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Title: "Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?"
Text: Mark 2:13-17
Theme: Jesus came for and calls out to sinners. He is the great physician to heal the souls of the sick. We must go where sinners congregate.

Introduction:

First a leper, then a paralytic, and now a tax collector! If Jesus were running for public office he ought to be more careful about the company he is keeping. But Jesus has a higher mission than popularity: "to proclaim freedom to the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and to heal the brokenhearted" (4:18), and the needy aren't always clean or respectable. http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5_27-32.htm

In our initial story (2:1-12), the authority to forgive sin is established and demonstrated. Now in this story (2:13-17), Jesus shows us what this looks like. To believe that Jesus saves and is the only one through whom the forgiveness of sin happens demands that we go and demonstrate and declare that such is true to those who need it most.

Bede notes concerning this passage, "Following Jesus is not so much a motion of the feet as of the heart." (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II – Mark, 28).

Bede (c. 672 or 673 – May 25, 735), was a Benedictine monk at the Northumbrian monastery of Saint Peter at Monkwearmouth [England], today part of Sunderland. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bede>

If we truly believe that Jesus came for sinners, then we will go where sinners live and congregate.

Its Eternal Value:

If we do not go after the sinner, we will betray the purpose of the gospel. Fulfilling the purpose of the gospel in seeking sinners is dirty work. Are we ready to get dirty?

The Present Danger:

In our quest to protect the purity of the gospel, it is possible for us to abandon the purpose of the gospel. The gospel is not sterile; it has seed and this seed needs to be broadcasted far and wide. We need to pray for the germination of this seed in the hearts of the sinner. We have grossly misunderstood 1 John 2:15, 16 and James 4:4.

¹⁵ "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (1 John 2:15, 16).

“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

Worldliness and reaching the lost are not the same. It is possible in our quest to avoid contamination by the world that we are actually worldly in our actions and attitudes. It is possible in our defense of the gospel’s purity to become antichristian in our behavior. Today, our desire is to see that Jesus forgives sinners and we must go where they live and tell them this truth.

“Steadily and inexorably the synagogue door was shutting on Jesus. Between him and the guardians of Jewish orthodoxy war had been declared. Here was the beginning of that dreadful situation when the Son of God was banned from the place which was regarded as the house of God.” (William Barclay, Mark, 52).

THE BIG PICTURE:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ in Galilee - Early Galilean Ministry - His authority challenged concerning the forgiving of sin (2:1-12)

- His authority challenged (2:1-3:35 [Ministry in Conflict])
 - “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” - concerning the forgiving of sin (2:1-12)
 - “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?” - concerning the friends He kept (vv. 13-17)
 - “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” - concerning the fast and food (vv. 18-22)
 - “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” - concerning the forsaking of the Sabbath (2:23-3:6)

Questions:

1. How isolated are we to be from the social outcast and places where sinners congregate?
2. Is there a difference between isolation and insulation, between being “in the world” but not “of the world”?
3. As a fellowship have we positioned ourselves to reach the sick or have we unknowingly cut ourselves out of effective ministry expression?
4. Are we like Jesus reaching out to sinners or are we like the religious establishment reacting against sinners?

To Know: The Holy Spirit desires for us to know Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

To Choose: The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose to join Him in the purpose of the gospel.

To Feel: The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of seeking Jesus above all else in living and speaking the gospel.

How will they best hear?

1. Have you ever worried about what others might think about you if they saw you doing something that was right, but in an area considered taboo by some?
2. Perhaps this has never crossed your mind, but would you pick up a lady you knew if she was walking in a rain storm and you were alone in your car? This is the kind of situation reaching sinners can place you in.

In each of the stories we are reading, there are three movements: the immediate environment (v. 13), Kingdom expression (v. 15), and finally divine explanation (vv. 16, 17).

Notice the common thread of enormous crowds and teaching (v. 13 [cf. 2:1, 2]).

- I. The context explained – the picture (v.13)

Three things are noted: again by the seashore, all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them.

- II. The call extended – the personality (v. 14).
 - A. He was hated by men, but loved by God.
 - B. He was hurting from rejection, but healed by embrace.

For us to grasp the enormity of the situation, it is necessary for us to consider the place of the tax-collector in Ancient Near Eastern culture and society.

Rome's method of collecting taxes was to employ as tax collectors locals who knew who had money and where they kept it. A province was divided into tax districts. Locals would bid for the contract of collecting taxes in a district. The bid was the money they were contracted to pay the government; whatever they collected over that amount was theirs to keep. The chief tax collector (such as Zacchaeus in Luke 19:2) owned the contract for his region. Then he would employ others to collect taxes in the various villages. **Tax collectors were widely regarded as thieves and robbers.**

Rome collected three principal kinds of taxes, (1) a land tax, (2) a head tax, and (3) a customs tax of 2% to 5% of value on goods being transported. A tax office or booth would be located near a city gate or port to collect the custom tax, though liability for this tax would have been primarily limited to those engaging in commercial trade to other areas[1] -- such as fishermen exporting dried fish or farmers shipping surplus crops to a larger city. If ancient Capernaum is to be identified with the ruins at Tell Hum, then the customs house would have collected revenue on the produce of the area as well as traffic that moved eastward along the road to Bethsaida Julias.

Tax collectors were hated men. All a tax collector would have to do is threaten to report a person to the soldiers of Herod or Rome, and he could take what he wanted by extortion. This was a police state, and residents didn't have many civil rights unless they were citizens of Rome. Few were.

Tax collectors who collaborated with the hated Romans were despised even more. They were viewed as traitors, turncoats, and quislings. They worked for the enemy out of greed, a greed that sucked the people dry.

To eat with a Gentile or tax collector was considered by the strict Pharisees to render one spiritually or ceremonially unclean. Uncleaness was conveyed by touch and association. Even a house entered by a tax collector was considered unclean. Tax collectors were both hated and avoided by respectable society. http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/5_27-32.htm

“Jesus wanted the man no one else wanted. He offered his friendship to the man whom all others would have scorned to call friend.” (William Barclay, Mark, 53).

It is to a tax-collector that our Lord extends the call to come and follow Him. Notice the consistent theme of forsaking all and following Jesus (cf. 1:14-20). Whether you are male or female, Jews or Greek, bond or free, the call is the same, “Follow me.”

Jesus calls to Levi (Matthew) to follow. He makes a direct appeal to Levi’s will. What impact do you think his decision had on the rest of his life? Do you think Matthew ever regretted his decision to follow Jesus? I think Matthew decided that no price could be put on a clean and cleared conscience before God and man. This is what Jesus offers to all of us.

“The point of it is that the one person for whom Jesus can do nothing is the person who thinks himself so good that he does not need anything done for him. To have no sense of need is to have erected a barrier between us and Jesus; to have a sense of need is to possess the passport to his presence.” (William Barclay, Mark, 57).

There is an unavoidable audience throughout the gospels. God invites those within society that are less than ideal, who form the outcast, those others look down on. In every culture, at every time this changes. Notice Paul’s thoughts in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 [READ]).

²⁶ “For consider your calling, brethren, that there were **not many** wise according to the flesh, **not many** mighty, **not many** noble; ²⁷ but **God has chosen** the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and **God has chosen** the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the despised **God has chosen**, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no man may boast before God. ³⁰ But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, ³¹ so that, just as it is written, ‘LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD’” (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

Remember, it does not say “any,” but rather “not many.” He still calls people like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Paul the Rabbi, and Luke the Physician, but the many are called from the mass. Our appeal should be as large and as inclusive as our community and culture. Luke 4 gives us a description of our targeted audience.

Luke 4:18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED,

They are the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. As a despised tax-collector and a social outcast, Levi was used to abuse and scorn. Yet Jesus met him with warmth, love, and acceptance. This is the same idea seen with the immoral Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. They positioned themselves to withstand the abuse. They lived with perpetual friction and had become insensitive and hardened, yet Jesus spoke words and showed actions that disarmed and dissolved their barriers. To whom are we reaching? How can we be the love of God to those who are completely turned off and hurt by our repugnant behavior?

III. The company kept – the place (v. 15).

Gregory Nazianzen also makes a penetrating comment concerning this passage when he said, "When Jesus is attacked for mixing with sinners, and taking as his disciple a despised tax collector, one might ask: What could he possibly gain by doing so? Only the salvation of sinners. To blame Jesus for mingling with sinners would be like blaming a physician for associating closely with sick people." (Oration 45, On Holy Easter 26, in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II – Mark, 28).

Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – January 25, 389), also known as Gregory the Theologian or Gregory Nazianzen, was a 4th-century Archbishop of Constantinople. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregory_of_Nazianzus

"For Jesus to invite people like Levi to a feast in his own home – people known locally as 'sinners,' an easy label to stick on those who didn't conform . . . – this was simply outrageous." (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 21).

IV. The complaint stated – the problem (v. 16).

The tragedy of our story is how both parties, the tax-collectors and the religious leaders, were sick but only one recognized the full extent of their hopeless and helpless estate. The other group was self-deceived in a failure to recognize their ill-health.

It is like the story of the two prodigals in which we believe only the one who left was wrong (Luke 15:25-28 [READ]).

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ **But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him**" (Luke 15:25-28).

Or like the religious man who is thankful that he is not like the wicked sinner praying in the temple (Luke 18:9-14 [READ]).

⁹ “And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: **'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.** ¹² I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

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 suburbanites. 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 avid fishermen taken 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 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 Him 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 accepting Him 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.

V. The charge accomplished – the purpose (v. 17).

“Jesus’ answer to the sneering criticism went to the heart of the matter. There’s no point in the doctor only keeping company with healthy people. The doctor must associate with the sick. Jesus’ whole ministry was to bring health, not just to the physically sick, but to Israel as a whole and the world as a whole. That, however, would involve upsetting a lot of people for whom it was more comfortable to label people as ‘outcasts’ and ignore them from then on.” (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 21).

Some suggest the word “sinners’ referred to here were not men who led wicked lives, but simply those who did not keep all the minute rules and regulations of the ‘tradition of the elders.’ So the Pharisees dubbed them ‘sinners’” (Word Meanings in the New Testament: One-Volume Edition, Ralph Earle, 32).

The application of this to our current culture is immediate and painful. The issue is not our method, but our heart. Do we love those who are different than us?

- Does the unwed mother find a warm embrace in our midst?
- What about the person who lives with chronic depression?
- How about the individual who is persistently plagued with suicidal thoughts?
- What about the single parent or divorced individual?
- How about those who are democrats or republicans?
- How about the liberal feminist or the “ditto-head”?
- What about the immoral and ungodly?
- What about those who support the war in Iraq and those who are opposed to it?

Do these people feel the love of God in this place? Do they find a love without condition, an acceptance without requirement, a forgiveness that is without limit, and a service that is without reward? I am not talking about anything external to us, but about our internal hearts. Do we love as God would love them if they showed up in our community of faith? Are we reaching out to this people?

As good as an addiction ministry might be or a ministry to unwed mothers, or single parents, or divorced individuals, or a dynamic and culturally attractive student ministry, these things are unnecessary if the love of God is fully and truly “felt” by all who enter our doors.

Remember the larger context of this story. He already healed a leper (1:40-45) and a paralytic (2:1-12). He also forgives sin. He uses the two images of healer and savior in our present story.

“They who use the knife or heat to remove certain unnatural growths in the body, [or cut away diseased and dying tissue], do not bring to the person they are serving a method of healing that is painless, though certainly they apply the knife without any

intention of injuring the patient.” (The Great Catechism 8, in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II - Mark, 29).

So also is there pain in the salvation of sinners. Recognizing who you are in light of who He is and what such a state cost Him is an agonizing revelation. Being convicted of sin and repentance is painful. Brokenness and humiliation is painful, but absolutely necessary for the soul to move from death to life, from darkness to light, and from sickness to health.

Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost. My role as shepherd is to tend to the sheep, but it is your role as sheep to reproduce and make more sheep. You must not collapse into a holy huddle. We must come to be equipped and then we must go and do the work of the ministry.

APPLICATION: (Where do we go from here, what is our NEXT ACTION STEP?)

SHARE THE GOSPEL

1. As a fellowship have we positioned ourselves to reach the sick or have we unknowingly cut ourselves out of effective ministry expression?
2. Are we like Jesus reaching out to sinners or are we like the religious establishment reacting against sinners?
3. There are several ministries that we are calling the fellowship to whose sole intent is to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the company of sinners. You must give and go, pray and practice, learn and live Jesus. Be who you are where you are at.

“Jesus’ actions and words ring out like a great bell into today’s world, telling us what time it is (time for the doctor to see the patients), warning us to look at things from God’s point of view (human respectability can so easily mask reality), encouraging us to extend his healing welcome, his transforming party, wherever it’s needed.” (Tom Wright, Mark for Everyone, 22).