

Jesus the friend of sinners

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 2, verse 13. Jesus 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 will well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Good morning. For those who don't know me, my name's Phil. I'm the minister here. Do keep that passage open, and let's pray as we begin.

[1 : 13] Father, we thank you for this chance to come to your life-giving word, and we pray that you might open our hearts to your word, and open your word to our hearts.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, can I add my welcome to Ben's. If you're here with us for the first time or just visiting, it's great to have you with us.

Our subject over the next four weeks is going to be the goodness of Jesus, and therefore of God.

So if you're visiting, I do hope that you can join us for these next four weeks.

There are going to be many surprises in the Bible, in the word of God, as we read through these texts in Mark's gospel. Mark wants to show us in this section that, in fact, to come under the rule of Jesus, the Son of God, is to find limitless welcome, the joy that we long for, and rest.

That's where we're going to be going in the next four weeks. And all of that is in contrast to what we might think. And it's in contrast to the elitist, joyless, and burdensome rule of man, and of man-made religion.

[2 : 44] There's a recent article in the Times that announced that Britain has entered the first atheist age as non-belief in God has surged in the last few years.

Apparently, it's the first time in history that atheists outnumber believers in God in this country. But what was interesting was the response of another Times writer, another atheist called James Marriott, a couple of days later.

And he wrote an article confessing, he says, quote, to some embarrassment about the dawning of the first atheist age. He says, instead of a second enlightenment, we have a plague of secular fools, his language.

Referring, I think, to the bewildering muddle of opinion online. And he bemoans not the age of reason, but the age of unreason. Instead of a new liberated humanity, we have the anxious generation.

Instead of a sense of satisfaction with this new secular regime, we have churches. And I was just hearing this report from a fellow church leader in London, reporting that, in his view, spiritual hunger in London is massive at the moment, and especially among the young people.

[4 : 09] Coming in to his church and to churches all across London, tearing up their atheist secular narrative that they've been taught, and saying, it doesn't work.

I'm anxious all the time. Is there anything more? Well, the good news of the Christian gospel is that there is.

We've been looking, as we've been going through Mark, the last time we were in Mark, in chapter one, we've been seeing the authority of Jesus as God's king to bring God's kingdom. He proves it.

But now, as we move into this next section, as he goes out beside the sea, and that's the section marker, this next section, Mark wants to show us the goodness of Jesus and his kingdom, in contrast to the religions and kingdoms of the world.

And the first thing we see about his goodness today is his limitless and unconditional welcome for spiritual failures, for the broken, for the far from God.

[5 : 16] In fact, that is who he's come for. Let's look down at these verses. We get these two connected events. Verse 13, Jesus went out beside the lake, the Sea of Galilee.

And all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. But as he passed by, he saw an individual, Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth.

And he said to him, follow me. And he rose and followed him. Tax collectors were Jewish people, but they were hated by the Jews, and especially by the religious law-keeping Jews, for two reasons. Number one, they were thieves. Number two, they were traitors. They used to take more money than they should have done, rinsing people of their money.

And secondly, they were traitors, because they were in league with the occupying Roman Gentile force. They were therefore the epitome of anti-God.

[6 : 27] They had no concern for God. They had no concern for his laws or for his people. And look at what it says in verse 14. Isn't it beautiful? Notice this little detail.

He saw him. He saw him, a sinner, lost, far from God. And he called him.

He saw him, and he called him. Follow me. And he left everything. To follow him. The second episode that Mark puts side by side with this may have happened straight afterwards.

It's this dinner party. It may have happened straight afterwards, or sometime soon after. And either at Levi's house with his mates, or possibly at Jesus' house, verse 15.

As he, Jesus, 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.

[7 : 34] You get this phrase, reclined at table. What does that mean? We don't use it. Is anyone going to go for lunch to recline at table with someone this afternoon? In first century Palestine, there was, Israel, there was, they used to eat at quite low, so you had quite low tables.

And then you'd recline on cushions. It's the equivalent to going to relax over a meal that we would do today. And he does this with tax collectors and sinners.

Imagine the scene. It's a scene of friendship, isn't it? It's a scene of laughter, drinking together, eating together.

It's a scene of welcome. And that is for people who had no regard for God or for his laws. And that is what angered the religious leaders.

Do you see that in verse 16? 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? I guess they would have been fine if he'd gone to eat with them and the tax collectors and sinners could look in and listen in from the window.

[8 : 55] It's the friendship. It's the welcome. It's the association. As if he's come, not for the people that he's supposed to have come for. And here in verse 17 is the conclusion.

When Jesus heard it, he said to them, this is the key verse. Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. There are two points we're going to dwell on. Who is Jesus? And who did he come for?

Who is Jesus? The doctor for sin. He's come as a doctor. That's what that word physician means, doctor or healer. He's come as a doctor with medicine, as it were, but to heal us from our deepest problem.

That is the sickness of sin. Hospitals around in London are full of doctors, aren't they? Jesus says, verse 17, he is the doctor.

[10 : 03] Did you realize that? Part of the character and office and work of the son of God is that he is a doctor.

And he has come for those with a disease that is worse than any cancer or any disease that you can find in the hospitals of London.

Because without a cure, the disease of sin takes us not just to death, but to judgment and eternity under the judgment of God.

People may seem to be well in Dulwich as you walk around. But by nature, we all have a spiritual disease that is far worse than what anyone has in any hospital.

And Jesus says, he has come down from heaven with medicine, as the song puts it, with mercy in his eyes to heal sinners forever.

[11 : 11] Just to pause on this for one second. This means, by the way, that the son of God has come to us because we are sinners, not in spite of the fact that we're sinners.

Can you see the difference? Our sin is not what keeps him away from us, but is what has brought him down to us. Why?

Because he is the doctor sinner for sin. This leads us to who has he come for? Therefore, sinners, verse 17, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Not to call the righteous, of whom there are none, we'll come back to that later, but sinners. That is the point. Contrary to the expectations of the Pharisees and the religious leaders of the Jews, contrary to the expectations of people today, Jesus is a doctor for sin who has therefore come for sinners.

Who else would you expect him to have come for? This means three things, three implications of this, that he's come for sinners that we're going to dwell on for the last few minutes.

[12 : 29] Number one, the qualification for the call and welcome of Jesus and therefore of God into his kingdom is failure.

This is probably the most liberating truth of the gospel. What qualifies us for the kingdom of God?

What qualifies us for heaven? What qualifies us for the welcome of Jesus?

What qualifies us to be called by him? Failure. Failure to love God, failure to keep his laws, failure to love neighbour, just like this tax collector.

Now imagine if the world worked like this. It doesn't, we know it doesn't, but imagine if it did. You may know of the bakery in Hearn Hill called Doe. Anyone been there?

A few nods. It is run by the former Apprentice winner, Karina Lepore. I've never seen her there, but she's the boss. She's apparently the most successful Apprentice winner ever, winning nine out of the ten tasks.

[13 : 41] But imagine the Apprentice where what was required to win was failure. To have failed every task so utterly as to be the laughingstock of your fellow contestants and of the watching world.

Sir Alan Sugar on the last day? Congratulations. Imagine if what was required to get into Oxbridge was straight U's, never been to school.

Imagine if what was required to play for Chelsea was no ball skills at all. I mean, some of us might think that probably is what is required. In every sphere in the world, the qualification for acceptance and welcome is success.

Right? On social media, to be successful at being attractive. On X, to be intelligent, interesting, insightful, wise, unlike the rest of them.

At work, consistent performance. That's your welcome every day at the door, isn't it? You have to, you'll be welcomed, but consistent performance. Sometimes even in church, sadly.

[14 : 55] What is thought is that to be gifted and godly is what qualifies us for acceptance and welcome? Well, that's nonsense.

What is the qualification for acceptance and welcome with God? Simply to be a sinner and nothing more. Verse 17, I've come to call sinners.

This is utterly liberating, is it not? To know that we're welcomed as moral and spiritual failures that we are. We have not lived a good life. Jesus says, it doesn't matter.

I've come down precisely because you're a failure to cool you and to heal you. Put it another way, this means it is welcome before change.

Not change before welcome. Yes, change. He calls Levi to follow him. Jesus changes us. But it is come as you are, he welcomes these sinners and tax collectors around his table as sinners.

[16 : 08] I came across an advert over in City Thameslink for men's mental health. It just says, it's okay not to be okay.

And we need posters like that because really we know that it's not in the world and we will be judged or excluded. But it really is okay not to be okay with God.

In fact, it is the not okay and the not good that Jesus has come to call. Are you a spiritual failure who has failed to love God, to keep his laws and to live a good life?

Yes. Oh well, you are well and truly qualified therefore to be called and welcomed by the Lord Jesus. Can I say if you're a visitor here perhaps you don't call yourself a Christian. Repent. That means come back to God and you will find that his welcome for sinners is limitless. He will heal you. He will make you his friend and he will give you a place around the table in heaven forever.

[17:18] Well, there's no better news than that. Well, firstly, the qualification is to be a sinner. Secondly, this means that there are no limits to his mercy except one.

There are no limits to his mercy except one. If Jesus is the doctor who can heal sin there's no sinner who is out of his reach as if a doctor in Bart's hospital with the cure for every cancer should walk past a bed where somebody has got the worst kind of cancer and say, sorry, I've got the cure but you're too bad.

This can get uncomfortable and even offensive as it was for those religious Jewish leaders. Why does he eat with those people? It's Remembrance Day today as you know or remember it's Sunday.

I imagine there are many stories about the world wars or from the world wars that are being recited in churches across the country but I don't think many will be telling the story of Henry Garek. Henry Garek was the American chaplain to the 10 condemned Nazi war criminals during the Nuremberg trials. Goering Hess von Ribbentrop Keitel among his parishioners for about six months he had with them regular services opening the Bible with them.

[18:47] not all of them came to faith in Christ but some did. These apparently were the last words of von Ribbentrop when asked by his executioner if he had any last words.

He said I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. may God have mercy on my soul and then he turned to Garek and said I'll see you again and the black hood was pulled over his head and he was gone.

Garek apparently was a seasoned prison chaplain not easily duped by false professions interestingly after his death his son came across a drawer in his desk which was full of letters hate mail from all over America one said you should have been hanged with the rest of them probably from many people who would have called themselves Christians.

I wonder what you make of that. Von Ribbentrop and others responsible for the deaths of thousands even hundreds of thousands the Lord Jesus Christ as he called Levi from the tax booth so he called Von Ribbentrop because he's the doctor for sin and for sinners and there are no limits to his mercy.

he's come to call them he's come to call us we may not be Von Ribbentrop but to a law keeping Pharisee from the first century if we're Gentiles which I take it is most of us in this room we're every bit as far from God as that tax collector was by nature at least the tax collector was Jewish imagine what they thought of Gentiles we have not kept God's laws most of us not even Jewish oh he's come to call even us I just want to deal with one misunderstanding about Jesus it's really important this it's sometimes suggested that Christ has a special concern for those who are materially poor the socially marginalized but I don't think there's any evidence for that at all if you read his life in the Gospels and the New Testament not least here tax collectors were not poor and they were not homeless they probably had some of the bigger houses in Capernaum and here is the example that Jesus chooses of the sinner that he's come to call neither would tax collectors neither would they have been friendless within their own circles they would have had plenty of mates the problem was they were far from God

[21:55] Jesus does not say that he came to call the poor and the marginalized materially and socially no he came to call the far not the poor but the far the far from God sinners this is really important for us to see in Dulwich and it's really important for us to see in our workplaces Jesus has come to call sinners regardless of social ethnic economic group let's be praying for our friends for our colleagues for our neighbours there are no limits to who he has come to heal except one except one we may disqualify ourselves by persisting in refusing to accept that we need him I take it in verse 17 where he says I came not to call the righteous that there is a searching bite to those words there are those who like the scribes and

Pharisees here having heard and seen Jesus persist in thinking themselves basically good not in need of his salvation if that is you then he's not come for you because you will not come to him lastly thirdly a word for the church lest we forget our roots remember our roots that we are sinners this is really important I think the impact of this truth on us is twofold if we're Christian here and

we've been Christian maybe for a while or however long number one it's reassuring it's wonderfully reassuring this passage number two it's humbling it's reassuring because we know that our ongoing failures are no surprise to the Lord Jesus our failure to pray as we should our failure to depend on him our failures to want to read his word even to go to church our failures greater moral failures that we fall into we need hide nothing from him he knows who we are and he came for us for people like us and he loves us it's reassuring but it is also humbling in a very important way it's just possible in a church like

Grace Church Dulwich concerned for growth in godliness as we are which is a very important thing but it's just possible that we begin to think of ourselves as rather good and to give the impression that we are as we come to church or as we engage with people and therefore for a kind of self-righteous culture to develop in a church like Grace Church where it's difficult to be open with people about our failures well we need to remember who we all were and where we've come from and not to mistake the transforming grace of God in our lives for something that we can boast in as if we're righteous as if we're something it's helpful for you to know who you've got leading your church you've got a sinner I'm a failure complete failure in whom God is at work by his grace you know that already and let's be open with each other about our failures rather than try and give the impression that we're

God's gift to the church church is for spiritual failures failures in whom God is at work but failures and so grace church let's remember who we are we're all the same there's no place for self-righteousness among us oh she's treated me badly she's a bad egg I'll quietly steer clear or he's not where he should be in the Christian life or they're not as mature as me what have you got that you have not been given by the grace of God when we stuff up we're not the people we should be we must treat each other with the same grace and patience with which the Lord Jesus treated us treats us and treated these people around the table with him we're all the same sinners called by and gathered by the saviour let's pray we close we thank you for how freeing it is father to know that we are sinners gather around the saviour the doctor for sin we thank you for how rightly humbling it is to remember that we're all the same we thank you for the reassurance that the Lord Jesus knows everything about us even things that we don't know about ourselves he has welcomed us however however much of a failure we are and Lord Jesus we pray that you would continue that wonderful work of transformation in our lives as you called Levi to leave behind everything how we pray that you'd be at work in us as a church sinners gathered around our saviour being transformed by your grace we pray that there would be no self-righteousness among us please banish that from us may we be a church where it is easy and okay to be a failure and we ask these things in your name amen