesus about his claim to forgive sins. Mark identifies these religious leaders as “the scribes of the Pharisees.” Most of you have met them before and we will meet them again. But simply put they are the strict separatists of Judaism, the legalists, the architect and guardians of the oral tradition that was added on top of the law, promoters of salvation by works—by self-righteousness. Oh, they were orthodox on many points. They affirmed the OT, resurrection, angels, the supernatural, demonic activity, individual responsibility, the written law, the coming of Messiah. But they added to God's law by demanding adherence to man-made traditions that had developed about the law over the last several hundred years.

There were only 6000 of them in Israel but they were very influential. The Pharisees were the power-brokers, the teachers and preachers, the up-front guys in religion. The scribes who are mentioned were the theological scholars, the seminary profs. Some scribes belonged to the Pharisee section of the Jewish religion, others to the Sadducees, and others were independent, but the ones here this day were likely theologians backing the Pharisees.

And here they can't get over the fact that Jesus is not only forgiving sinners, he is actually fellowshipping with them. How scandalous! One commentator puts it,

The scandal of this story is that Jesus does not make moral repentance a precondition of his love and acceptance. Rather, Jesus loves and accepts tax collectors and sinners as they are. If they forsake their evil and amend their lives, they do so, as did Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10), not in order to gain Jesus' favor but because Jesus has loved them as sinners. Jesus' association with such people is not coincidental. He does not happen to be with them or wait for invitations. He initiates the fellowship<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Edwards, J. R. (2002). *The Gospel according to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament commentary (85–86). Grand Rapids, Mich; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos.

Sovereign grace! But scandalous grace to the Pharisees!

**Scandalous assertion (v. 17)**

The last verse contains the Jesus' response to the pettiness of the Pharisees. He makes a scandalous assertion—with a simple analogy and yet with divine authority.

“And when Jesus heard it [and was thoroughly disgusted with their pygmy, puny hearts] he said to them! “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick!” In other words, doctors' offices are not crammed full of strong, healthy people who are clamoring for relief. No, the people in need of a doctor are weak and sick!

If you are not weak and sick, you don't go to a doctor. If you do not realize or want to admit that you are sick or weak, you don't go to the doctor. The sick go to the doctor. Do you get it? For Jesus, the Savior, to refuse to associate with sinners is as foolish as a doctor not spending no time with their needy patients.

There is no statement in all the gospel of Mark more profound than this one. This is the keynote of the gospel. The new truth Jesus is announcing is not that God saves sinners. The Pharisees see that. But what is new is that God loves and saves people when they are still sinners. The Pharisees and most religions today say, “Oh, no! You have to first clean up your act! First perform this ceremony or that ritual or do this many good things! Then God will give you grace that will get you the rest of the way to heaven.” No, God loves and God saves sinners when they are still sinners!

Doctors can help lots of people. But they can't help people who either 1) don't know about them or 2) know about them but refuse to trust them or 3) who will not admit that they need a doctor. The same is true of Christ. He will not save, he cannot heal the hearts of those who don't know Him, have heard of him but refuse to trust Him alone for salvation or who will not admit that they need a sovereign Savior such as Jesus (like the scribes of the Pharisees).

Oh what a Savior, the Great Physician, who comes to sinners in their need, who makes a perfect diagnosis, who provides a final and complete cure, and who even pays the bill—he paid the price for our sin!

Now, here's the analogy: Jesus says, “I came not to call the righteous [that is the self-righteous, those who are indifferent about their sin or those who lay heavy religious obligations to fulfill on other sinners], but sinners! What does he mean “call”? “I didn't come to call into my kingdom self-righteous people who think they are already good enough. I didn't come to call them to repentance. Rather, I came to call sinners!

This is scandalous in the minds of the self-righteous religious types. Jesus asserts his authority, his Person, over the Law as interpreted by the leaders. He asserts the love of God over the merit of sinners. The leaders came to burden, Jesus came to redeem!

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? The grace of God extends to and overcomes the worst forms of human sinfulness. Or as Paul said, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Or as James writes, “God resists the proud, the self-righteous, but he gives grace to the humble—to sinners who see themselves as lost, begging for God's mercy, straying from His law, burdened with guilt, who come hungering and thirsting for God's righteousness. These are the ones Jesus came to save!

*“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”* (Isaiah 1:18)

*“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”* (Isaiah 45:22)

*“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. . . .”* *“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”* (Isaiah 55:1, 6–7)

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”* (Matthew 5:6)

*“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:28–30)

*“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* (Luke 19:10)

*“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”* (1 Timothy 1:15)

*“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”* (Revelation 3:20)

*“The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”* (Revelation 22:17)

If you are new here today, I want you to look around for a minute. Please realize that the church of Jesus Christ is not made up of good people. It is made up of bad people. It is not made up of people who think we are pretty great, pretty righteous. It is made up of people who know we are not. Real Christians understand that we have not attained some acceptable level of good works so

God must be pleased with us. Oh no, we understand that we could never achieve a place of acceptability before God by our own goodness.

You see, we are not only guilty of sins [individual acts of rebellion against God], but we are guilty of sin—that is we have a nature through and through that is sinful. Sin affects us pervasively. And we still sin.

The Bible teaches that sin is universal (Rom. 3:23) and that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). The concepts of sin, holiness, and forgiveness are bound together. It is hard to get a good picture of one without the other s. In brief, God's holiness cannot allow sin into his presence. No matter how small the sin may seem from the human perspective, it is intolerable from God's perspective. So how can Jesus forgive our sins? Forgiveness for sins requires the shedding of blood, and perfect forgiveness requires a perfect sacrifice. Jesus Christ was given to be that perfect sacrifice (Heb. 10). It is only through Christ that we have forgiveness for our sins. We, like Matthew and his fellow sinners, must turn from our sin and trust Christ alone in order to be in fellowship with God!

Oh, sinners, won't you come to this Christ who is called a friend of sinners! Turn from your sin and trust Him alone!

And believers, let us keep looking to Christ more and more. Specifically let us minister as He did. His ministry was not one of isolation. That's how the Pharisees' philosophy—only be with people just like you. That's not biblical. Nor was Jesus' ministry assimilation—that is become like others to reach them. Jesus never indulged in sin to reach sinners. We are in this world but we aren't to be of the world. Not isolation or assimilation. Jesus' way is mission! Go, teach the crowds, call outcasts, and go to the sick and needy.

Christ sat down with sinners. He dined with them and they with him. And he met their need by speaking the truth, the gospel.

And let us always remember, fellow Christians, that the link between us and Christ is not our goodness, but really our badness. It is not our merit but our misery. It is not our standing but our falling. It is not our riches that but our poverty.

Let's learn the lesson from the scandalous call, fellowship and announcement Jesus made in this text. Matthew and his friends serve as a vivid illustration that the Lord often chooses the most despicable people of this world, redeems them, gives them new hearts, and uses them in remarkable ways. That's the lesson from this dinner with sinners.