

Jesus Came for Sinners

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, let me invite you to stand. Let me invite you to stand as we turn to God's Word. Our sermon passage this morning is found in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 2, verses 13 through 17.

That's page 786 in the Pew Bible, and we'll have it on the screen too. Let me read our sermon text for us, and then I'll pray. So this is Mark, chapter 2, verses 13 through 17.

He, that is 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 tax collectors, 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.

[1 : 07] I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Go ahead and take a seat. Let me pray for us. Father in heaven, let us hear what your Spirit is saying to us through this passage.

As we consider Jesus, give us eyes to see and hearts to believe in him, that our lives might reflect him more and more as a church. Amen. So when it comes to becoming a follower of Jesus, how far is too far?

In other words, are there certain sins or flaws or addictions or lifestyles or backgrounds that put someone beyond the reach or beyond the desire of Jesus and his kingdom?

Now, I think maybe we know the right answer intellectually, but do we really believe that at the heart level? And does our life together demonstrate it?

You know, in your head, you might say, No one is too far gone for the grace of the Lord Jesus. But at the heart level, maybe you feel like you're too far gone.

[2 : 14] The things you've seen or done or the things that have been done to you or how long you've been stuck, you might think, Jesus couldn't call me or use me or accept me.

On the flip side, in your head, you might say, No one's too far gone. But at the heart level, you might look at other people or other kinds of people and think, They're certainly too far gone.

Given the things they've done or seen or been, you think they could never be called or used or accepted by God. But all this raises the deeper question.

Who did Jesus come for? Who did Jesus come for? This morning, we're kind of jumping ahead a little bit in our series in Mark, ahead to chapter 2 here, and we see a story about just that.

Who did Jesus come for? As he brought God's kingdom, as he inaugurated the reign of God on earth, who is it that Jesus came for? And we see two things in this passage.

[3 : 18] The first point we see here in our short text is this, that Jesus came for sinners. Jesus came for sinners. We see this in the first few verses of the story, which center on the call of Levi.

This scene immediately sort of reminds us of the calling of Simon and Andrew and James and John from chapter 1. Right? Jesus meets them at their work. He calls them to follow him, and they immediately respond. But of course, the new element here in this story is Levi's profession, his job. He's a tax collector. Now, tax collectors were nearly universally despised in the first century. Now, I know we have some people who in our community have worked for the IRS before.

I won't point them out. But, you know, in our culture, sometimes we have to really work up love for tax collectors. But in the first century, it was utterly, they were utterly despised, especially by the upright, good, believing Jewish community.

Why? Because on the one hand, what were they doing? They were collecting taxes on behalf of Rome, the pagan Gentile empire that held the Jewish people in nearly constant subjection.

[4 : 27] And so these Jewish tax collectors, they were agents of the oppressors against their own people. But even more than that, the way that tax collectors made their living was by charging people more than Rome required so that they could take that extra off the top and line their own pockets.

In other words, they would sort of get a contract from Rome to collect taxes in a certain area and then charge whatever they needed on top of what Rome required to make a fortune. So they were profiting literally at their fellow Jews' expense.

In later Jewish tradition, tax collectors would be lumped together as morally equivalent to thieves and murderers. A Jew who collected taxes was disqualified as a judge or a witness in court.

They were expelled from the synagogue and they were a cause of disgrace to their family. Again, in later Jewish tradition, the touch of a tax collector rendered a house unclean. Jews were forbidden to receive money or even alms from tax collectors since revenue from taxes was considered robbery. In short, tax collectors were considered the worst of the worst. If there was anyone who was too far gone, who had gone past the point of no return, if there was anybody who had no place in God's kingdom, no seat at the table of the king, it was Levi, the wretched tax collector and all of those sinners who gathered around his table.

[6 : 03] But what does Jesus do? He says to Levi, the same exact thing he said to Simon and Andrew and James and John, follow me.

In other words, Jesus says, I've come for them too. There's no sin so bad that Jesus didn't come to rescue. And that means no matter how deep or dark or stuck you feel in sin, whether it's addiction or anger or bitterness, Jesus calls to you and says, I see you and I love you.

Come follow me. Come sit at my table and come dine with me. If Jesus called Levi and welcomed him to dine, then he will and does call and welcome you too.

Jesus came for sinners. And I think we can apply this in two ways. First, Jesus came for sinners, so come to him. Of course, when you're that deep in something that's so obviously despised, one of the great barriers to coming to Jesus is shame.

Shame works in a lot of ways. We feel shame because we've done something wrong. We feel shame because others have told us we've done something wrong. We feel shame sometimes because something wrong has been done to us.

[7 : 33] Is it so hard to imagine Levi sitting at his tax booth, seeing the disgust on his neighbor's faces as they passed him, and feeling in the pang of his own heart what he's doing? Is it so hard to imagine Levi sitting there gripped by shame?

It's not hard to imagine if you've ever been somewhere like that in his shoes. But how does Jesus approach Levi? The same way he approached everyone else.

He called him and he communed with him. Jesus sat down at his table and ate his meal with his friends as if to say, I love you, Levi, no matter what you've done.

Let me cover your shame. Now, does Jesus approve of Levi's sin? Is the point of this story that tax collecting and wronging other people and cheating others is okay in Jesus' eyes?

No. Jesus didn't come to approve sin, nor did he come to judge, but to heal. He's a great physician.

[8 : 42] You know, if you go to a doctor, if you go to a doctor, they're not going to say, you know, you have cancer. Congratulations! Just be yourself and you'll be okay. Right? But nor will they say, you have cancer.

How dare you get out? You have no place here. Instead, they'll say, here's the news. You have cancer. Let's begin the process of healing.

It's the same with the great physician, Jesus. He's looking at you and me and saying, let's begin a journey of grace-fueled recovery from all of sin's chains.

Jesus came for sinners, and if that's you, then come to him. But I think we can apply this point in a second way. Briefly, Jesus came for sinners, so we should go with him.

We should be willing to meet people where they are with the love of Christ. Does that mean we should join people in their sin in order to win them for Christ? Well, notice, Jesus is eating with Levi and his friends.

[9 : 45] He's not sinning with them, right? Jesus didn't start collecting taxes in order to call and commune with Levi. He didn't start frequenting brothels to call and commune with the so-called

sinner around Levi's table, but Jesus did find ways to connect and call and commune with us.

He wasn't afraid to be seen with us. He wasn't afraid to engage with us, even in our sin. And if you look at your life, I'm sure you can see many ways to follow Jesus in his loving pursuit of the lost, whether it's at the local gym or the local school or the roommates right under your roof.

How can you be showing this love of Jesus to those around you? Jesus came for sinners, so we should come to him and we should go with him.

But, you know, there's another important piece of our passage. We see in the calling of Levi that Jesus came for sinners, sinners, but we see in the second half of this passage that Jesus came for sinners and only sinners.

Jesus came for sinners only. Let's look again at verse 16. Mark says, the scribes, that is the legal experts of the Pharisees, you know, those Pharisees who were legal experts, when they saw that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners, said to his disciples, why does he do that?

[11:12] Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? Now, the Pharisees were sort of like a movement in first century Judaism, a movement that valued the law of God and sought to keep it as best they could.

So what they did was they developed traditions about things that you should or should not do so that you wouldn't get anywhere even close to breaking God's law. They would put sort of this hedge of rules around the law, extra requirements, so that if you kept those extra requirements, then you wouldn't be anywhere near to breaking God's law.

Then you would be set apart. Then you would be pure, which is maybe where the name Pharisee comes from, the separated ones, the pure ones. And when they hear that Jesus, this popular teacher who himself is getting quite a movement of his own, when they hear that he's eating with tax collectors and sinners, they're offended.

They're scandalized. That is not what good people and good teachers do, they think. You don't welcome and commune with people like that.

Those people are the very problem. They're the very people we're trying not to be like, according to the Pharisees. But this Pharisaical heart, it wasn't just a problem in the first century.

[12:25] It lives on, doesn't it? Some people are afraid to come to church because they think they'll be judged. But some people are all too ready to come to church because they think they get to judge.

Of course, Christians are called to holiness of life. But it's very easy for pride to creep in.

We catch ourselves thinking, if I raise my kids right, they won't be like that. I've worked hard to get where I am. They must just be lazy.

If that person really believed, they wouldn't be struggling like that. The heart of the Pharisee, if we're honest, creeps in the corners of all of our hearts.

And what does Jesus say to us? Verse 17, 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.

[13:32] Now, what's Jesus' point? Does Jesus' reply here mean that there are actually some people who are righteous, who are spiritually healthy enough so that they don't need him? No, that's not Jesus' point.

Rather, Jesus is saying, if you want to sit at my table, if you want to sit at my table and dine with me in my kingdom, then you have to take the seat of a sinner.

You must sit in the seat reserved for sinners only if you're going to sit at this table at all. Jesus is confronting the Pharisee in all of us, confronting our self-righteousness.

If you continue to cling to your own moral record as that which puts you apart from anyone else, if you don't admit that you need as radical a rescue as the most obvious moral failure, then you will stand outside the feast that Jesus has come to bring.

In other words, Jesus is asking us to do something that is radically undoing for so much of our identity. You have to admit you're a sinner just like Levi and his friends.

[14:57] You see, we like to divide the world into the good people and to the bad people, don't we? We're very good at that. These are the good people, these are the bad people, but according to the Bible, there aren't good people over there and bad people over there.

No, we're all made in the image of God full of dignity and worth and we are all sinful and broken and in need of a radical rescue.

But how could a Pharisee like you and me ever admit that? How could we when so much of our time and energy is spent trying to bolster a sense that if we achieve enough and have done enough and have loved enough, then we are something.

We spend so much of our time trying to do that through our achievements and what we've done and who we are and what we follow. Would it not utterly undo us to admit that we're sinners?

But listen, the one who is calling you to admit that you need this radical rescue, the one who says you have to admit that you're a sinner, you have to identify with them, sit down in their seat, the one who says that is the one who himself has also done that.

[16:27] The Lord Jesus is the only one who is ever truly without sin. He was more righteous than the Pharisees could ever imagine. But he puts himself in the seat of a sinner.

Don't you see what's happening on the cross? The righteous one is putting himself in the place of the unrighteous. He takes all of our sin and he takes all of our shame willingly on himself to give us in exchange the favor and acceptance of God.

He takes all of our shame and says, here is favor. God's God's God's pronouncement.

It was God's public pronouncement of favor and acceptance proclaiming to the world, this is my beloved son in whom I'm well pleased and that favor and acceptance is freely given to all who trust in him.

So don't you see what he's done for you and for me? He sat down in the seat of your sin so that you can sit down in it too so that you can admit your need so that you can confess that you too are a sinner but because of the cross when you sit down in that seat you find that it's not a seat in the courtroom.

[17:52] It's not a seat of condemnation but you sit down and it's a seat at the banquet. It's a seat of forgiveness and favor and freedom. At first the call of Jesus sounds like the very undoing of our identity.

Wait, I have to admit that I'm so lost that I need someone to rescue me? It sounds like it's going to undo us but what you find is that it's not your undoing it's your very liberation.

It's your freedom. It's the joy of sitting at the banquet with the king with no more hiding and no more performing and no more pretending surrounded by others who are also done hiding and performing and pretending.

No longer defined by their shame or by their self-righteousness but defined by the grace of God.

Could that be us as a church?

Where the love of God in Christ is so real and powerful that we're no longer ruled by shame or self-righteousness but we all sit down at this table together as sinners saved by grace?

[19:11] Where we really believe in our hearts that no one is too far gone to be welcomed by the gospel and where we're willing to commune with each other on this long road of God's transforming grace?

Could that be us? Maybe we're not all the way there yet. In fact, we're always going to have room to grow. But that's where the gospel's taking us because that's why Jesus came.

Not for the righteous but for sinners. Let's pray. Father in heaven, Lord, I know that many of my friends in this room and many that I haven't met yet, Lord, I know that many of us are wrestling with shame.

Lord, help us to see the love of Christ with a fresh clarity this morning who comes to us where we are and speaks those loving and embracing words, come follow me.

Lord, and I pray that by your spirit we would all know the reality of that radical grace and you would continue to drive self-righteousness from our hearts to make us into a community of real welcome and transforming grace.

[20:32] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.