

OVERCOMING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE AND TRADITION

SERIES: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

By Doug Goins

In this message we are going to consider the story of Jesus' calling of Levi, the despised tax collector, and Levi's choice to follow him in Mark 2:13-22. This passage is part of a larger literary unit that focuses on the increasing confrontations that take place between the religious leaders in the nation of Israel and Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees, who are the authoritative interpreters of law, religion, and tradition, are increasingly offended by the things Jesus says and the ways he relates to people. A number of times they ask challenging questions and accuse him of blasphemy. By the end of this section, in the middle of chapter 3, they are done questioning him and are committed to killing him.

In this section Jesus is ministering in the north of Israel, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, in and around the city of Capernaum.

Mark 2:13-22 falls into three parts: Jesus' calling of Levi, Levi's response, which includes a party he throws for Jesus and the problems that creates. Two questions come out of this party: what kind of people Jesus chooses to party with, and the bigger question of what business Jesus has partying at all, considering the mess the world is in. What place does celebration have in life?

Let's read about the calling of Levi.

Seeing through sin-sickness

Verses 2:13-14:

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

Jesus' popularity with the crowds is still very evident. But in a very busy period of teaching and ministering to many people, Jesus focuses on this one man. Levi is almost universally identified as the author of the gospel of Matthew because there Matthew identifies himself as the tax collector who is called by Jesus and who responds to the invitation (Matthew 9:9-10). In all probability Jesus changes his name from Levi to Matthew, just as he changes Peter's name from Simon to Petros, "The Rock" (Matthew 16:17-18). Matthew is a beautiful name that means "Gift of God."

Probably this is not Levi's first encounter with Jesus. Jesus has been ministering very actively in Capernaum. He has also been living with Peter's family. Probably the brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John, who were fishermen, all know Levi, because they had to pay taxes on their fishing business.

Levi is sitting in his tax office, watching the goings-on, and Jesus says to him, "Follow Me." He reaches out to this man and offers him a personal relationship. I think Levi understands the invitation. He has heard Jesus preach and teach. He knows Jesus' message. We have considered it earlier in this series (Discovery Paper 4793). Mark 1:14: "Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God, and saying,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Farther on in 2:17 Jesus explains his approach and primary emphasis with people: “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” In Luke’s account he adds, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners *to repentance*” (5:32; italics mine).

Levi has tremendous need. If anybody struggles with sin issues, it’s this guy! First, he is a tax collector. Tax collectors were despised by the Jews because they turned against their own people and collaborated with the army of occupation, the hated Romans.

Second, tax collectors gouged their fellow citizens, and because of that most of them were very wealthy. They were hated, so they were isolated from normal social life in Israel.

Third, tax collectors were outcasts from synagogues and the temple because they were unclean. They weren’t allowed to take part in any of the spiritual life in the nation. They were rejected by all the religious leaders.

But Jesus is watching Levi. He sees discontent in Levi, senses spiritual hunger. So he invites Levi to become his follower, to begin a spiritual process of life change based on a personal, intimate, love relationship with him.

Let’s stop and take a look at ourselves. Jesus noticed this hurting man. Do you pay that much attention to the disreputable individuals in your community, the riffraff, people like Levi (who may or may not deserve their bad reputations)? Probably each one of us has our own categories of people we don’t want to have anything to do with--perhaps bartenders, Hells Angels, or strip club dancers. Maybe for you it’s gay people, or prostitutes, or even those less deviant pagans who practice plain old garden-variety immorality. Maybe it’s people who swear constantly, or rednecks, or crass materialists.

But Jesus is able to see through Levi’s sin-sickness. He sees the potential for the spiritual health of a Matthew, a gift of God. It is a bit like the way Cervantes’ Don Quixote sees through the filthy, hard, foul-mouthed behavior of a peasant washerwoman. He sees the potential for her to be sweet and gentle and soft. So he names her Dulcinea, because that’s who she will become.

When was the last time you invited a social outcast to have a cup of coffee with you, or come to one of your Bible studies, or go to a movie with you, or just join you and your friends for a good time, in order to draw that person into the circle of Jesus’ love, to introduce them to this amazing Person who can love them unconditionally, enfold them in his arms of acceptance and care?

Look now at the response of Levi in verses 14-15. There is a change from sin-sickness to spiritual health.

The irrevocable decision

And he got up and followed Him.

And it happened that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him.

Mark gives several evidences that demonstrate the reality of Levi’s transformed life. First, verse 14 says he gets up and follows Jesus, literally. He takes immediate, obedient, physical action; his is not just

intellectual assent, or a warm, fuzzy, emotional response to Jesus' interest in him. Levi gets up, leaves, and apparently never looks back. Luke's account of this same event says, "He left everything behind, and got up and began to follow him" (5:28). That's an incredible sacrifice. He just walks out on his business, his ties to Roman influence, the power that money can buy. We know Luke is a very careful historian. He is not just embellishing the story to give it more dramatic impact. Levi has become a new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Frederick Buechner has written a wonderful little book called *The Magnificent Defeat* on the life of Jesus. He addresses the same choice to follow Jesus that each one of us is called to.

"There is a kind of relentless spontaneity about it, a kind of terrific sense of conviction, so that if you are Matthew in the tax office, you lay down your pencil, do not even finish the form you happen to be working on at the moment, but just push back your chair and start heading for the door.... You get the feeling not that you acted on blind impulse without any preparation, but this is the moment, the crisis, that somehow your whole life has been preparing you for. 'Yes, I love this one.' 'For that I would be willing perhaps even to die.' And the voice that you heard over your shoulder as you sat there working on Form 6321B was not so much the cause of your decision as the occasion for it. The bow had already been drawn tight, the arrow already set in place and aimed, for Lord knows how long. The voice just made it possible to let it fly, to give it wings." (1)

Verse 15 tells us that Levi throws a party in Jesus' honor. It is clear that Levi invests time, money, the use of his own home, and physical effort to put on this big, lavish banquet to honor Jesus, to express his gratitude, love, and appreciation. He intuitively knows that this new relationship is something to celebrate with joy, hilarity, good food, and good friends. So he invites all his disreputable friends. His friends are people just like him: other tax collectors, outcasts, people who have embraced the sinful lifestyle wholeheartedly. And do they know how to party? You bet they do! They have the kind of parties that we see advertising Coors and Miller genuine draft on TV.

I think Levi probably has several agendas. He wants to say goodbye to the old crowd. Perhaps he wants to explain why he's getting out of the business, why he's going to follow Jesus. He definitely wants to introduce his friends to Jesus, who has offered him unconditional love. This rabbi is like no other religious person he has ever met.

It's only natural to share exciting, new, life-changing experiences with your friends, isn't it? Remember when you first became a Christian and you couldn't tell enough people what God had done for you? Levi's decisive response of love and devotion to Jesus gives us a model by which we can evaluate our own response of faith to the Lord. Right now, does the call of Christ supersede every other loyalty and priority in your life? Does he have complete control of your time, vocation, money, friends, house, family, social life, and even your personal reputation? His invitation to follow him means that you entrust him with everything.

Now we come to the problem in verses 16-22.

A clash with prejudice

The problem, in a nutshell, is that Jesus is eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors, rather than fasting and praying with righteous people. Look at verses 16-17:

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?” 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.”

Mark doesn't say Jesus is teaching, preaching, or sharing his faith at this party. Verse 15 says that he is reclining at the table, and verse 16 says he is eating and drinking with these sinners, social outcasts, and tax collectors. In that Middle-Eastern, first-century setting, to eat with a person was to accept him or her. It was a commitment to intimacy. It wasn't a casual “Let's do lunch” or a “power breakfast” that has nothing to do with friendship, just the almighty dollar. Jesus eats and drinks with outcasts as if they were his friends, and he doesn't seem to care who knows it.

That really upsets the professional religionists of his day, and that is why they question the disciples. Remember, Jesus has only four disciples at this point, not counting Levi himself. They are newly chosen and probably don't completely understand Jesus' priorities in relationships. They probably don't know the answer to the question “Why is he hanging out with people who flaunt their sinful lifestyle?” The Pharisees who are challenging them represent the conservative religious and political party in the nation. They have a right to be offended, because these tax collectors are turncoats who are betraying their nation for money, collaborating with the Romans. The Pharisees are the true patriots in Israel. Their name means “Separated Ones.”

But Jesus steps in and answers the question on behalf of his disciples. (Aren't you glad that Jesus knows answers to things that you don't understand?) He says, yes, he knows who these people are: They are sick, troubled, hurting people. The lifestyle they have chosen has damaged them terribly. They don't see life rightly. They are trying to cover up pain with conspicuous consumption. Jesus says, “You're right, these are sick people. But where else should a doctor be? I've come to heal people of their sin-sickness. Wherever hurting people are, there I choose to be.”

Remember, in Luke 5:31-32 Jesus says the antidote to the illness is repentance. This is the Greek word *metanoia*, and it means a change of heart and mind about your sin, your need for forgiveness and cleansing. You've got to know your need, to realize that you are sick.

Jesus turns the question back on the Pharisees in the last phrase in verse 17. He is saying repentance is impossible for self-righteous, respectable, spiritually self-sufficient people. You see, the gospel has nothing to say to people who really believe they have it all together spiritually. Jesus is suggesting that tax collectors and sinners are much more open to truth. They know their need better than the well-trained professional religionists.

Now in verse 18-22 we come to this bigger question of why Jesus chooses to party at all.

The joy of relationship with Jesus

This time Jesus himself is questioned. Verse 18:

John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, “Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?”

This is a very strange coalition. The Pharisees hated John and were thrilled when he got arrested by Herod and thrown in prison. These disciples of John may be here in Capernaum observing the party with

the Pharisees, but they are still loyal to John, even though he is now in prison.

This issue of fasting is important. Fasting in the Bible is setting a certain time period when you won't eat anything. In the Old Testament, there are many feast days, but only one day a year when fasting is called for. That is the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, a twenty-four hour period of fasting. Every other holy day in Israel is a time to celebrate. The Bible says that this annual fast symbolizes three things. First, it expresses humility before God. Second, it is a personal sacrifice before the Lord. It's like the offering the Jews would give in the temple, a perfect lamb or baby goat or dove. In this case they give up eating as an offering to the Lord. Third, it is a symbol of grieving over sin. The Day of Atonement is focused on forgiveness of sin. It represents their desire to look at their lives and repent.

Fasting in the Old Testament was a very private and personal thing before the Lord. But in the first-century religious tradition, the legalism of the Pharisees has gone way beyond that. They fast often and publicly because they want everybody to know it. They make everybody else feel inferior to their zealous, religious discipline. John's disciples are in mourning because of his imprisonment, and they are very impressionable. They look up to these spiritual giants, the Pharisees, and are influenced by this carnal religiosity that requires fasting.

What shocks both the disciples of John and the Pharisees about Jesus and his disciples is their normality. They are way too cheerful and happy. There is too much jocularly, too much fooling around. What right do they have to party at all, when the world is going to hell in a hand basket? There should be more sobriety, solemnity, and respect for serious religious activity. "You ought to pray more, fast more, give more alms to the poor. You ought to memorize more Scripture, and have more respect for established religious traditions. And Jesus, you ought to be a lot more sensitive to your cousin John who is now in prison because of his faith. What right do you have not to fast when everyone else is fasting?"

Jesus answers the question in verses 19-22. Perhaps he picks up on their observations back in verse 16 about eating and drinking. "Speaking of parties, let me give you three metaphors," he says. He compares following him to a wedding reception, wearing party clothes, and drinking the best wine. Look at verses 19-20. If following him is like a wedding reception, then joy and celebration are normal!

And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day."

The last recorded words of John the Baptist in the gospels are in John 3. He too calls his cousin Jesus the bridegroom in 3:28-30:

"You yourselves are my witnesses, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease."

Relationship to Jesus brings joy. A love relationship with the bridegroom means spontaneous devotion to him. Love doesn't demand performance of religious ritual or observance. Jesus is saying, "You can't make my disciples fast." He says the behavior of his disciples isn't motivated by duty or obligation or Pharisaical legalism, but by love and devotion to him.

Religious law demands external piety, but God's love creates internal authenticity. Religious law controls behavior, but God's love changes hearts. When the love of Jesus Christ is what constrains us,

then life becomes a beautiful tapestry in which the good and the bad, the difficult and the wonderful, the tears and the laughter, receiving and giving, repentance and celebration are all woven together. There is a balance in all these things in the Christian life. It is absolutely normal and respectable to be spontaneous, because God's amazing, joyful blessings are being poured into our lives.

In verse 20 Jesus does suggest that there will be a coming season of mourning when he is violently removed from them. That's a hint about his crucifixion. But for us now, because we live on the other side of the resurrection of Jesus, he is with us always, as he promised. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). The only thing that can separate us from joyful fellowship with him now is our own sin. That will break this love relationship we have with him, and when that is there we do need to mourn for sin. We need to turn to Jesus in repentance. And the promise is that he will restore the joy, put us back in intimate fellowship with himself. When we welcome new believers into the family of God, we really can say to them, "Welcome to the party!" Christianity is a lifestyle of joy, celebration, and gladness, just like a wedding reception.

The power of new life

Jesus' second metaphor is in verse 21. He refers to the party clothes that we wear to the wedding.

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results.

He says, "You don't patch this new arrangement for living in me onto the old arrangement of living under religious tradition and law. You always wear new, good-looking clothes to a party. New fabric isn't used to repair old garments. It would be silly. It would look bad, and you would eventually ruin the garment anyway, because it is very old and weak, so you would have wasted a perfectly good piece of brand-new fabric in the process." Jesus came to clothe us in new garments.

In a beautiful Messianic prophecy, Isaiah anticipates the new party clothes that we get to wear, because we are the bride and Jesus is the bridegroom. Isaiah 61:10 (NIV):

"I delight greatly in the LORD;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

Jesus is offering us a new relationship with God based on God's mercy and love and grace. But we can't accept that relationship and try to patch it onto some old pattern of religious discipline, performance, or legalism.

Jesus' last metaphor is in verse 22. What Jesus offers in a relationship to himself is like the best wine served at a wedding.

No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.

You can't put this new life of freedom, of tremendous expansiveness, into men and women who self-

righteously hang on to old religious structures and forms, because it breaks the old structures apart.

In the Old Testament wine is a symbol of joy. At the final Passover meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples, he chose wine as a symbol of this New-Covenant arrangement for living in relationship to God. This new life that he offers, life in the Holy Spirit, is powerful, dynamic, exhilarating. It's like new wine, which is still in the process of fermentation. It is much too volatile and active and strong to be enclosed in stiff, rigid, old forms of traditional religion. There is a basic incompatibility between the old and the new. Hebrews 7:18-19 contrasts the old arrangement and the new arrangement: "On the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope through which we draw near to God." Religious prejudice and tradition restrict and inhibit. In the traditions of religion you keep God at arm's length. But God wants to draw us close to him. And he wants to help us learn to live a life of acceptance and openness to other people no matter what their lifestyle choices, to embrace a life of freedom and flexibility in Jesus Christ.

God has used this church tremendously during the twenty-four years my wife Candy and I have been here. He has modeled truth through people and has taught us wonderfully. God has been faithful to us in freeing us to some degree from religious prejudice and tradition. By God's grace we are learning to live in loving responsiveness to the Christ who indwells us, living out flexibility, laughter, and spontaneity. We really do want to have a greater concern for the social outcasts, the misfits, the people who flaunt their sinful lifestyles. We want to learn to live a life of freedom from externally imposed religious restrictions. I don't want to be controlled by what other people think of me. I want to be controlled by Jesus and his love. I won't end up being irresponsible or insensitive if I learn to live that way. I'll be more like him.

Candy has taught me a lot about being a presence in the community, seeing people who are messed up and relating to them and loving them. She has a wonderful job in our community. She is involved in weekly meetings and open houses that I get to be a part of. It's amazing to us how thirsty and hungry people are. If you just connect, just ask questions about spiritual realities, people want to talk about struggles and issues. Our world is full of these people. And like Jesus, we can know the blessing of connecting with them, loving them, sharing life with them.

Hopefully, we're becoming more and more like Matthew. You have only two choices. You follow Jesus like Matthew, which leads to celebration, or you end up being like the Pharisees, standing outside looking in, being grumpy, critical, judgmental, and accusing. It's a pretty simple choice. You follow Jesus into a life of increasing freedom and joy and spontaneity and flexibility, or you become stiff and rigid and resentful and resistant to the work of the Spirit. I want to be more like Matthew, this converted tax collector, and the great thing is that God really does have wonderful plans for our lives if we choose to follow him that way.

Notes

(1) Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, © 1985, Seabury Press, New York. Pp. 96-98.

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Mark 2:13-22

Sixth Message

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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