

## *“Why is He Eating and Drinking with Tax Collectors and Sinners?”*

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Read Mark 2:13-17

This is the rub. How can we be “in the world” but not “of the world” (John 17)? What are we protecting? **We must protect the purity of the gospel without isolating it from the purpose of the gospel.**

How have we come to this point in our lives where “church” is identified by a structure or building and not the living body that meets in the building? How have we come to the point where contact with the unbelieving or association with the non-churched is something to be avoided? Why are we so guarded about what people might think of us? When we are more concerned about our “image” rather than our “audience,” we have become Pharisees. How we understand the idea of “being in the world” and not “of the world” will shape our purpose as a church.

Sunday morning services are “for the people of God whereby we gather to worship Him.” But from our worship comes life and in the context of living, we demonstrate and declare the gospel to everyone, everywhere, at all times. Going where the sinner lives, does not make you a sinner. Our Lord’s appeal is to be who you are where you live.

I fully recognize that we are a white middle-class suburban fellowship. This, however, should not cause us to neglect or overlook those within our community who are not white middle-class urbanites. All of us live in a context of shared experiences. Things such as addictions, depression, worry, economic uncertainty, contentment, hardships and heartaches care not what race identifies you. Struggle cares not if you are female, male, bond or free. Oppression, captivity, bondage, knows no limit. We must keep before us the masses Jesus Christ came to save. We must go where the fish are if we are to be fishers of men.

I am not an avid fisherman. However on certain occasions, I have had those who are avid fishermen take me fishing. When they do, they take me to areas where fish live and where they might be biting. We might not catch anything, but the chances have increased by being where fish live. As little as I know about fishing, I have never fished in my bathtub or in a chlorinated pool. It would be foolish for us to think that the church is where the fish live. We do extend the gospel invitation on occasion, but we are never going to confuse *the purpose of the church gathered with the purpose of the church scattered.*

The question confronting us is simple, “Where are we going to find the best places to catch fish?” The challenge is to be in the world, but not of the world. In is only as we are in the world and not of the world that the world takes notice of the hope that lies within us (1 Pet. 3:15). This hope is, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). We

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must be Christians in the context of unbelief. Even in vocational Christian employment there is still ample opportunity to live Christ among the unbelieving.

For too long the church has isolated itself from the “world.” The real world is dirty and filled with sinners. They are “immoral, impure, sensual, idolatrous, bewitched, at war, consumed by jealousy, continuing to have outbursts of anger, always disputing, dissenters, factious, envious, alcoholics, womanizers, and things like these” (Gal. 5:19-21). This is what they are and, apart from the grace of God, this is what we are in our old nature. Why are we surprised or shocked that such is the case? These are the people for whom Christ died. These sinners wear three-piece suits, polish their shoes, hold jobs, stay with their wives, raise their kids, and go to church, but they are sinners apart from the work of Christ and acceptance of Christ by faith. Some of the “riff-raff” we are called to reach are unwed mothers, wear tattoos, drink alcohol, use tobacco, yell at people, have HIV and go to church, but they are sinners apart from the work of Christ and acceptance of Christ by faith. There are young sinners and old sinners, good looking ones and not so good looking ones.

Yet, we must go into “the highways and the byways and compel these people to come” (Luke 14:23). They are not going to seek us out (Rom. 3:11), we must go to them. It is only as we live Christ before them that they will gather around us and willingly listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Where are the fish biting? Coffee shops, bookstores, laundry mats, office buildings, community soccer, baseball, football, basketball, the YMCA, cigar bars, anywhere people gather sinners can be found. We must go where they live. Just as a church planter goes where the non-reached live, so also must we. We have got to stop worrying about what other church people might say about our presence in “questionable” locations and our association with “tax-collectors and sinners” and live Christ before those He came to save.

Jesus was always maligned by the religious establishment in His identification with sinners. Would it not be terrible to find out that in our quest to guard the purity of the gospel, we missed its power simply because we refused to see its purpose? Jesus came to save sinners and saving sinners is messy work. We cannot afford to worry about what others might think when Jesus calls us to scatter. Call it whatever you like, missional, incarnational, proclamational, church planting, evangelism, or witnessing, the fact of the matter is we are the hands and feet of Jesus. We are His body and this is what we are to be in our community, our nation, and our world.

May God continue to embolden us as we seek to glorify and proclaim Him to every tongue, tribe, people, and nation.