

EASTSIDE CHURCH OF CHRIST

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Sermon Manuscript for

“The Right Kind of People”

Mark 2:13-17

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Opening the Bible for Life

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Since the shut-downs for the coronavirus pandemic began back in March, over thirty million workers have filed for unemployment insurance. That's thirty million people no longer able to work like they need to provide their livelihoods. Most likely, most of those job losses are temporary. When everything is opened up again, it may be that people cannot go back to the job they had before. A lot of small businesses are going out of business, sadly, because of the Wuhan Virus pandemic. But there will be new businesses, maybe even new industries, taking their place. Even in the midst of the millions losing their jobs, others are being hired for jobs created by the crisis. Grocery stores—even here in Farmington—have had to hire more hands to stock shelves, keep things clean, and control the flow of customers into the stores. FedEx, UPS, the US Postal Service have all been hiring lately, because demand for shipping services has skyrocketed since everyone has had to stay home.

If it were your job to hire new people to fill positions for, say, delivery drivers for UPS, what do you think you would be looking for? What qualifications would you have in mind for the right kind of person for that job?

We can think of a few things. You would want someone who is genuinely interested in doing that kind of work, because you would also want to find someone who will be committed once they start the job. Obviously, though, the most important qualification is that they are capable of doing the job. If you're hiring delivery drivers, then, you would look for people who have excellent driving skills and clean driving records. You would want people who have good customer service skills, who are friendly and patient. They need to be able to work with computers as needed, to fol-

low a delivery route, and many other things.

This is all so common-sense, it is amazing to see that Jesus seems to do just the opposite. For some reason, Jesus looks for those who are incapable of doing what he calls them to do.

The Kind of People Jesus Chooses

In Mark 2:13 we find a familiar scene. Jesus walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This was how Mark began his story of the good news of Jesus. He was going around to the towns of Galilee telling everyone to repent and believe the good news that God’s Kingdom is almost here. Jesus was walking the shore of Galilee when he found the first four disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They were doing their fisherman chores, and Jesus called them to follow him, and they did (Mark 1:16-20). Jesus started his mission for the Kingdom of God this way, finding and calling the right kind of people to go with him. Now, Jesus and those four disciples go out to the Sea of Galilee, and many other people from Capernaum follow them out there.

Wouldn’t these people have a good chance of being just the kind Jesus is looking for? They are obviously interested. No one told them to go find Jesus. All they needed was to hear that he was in the area, and they left whatever they were doing to go hear what he had to share with them. They are also clearly committed to knowing more about Jesus. He has not made it convenient for them to be with him to hear his teaching. They have had to go to some trouble. It would have been much easier if he would have gone door to door among their houses, or called a series of meetings in the evening at the synagogue. Instead, he went for a walk away from their houses and away from the synagogue. If they

wanted to hear what he had to say they had to go find him. That would seem to be just the kind of motivation the leader of a reform movement should be looking for. But that just makes Jesus’ next move a little more confusing.

While he is walking along teaching his followers, they come to a tax collection booth occupied by a man named Levi. Just like Jesus did when he called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, Jesus says to Levi, “Follow me,” (Mark 2:14). That’s confusing, because a “tax collector” like Levi would have been the last person any Jewish religious leader would have invited into their group.



Tax collectors in our day might not be a joy to work with. Perhaps we object to the tax system IRS workers have to enforce. It’s not personal, though. We don’t really think someone who works for the IRS is evil or an enemy in any sense. They’re just doing their jobs. In Jesus’ day, tax collectors had earned a very bad reputation. They were backed by the full authority of the king or emperor they worked for. They had certain amounts of revenue they had to provide to the authorities. Anything above that they could keep for themselves. Tax collectors among the Jews, like Levi, were especially hated. They represented oppressive rulers, and they tended to tax people greedily.

We have an example in Luke’s Gospel, where some tax collectors are among many others coming to John the Baptist. They want to repent and be baptized so that their sins are forgiven. So they, too, can be included in the Kingdom of God. Some of those tax collectors asked John what they needed to do for their repentance. He told them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do,” (Luke 3:13, ESV).

Tax collectors were so despised among the Jews of Jesus' day that Jesus compares them to prostitutes as clearly illustrating how bad sinners can be (Matthew 21:31).

Why would Jesus call someone like that to be his disciple? Isn't that like UPS hiring drivers whose licenses have been revoked due to their terrible driving? Or hiring drivers who have never been able to drive a car, much less a delivery van. Why would Jesus “hire” an immoral, greedy person like Levi for such an important and righteous mission as the Kingdom of God?

It gets worse. Jesus didn't just invite that greedy, abusive tax collector to join his entourage. Jesus feasted with him at Levi's house! Luke captures the spirit of the occasion when he writes that Levi gave Jesus “a great banquet,” (Luke 5:29, NRSV). That is exactly the opposite of what the Law required a devout Jew to do. Charging people more than they actually owed compares to charging high interest on loans. Through Moses, God prohibited that kind of behavior. Tax collectors like Levi got rich by breaking the commandment against one Israelite charging interest on a loan to another Israelite. God said,



If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. (Exodus 22:25 ESV)

No serious Jew would have fellowship with such a law-breaker. Why is Jesus doing that? And Levi wasn't the only one! His banquet that evening was attended by many tax collectors and other sinners just like himself (Mark 2:15).

But it gets even worse. Now Mark lets us know that the people attending Levi's banquet are the people who have already been following Jesus. Mark writes,

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 ESV)

We don't know if Levi was the first tax collector Jesus called to be a disciple, but we know he was not alone. The banquet Jesus celebrated with Levi that evening was full of sinners. Full of people whose way of life was the opposite of respecting God. These were people who had proven incapable of righteousness. That's why they were known as “sinners.” Why would that be the crowd Jesus would choose for the righteous Kingdom of God? Jesus seems to pick the exact opposite of the kind of people who should populate God's kingdom.

In case we weren't already asking that question, Mark asks it for us in the voice of some religious leaders who know what's going down at Levi's house.

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?” (Mark 2:16 ESV)

The Pharisees were the ultra-righteous sect of the Jews of that time. They worked really hard to multiply guidelines for religious practice that would ensure that God's people would come nowhere near violating any of his laws. Some of their more familiar guidelines—which they enforce as laws—had to do with how to eat food without becoming religiously defiled. They strongly advocated Sabbath rules, like the concept of a “Sabbath day's journey” (Acts 1:12). This

was the idea that a person could travel a certain distance from their house without it being considered “work.” If a person went one step beyond that point, now they are working. It wouldn’t matter that they were now on a downhill slope of their journey. They had many rules like that, making it—ironically—a lot of hard work to make sure you weren’t violating any of the rules against work (Matthew 23:4).

Anyway, it’s important that Mark makes sure we know these are Pharisee scribes—rather than Sadducee scribes or scribes from no party in particular. We are meant to understand that the issue here is one of holiness and righteousness. The Pharisees perceive that Jesus is defiling himself before God by not only associating with such sinners but also by sharing their food. And Jesus presents himself as a religious teacher preparing God’s people for God’s Kingdom?

The thing is, Jesus does not disagree with them. Jesus knows full well that all of these people he has invited to follow him and is now sharing their feast are unholy, unrighteous sinners. He knows better than the Pharisees do that a faithful Israelite is to reject such people who willfully defy the will of God (for ex., Leviticus 7:21; Jesus says as much in Matthew 18:17). As Jesus tells the Pharisees directly, the fact that his crowd are “sinners” is exactly why he’s calling them to follow him. Jesus isn’t “hiring” this kind of people as disciples because no one else is applying. Somehow, “sinners” are exactly the right kind of people for Kingdom discipleship.

Why Jesus Chooses Sinners

The righteous Pharisees were shocked by the sight of a self-proclaimed prophet of the Kingdom of God feasting with

known tax collectors and other sinners; a whole crowd of religious rebels. When they asked Jesus’ disciples about it, Jesus answered them by saying

“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 2:17 ESV).

Jesus admits everything the Pharisees’ question criticizes him for. He admits that he is not calling righteous people to join God’s kingdom. Instead he is calling sinners. But everyone knows that sinners cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9). Why are they the ones he calls, then? Why isn’t he bringing these Pharisees into his inner circle to get the Kingdom going? As the most righteous among the righteous, shouldn’t they have been his first choice?

In one sentence, in one powerful metaphor, Jesus explains what he’s doing. He compares himself to a physician and sinners to those who are sick. He says that the “sick” are those who have “need of a physician.” Those who are righteous have no need for a physician.



We know exactly what he’s talking about. Almost no one enjoys seeing a doctor. It’s not fun to be poked and scanned and undressed by strangers. So, people who are healthy do not go to the doctor normally. As Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician.” The ones who need the physician’s services are those who are sick. Their body is not working the way it should, or they have pain that won’t go away, or their body is doing things it shouldn’t do. They need a physician to diagnose the problem and prescribe an effective remedy. The goal in that relationship is for the successful physician to make it so that the patient no longer needs a doctor.

Is Jesus saying that he does not call the Pharisees because they are already righteous? Is he saying they do not need him?

That's not possible. The apostle Paul later reminds his readers in Rome that the Scriptures say, “None is righteous, no, not one,” (Romans 3:10). And Paul was brought up as a Pharisee! In the same place, Paul goes on to say, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (3:23).

The truth is—and, of course, Jesus already knows this—not even the Pharisees are righteous. They are as much sinners as Levi and the crowd at his house that Jesus feasted with that evening. When Jesus says that he has come to call sinners, he is saying that he has come to call everyone. We are all sinners. Every one of us.

The truth is, when it comes to living according to God's will, everyone is like a sick person. We may want to do right, but something in our soul is broken or diseased. We are weak, and so we sin rather than live righteously before God. It's just that some people are aware of this and are willing to admit it. Others are not.

When Jesus said that the healthy person has no need of a physician, he stated something obvious at the level of physical health. But when we consider those words according to Jesus' spiritual metaphor of righteousness and sinfulness, he is saying something else. Since no one is actually righteous (except Jesus, of course), everyone needs Jesus, the “physician.” Everyone actually is “sick.” A person who thinks otherwise is simply a sick person who won't admit it.

We know people like that. Maybe we are that way, too, sometimes. Since none of us really like to go to the doctor, don't we try to find every other explanation for things other than that we are sick? If we are being especially stubborn

about it we might refuse to admit our illness until it absolutely cannot be denied.

It makes perfect sense, then, that the Physician has come to call the “sick.” Jesus is looking for those people who are willing to admit that they fail to live up to God's righteousness. Jesus doesn't call sinners to follow him in the Kingdom as some sort of publicity stunt. Nor is it an act of “bucking the system.” Jesus is serious that sinners are exactly the people he has come for.

Remember his gospel message? “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news,” (Mark 1:15). Only sinners can repent. Someone who thinks they are already righteous has nothing to change. No repentance required. They have no need of Jesus' services.

The “sick,” on the other hand, know they need Jesus to heal them.

Why Sinners Deserve a Feast

At the end of Mark chapter one, Mark writes about Jesus healing a leper somewhere out in the wilderness (Mark 1:39-45). That story defines the sort of “sick” person Jesus is looking for, for the Kingdom of God. It also makes it clear why Jesus attends a banquet full of such people.

The leper was like every other sinner. His disease was not his fault. Diseases like leprosy are a part of the world after sin became a part of it, too. I should clarify this a bit. An important difference, of course, is that a leper is never “guilty” of leprosy. The comparison here is just that every human being is born with a condition which makes it almost certain that we will sin. Jesus never sinned. He is the only exception. The leper's disease was debilitating and disfiguring,

just as sin debilitates each of us, and our sins disfigure our souls from what God created them to be.

The leper was like all of us sinners, also, because he was religiously “unclean.” Because of his disease he had to stay away from God and from all of God’s people. He had to be rejected from Jewish society, because his presence defiled the whole community. Our sins have the same effect on each of us, making us “unclean” and causing us to be separated from God.

When all of those tax collectors and other sinners joined Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that day, they were echoing what the leper did just a short time before. That leper found Jesus in an out-of-town place, too. He came to Jesus, because he needed something he knew Jesus could give him. The leper showed exemplary faith when he said to Jesus, “If you are willing, you can make me clean!” (Mark 1:49).

The leper did not ask to be healed, he asked Jesus to make him “clean.” That meant that he needed to be healed of his leprosy, but it is important that being religiously clean before God, acceptable to God, able to fellowship with God and to worship him—these are what the leper wanted more than just to be physically whole again. That leper was the “sick” person Jesus the physician came for. So, he is a perfect example of why sinners gathering to Jesus are worthy of a feast.

When the crowd of tax collectors and sinners came to Jesus, they came because they knew they needed him to heal their spiritual sickness. Jesus accepted them, signaling that he wanted to grant what they needed. So, he was teaching them and allowing them to follow him. Just like the other disciples.

When the leper came to Jesus and asked for cleansing, Mark says that Jesus reached out and touched the man. Then Jesus said, “I am willing. Be cleansed,” (Mark 1:41). This is a great image of what happened when the crowd of sinners came to Jesus at the shore. Accepting them and teaching them, Jesus “touched” them, too, and cleansed them. He will later teach the twelve apostles, “Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you,” (John 15:3). These sinners became disciples by the cleansing power of Jesus’ word.

So, they were like the leper after Jesus made him clean. Normally, a leper needed a priest to verify that he was well again and then pronounce him religiously clean. This leper was different. He did not need a priest to pronounce him clean. He was made clean in God’s sight, because Jesus said so.

In a similar way, to the Pharisees, the crowds with Jesus were still the sinners they always were. They had not done anything officially to be seen in any other way. But Jesus did not need any religious system or process to make these sinners into righteous followers of the way of the Kingdom of God. Because Jesus said so, and because Jesus granted his healing touch to their souls through his word, the banquet at Levi’s house was actually not a gathering of sinners. The Pharisees could not see what Jesus had done. Everyone there that night were followers of Jesus. They were disciples.



They were all like Levi. When Jesus found Levi on the Galilee shore that day, Levi was about his sinful business of fleecing his Jewish brethren for everything he could in the

name of taxes. Jesus said, “Follow me,” Levi did, and he was never the same man. He was one of Jesus’ disciples, called to learn the ways of Jesus’ kingdom. Following Jesus, Levi and the others were no longer unclean sinners in God’s eyes. They were the beginning of a great harvest of souls made righteous by the gracious and powerful word of God.

Joining Jesus at the Water’s Edge

Would you follow Jesus, too? Whatever your history with Jesus has been, there is a message here for all of us. We should all be able to relate to the crowd of tax collectors and sinners in this story. None of us are righteous by our own ability. When it comes to righteousness, we are “sick” like everyone else—unless we have come to Jesus for the healing touch of his word.

Would you follow Jesus, but you are just now waking up to the fact that you need to do so? Are you like so many just now beginning to realize that you are not well spiritually; that no matter how hard you try, you keep failing to live up to what you know is good and right? Jesus is ready for you to come to him today. You are exactly the right kind of person for his Kingdom forever. It is the person who knows they’re sick that the physician can work with for their healing.

Jesus said “Repent and believe the good news.” When the Apostle Peter preached that message at the very beginning of the church, he said, “Repent and be baptized in Jesus’ name for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” (Acts 2:38). In other words, be joined to Jesus, and he will pronounce you “clean” and acceptable to God. He will begin to teach you his ways, as

long as you follow him.

Would you follow Jesus, and you are already a Christian? We can do so in a couple of ways.

First, whenever believers gather for the Lord’s Supper, it is like the banquet at Levi’s house. The fellowship is filled with tax collectors and other sinners whom Jesus has touched and pronounced righteous before God. We gather as The Forgiven. We gather in gratitude for that grace, apart from which we would remain forever lost from God.

Therefore, the Lord’s Supper is a celebratory feast. Yes, we remember the excruciating things Jesus suffered for us in shedding his blood for our forgiveness. But it is not a funeral dinner to which we gather. We celebrate the accomplishment of Jesus’ mission, and we celebrate the promise of his return to take us home. Jesus is not dead. Those who gather as his followers are his welcome guests at the feast.

Second, the sinners Jesus called to be his followers were people he encountered as he went on his way doing that day’s business. We can follow him in this by inviting every sinner we meet to fol-



low him, too. They are the ones Jesus came to call to his Kingdom. The more incapable of righteousness a person seems to be, the more qualified they might be to receive Jesus’ call to follow him as disciples. Offer them Jesus, perhaps we will get to celebrate the feast with them, too!

God bless you to follow Jesus faithfully today and forever.