

Calling All Sinners

Jason Abbott

How many of you remember playing pickup sports when you were a child? Maybe it was recess out on the playground, maybe it was after school in the backyard or in some park, but, you gathered everyone together and assigned two team captains and began to pick the teams one player at a time. That's the way it was usually done when I was a kid. It was a time honored tradition back then. No one argued about it. It's how teams were picked. It was a childhood orthodoxy.

And, you wanted to pick first; didn't you? You wanted to get the first choice because that meant you could select the very best player. It was like the NFL Draft. Everybody wanted that number one draft choice. (In fact the only change to the rules I recall was that, at some point, we began letting the second captain pick two players in order to match the value of that first pick—that best player.)

Now, there was a brutal flipside to all this; wasn't there? If there's a first pick then there's a last pick. There were always those kids who were the last ones chosen. The ones nobody wanted. Maybe this was you. Maybe you were the forced choice at the very end. Not a good feeling; right?

Well, this morning we'll see how Jesus picks his team. It's a little bit different. It defies and even offends our human orthodoxy. Let's see how.

Mark 2:13-17

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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?"

¹⁷ 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.”

Let’s zoom-in on three things Jesus does here. **(1st) Jesus calls** this man Levi; he picks him to be on his team. **(2nd) Jesus eats** at Levi’s house; he shares a big meal with a bunch of Levi’s friends. **(3rd) Jesus offends** the Pharisees by doing all this; he doesn’t operate by their religious rules, so they’re upset with him.

1. Jesus calls (vv. 13-14).

You know, if the Gospel of Mark were a movie, it would be an action movie. It’s written with rapid transitions, as if everything is happening at a breakneck pace. (You might wonder when Jesus gets rest.) Mark captures the excitement and energy and power of Christ’s ministry.

So even here, Jesus is out preaching and teaching in the Galilean countryside and comes upon a tax collector at his work—this man Levi—and he just calls to him: “Follow me.” And, what does Levi do? He gets up, leaves his tax collecting cubicle, and follows Jesus. In a heartbeat, he quits his job in order to follow after this rabbi. **Then**, there’s a sudden cut to Jesus at a huge party at Levi’s house with Levi’s friends and coworkers all around. Levi has apparently wasted no time in throwing a fiesta to celebrate his career move. And, Jesus is at the center of it. It may be Levi’s house, but it’s Jesus’s party. **Then** abruptly we have these creepy, peeping religious leaders who bust-in uninvited asking questions: “Why does your rabbi eat with tax collectors and sinners?” **And**, Jesus—in the midst of all of these festivities—instantly responds to their complaint.

Boom, boom, boom...the action keeps on coming. Jesus is turning the world on its head. Things are being stirred-up in the ancient Near East. When Jesus calls, things tend to get a little crazy; don’t they?

For Levi, Jesus’s call meant great risk. (It always does.) He had to walk-away from a lucrative job. A job he wouldn’t likely get back no matter how hard he tried.¹ As one New Testament scholar explains—these positions “were greatly sought after

¹ See Walter W. Wessel, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Mark*, 634.

as a sure way to get rich quickly.”² So, following Jesus would literally cost this man. Levi had to sacrifice his financial stability to follow Christ.

What kinds of things has it cost you? Or, what will it cost you to follow Jesus if you aren’t already? This question must always be before us.

Well, we need to recognize that Jesus is making a crazy first round draft pick. Levi isn’t the guy most rabbis would have selected. In fact, this prospect wasn’t even on the rabbinic radar.

I remember my dad would get together with a good friend back in the late 80s to watch the NFL draft. They’d stay home from work to watch their favorite team—the old St. Louis Cardinals—make picks. And, I recall one year and one draft choice in particular. The Cardinals had one of the very early picks in the draft’s first round. Anticipation was really high. Then came the pick. And, as they announced the name, hysteric confusion ensued. My dad and his friend almost fell-out of their recliners. Chris Berman and a young ESPN had to take a commercial break just to find video of this guy, who had never even played college football.

Friends, that’s the kind of draft pick Levi was. In fact, he was worse than that! You see, he was a tax collector. And, tax collectors were the worst. They were hated by their countrymen. They were considered dishonest, money-worshiping traitors. They were the worst kind of sinners.

In the Philip K. Dick novel *The Man in the High Castle*, Germany and Japan have won World War II. They each occupy a portion of what was formerly the U.S. John Smith is a former American military officer, who defected and joined the Nazis during their invasion in order to protect his family. And, as the years have gone by, Smith’s become powerful and wealthy because he sided with the occupying forces—because he betrayed his country. You can imagine how much such a Benedict Arnold would be hated by other Americans.

In many ways, friends, that’s who tax collectors were to their fellow Israelites. They were the worst of sinners. New Testament scholar James R. Edwards explains how extreme the distaste for such traitors was when he writes:

² Ibid.

Anyone who is familiar with “moles” and informants in Nazi and Communist regimes will have an appreciation for the loathing that first-century Jews felt for tax collectors.... A Jew who collected taxes was disqualified as a judge or witness in court, expelled from the synagogue, and a cause of disgrace to his family.... Jewish contempt for tax collectors is epitomized in the ruling that Jews could lie to tax collectors with impunity.³

So, Jesus is calling a John Smith to be his follower—one of the most disliked and reprehensible people in all of Israel. But, this is just the beginning of his offense. This rabbi is about to take his social insult to a whole new level.

2. Jesus eats (v. 15).

This party which Levi throws is really not simply to celebrate his life-change. It's also the celebration of a similar change in many of his peers—other tax collectors and sinners like him. Mark briefly highlights this when he describes the little party Levi hosts for Jesus.

*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 [Jesus]** (v. 15).*

So, apparently Jesus didn't simply call one John Smith type to be his follower but invited and welcomed many other traitors as well. And if that wasn't bad enough, he also was fellowshiping with them. It wasn't merely an educational relationship. It was personal and intimate and friendly and festive between Jesus and these sinners whom he called his disciples. They were eating and reclining and laughing together. This is significant since table fellowship was to be reserved for those who were pure in their observance of the law.⁴

And, here's where it gets really objectionable to all the nosy, religious leaders. It might be ok to relate to these kinds of sinners *if* they'd already turned and repented, *if* they'd demonstrated some change, but they hadn't. They're enjoying this by grace. They're experiencing all this fellowship with Jesus by grace. *They've not earned it!*

³ James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark*, 83.

⁴ Wessel, *Ibid.*, 635.

That's very significant and important. This teacher doesn't demand transformation before fellowship. That's what's so repugnant to these Pharisees.

And it's sadly, many times, what's so repugnant to us (in the church) as well. We really want a little bit of cleaning-up from those who would sit around our tables. They should look a certain way—*respectable!*—before we will begin to break bread with them; right? Isn't that the case?

Friends, what kind of people will you invite into your life and into your home? And, what kinds of people are off the table? Ask yourself that.

We need some Levis around here. We need some modern day John Smiths among us. But, they aren't going to come on their own. They aren't going to walk through our doors on Sunday mornings without an invitation. And, you're the ones who are supposed to give it (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).

Jesus called you to this! God created you for this!

When Jesus came, he called the most unlikely kinds of folks into discipleship. He called prostitutes, tax collectors, and fishermen to be students and representatives and leaders in his kingdom. And, when he gave us the commission to make disciples, what's interesting is how general he was about who we should target in that mission. He called us to the world. Not the world that looks like us. Not to the wealthy world. Not the nice and warm and fuzzy people in the world. Jesus calls us to go to anybody and everybody who might possibly, at some point, respond. Those are the boundaries which he gave us. Pretty all inclusive; right?

Friends, we cannot be like the Pharisees here. We can't expect transformation before fellowship. That's the antithesis of the gospel. That's mere religious legalism. That's ugly and wrong. Scripture is very clear on this.

...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

God doesn't tell us to clean-up and then come. He just tells us to come to him and, through his power in us, be cleaned-up. We are saved by grace, not our efforts. We are transformed by God's power, not our own. It's this truth—"that God loves

and saves...sinners” which is “the ...glorious doctrine of true Christianity in any” and every “age.”⁵ That’s the good news.

Amen! Praise Jesus for this great truth!

3. Jesus offends (vv. 16-17).

Look at the last two verses again as we close. Mark reports this.

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” (vv. 16-17).

Friends, here’s the truly hard saying in this passage. The Pharisees are already, without exception, offended by Jesus’s acts—his acceptance of and table fellowship with Levi and others like him. That’s what’s offensive. Yet, now, Jesus says this about healthy people and sick people and doctors, about sinful people being called while righteous people are not being called. This is the difficult saying.

In short, this statement begs a question: Who is a sinner? Who needs saving? Who has Jesus come to call?

The Pharisees could easily take Jesus’s words at face value. And, so could we! We could assume Jesus is founding some type of twelve-step program for the worst of sinners. Those who are really offensive. Those people who really need salvation because they are weak and helpless to live righteously. The people who riot and loot. Or, the bigots and the racists. They need extra attention and grace.

I’m sure, on that day, many Pharisees walked-away with that kind of mindset. And, I’m certain this is how many Christians think about their need for Christ Jesus, as if they only need him a little bit while others need him a lot more. Do you think about Jesus in that way? Is that why Christ came—to save the worst kinds of sinners, to rescue the truly lost people? Maybe you think he helps you just a little bit but not as much as those other really awful people.

⁵ Ibid.

Or...maybe Jesus's answer means something else, something more offensive, something that confronts the Pharisees and you and me and everyone.

The Bible is really clear, from Genesis to Revelation, from beginning to end, all of us have sinned (1 Kings 8:46; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:23). We're all sick! We all need a doctor! And, the thing about this pandemic of sin is that it always leads to death (Genesis 2:17; Proverbs 11:19; Romans 6:23). If untreated, it will kill you. So, whether you're a tax collector or a gossip, you need help. And, that's offensive to our human pride; isn't it?

Now, if you're like me, you think—How is a murder the same as a white lie? For both to be punishable by death is unfair. Yet, friends, it's not the type of crime which kills you but the one you commit the crime against. All sins break relationship with God, with the Giver of life. That's what's so deadly about sin.

Friends, Jesus is aiming to offend our sense of pride—our delusion of health—because Jesus doesn't want us to perish. He is the good Doctor; Christ is the one sent from heaven to take away your sins and to give you life. Yet, if you think you're well, if you think you don't need healing, you won't run to the hospital or go to the doctor. Rather, you will perish. You'll die.

But, as the apostle Paul explains:

...if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of [his] righteousness (Romans 8:10).

Amen! Friends, trust in Jesus, the good Physician, and receive life!