

Mark 2:13-17

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

As we return to our journey through Mark's Gospel, today we are considering the "Kingdom Welcome" – who did Jesus welcome into the kingdom and why. We'll be looking at three groups essentially, the

1. Seemingly Unlikely
2. Socially Undesirable
3. Spiritually Unhealthy

Seemingly Unlikely

There's a small part of me that feels a bit sorry for the Pharisees. I'll explain what I mean. This is a group trying to be accountable to God, to uphold the highest standards of Scripture – remember Jesus said of them in John 5:39-40 "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." They didn't get it. It's a salutary lesson for those of us who also study the Scriptures, to be careful that we don't miss out on Jesus by getting tied up in religious legalism. Let's all make sure that in addition to studying the Scriptures we also come to Jesus himself. Part of the Pharisees problem (and remember that they were respected, even feared by the people) was that they had built an entire secondary level of defence or an outer layer of laws, the Mishnah, that they added to the people in an effort to stop them from reaching the point where they risked breaking one of God's actual laws. The Mishnah is a collection of statements of Jewish law, or mishnayot, that make up the foundation of the Talmud. The Mishnah does not contain a specific number of laws, but it is a collection of traditions that demonstrate how to apply the 613 commandments, or mitzvot, of the Torah. Well meaning, well intentioned, but something that had become, in Jesus words, Matt 23:1-7 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them

on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.” Perhaps the most telling words Jesus speaks in relation to the Pharisees is when he contrasts their pride with the humility of the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14 where we read:

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.””

All of which brings us to the Seemingly Unlikely character in our text, the Tax Collector. The Mishnah which we’ve just mentioned ranks Tax Collectors along with thieves and murderers, just as you heard the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable do. As an aside, I do remember as a child hearing some of these accounts for the first time and wondering why there was such a degree of hatred for pub landlords who I had always understood performed a tremendous service to the drinking public. That was until I later discovered that the word “Publican” in the King James’ Version was the word for a “Tax Collector”. However, Tax Collectors were despised for a number of reasons. They were considered as traitors to their people because they worked ostensibly for the occupying Roman rulers. Also, they were taxing their fellow Jews, something forbidden in Scripture. The tax booth was a booth located on the edge of a city or town to collect taxes for trade. There was a tax booth in Capernaum, which was on the trade route from Damascus to Galilee and the Mediterranean. The “taxes” were collected on produce and goods brought into the area for sale, and were a sort of “sales tax” paid by the seller but obviously passed on to the purchaser in the form of increased prices. Think of it as a Trump Tariff, if you will. So for all these many reasons, clearly Levi is a Seemingly Unlikely person for Jesus to be calling to be one of his followers. What’s even worse is that it’s not just Levi as a one-off, but it turns out that there are lots of Tax Collectors and “sinners” (whom we will come to shortly) not only associating with Jesus but Jesus socialising with them over dinner. Plus it’s not just on this occasion, but on many occasions, to the point where

Jesus notes that the Pharisees say of him (in contrast to John the Baptist) in Matt 11:18-19 “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.” The Pharisees saw that the Tax Collectors and Sinners had Jesus’ friendship. The Seemingly Unlikely. When I became a Christian back in 1978 it was during the summer, so when I went back to school in September it seemed to make sense to me to go to the first Christian Union prayer meeting that they were holding at the beginning of term. Interestingly, those present later told me that they thought that I had come to it either to make fun of it or to disrupt it in some way, so Seemingly Unlikely was my presence there. Yet it is the Seemingly Unlikely that God in his grace sent Jesus to call to himself.

Socially Undesirable

So too the Socially Undesirable. The “sinners” as our text has it. Edwards, in his commentary on Mark’s Gospel gives us a great description of who “sinners” were. He writes “The Mishnah describes “sinners” variously as gamblers, money-lenders, people who race doves for sport, people who trade on the Sabbath year, thieves, the violent, shepherds, and, of course, tax collectors (m. Sanh. 3:3). (Interesting to note the inclusion of shepherds here, those who were invited to celebrate Jesus’ birth.) Some of the above are criminal elements, but many are simply labourers and commoners, who were too busy, too poor, or too ignorant to live up to the rules of the religious authorities.” So, essentially, the unchurched. Those with no “religious” leanings. Ordinary, everyday folk who just get up in the morning with no thought for God in their heads who go to their day’s work or about their daily tasks and go home to bed...then get up the next day and do the same. Ordinary people. These are the two groups of people that we find Jesus regularly in the company of – clearly regularly enough that the Pharisees accused him of hanging out with them on a regular basis, usually over food. It’s a fascinating side note that very often the encounters that Jesus has with people are in the context of meals. It is part of the thinking behind having a meal as part of an Alpha Course, as I understand. Meals are definitely opportunities for outreach. But all of this discussion around the Seemingly Unlikely and the Socially Undesirable is all quite academic unless we consider the subject of the Spiritually Unhealthy.

Spiritually Unhealthy.

Graveyards can be fascinating places and gravestones can be most illuminating in their inscriptions. It’s a fascinating reminder of one’s own mortality when going to worship in All Saints’ Chilton, walking as one does through the graveyard on the way in. One notable inscription is to be found at the church of St. Thomas in Winchelsea on the gravestone of the comedian the late Spike Milligan. Despite initial controversy,

it reads "Dúirt mé leat go raibh mé breoite," which translates into English from Irish as "I told you I was ill."

One of the opposite challenges one faces sometimes as a doctor is that of the sick person who doesn't consider that they are ill. What's worse than that is the person who doesn't think or understand that they are spiritually ill. Scripture is full of language characterising the human fallen condition as that of someone who is ill. Just a few examples are Is 6:10 "Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Or what we have read so recently at Christmas in Is 53:5 "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." Or 1 Pet 2:24 quoting Is and adding "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."

What, then is at the heart of the Pharisees' failure to understand what Jesus is doing, what is it that they fail to grasp about the "why?" of Jesus spending time with the Seemingly Unlikely and the Socially Undesirable? And remember – he's eating food with them. That's all that he's doing. Our text reads "When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." And what is that call? After his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness Matthew 3:17 recounts the beginning of Christ's ministry with these words. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.""

There is someone to whom I am related by marriage. On a school parents' night as they were going round the institution which their children attended came to be introduced to one of the Classics teachers. As I was not present I cannot vouch for the actual form of words used, but it ran something along the lines of "So, what are you actually useful for?" Now, before I distress those of you with a background in the Classics, I will add of the story that the "Views expressed are not necessarily those of the preacher" clause to this. However, that is not a phrase which any of us should seek or find to be used to describe any of us in the context of being a Christian. We know of Jesus as it says in Luke 19:10 "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." And here in Mark he says "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Which brings us to that question to address to ourselves. Jesus' Great Commission given to us at the end of Matthew's Gospel reads that "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."" Our call is to go to the Spiritually

Unhealthy, the Socially Undesirable and the Seemingly Unlikely and call them to follow him. But we cannot do that unless we are actually in the company of the Spiritually Unhealthy, the Socially Undesirable and the Seemingly Unlikely. Ask yourself this: am I only to be found in the company of the righteous, as the Pharisees were, distancing themselves for mistaken reasons of purity, or is any of my time spent amongst the unchurched. Hear the words this time of the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor 5:9-11. Here he is warning the church to disassociate themselves from believers who are sexually immoral, and he is making it clear that it is not people in general that he is referring to. 1 Cor 5:9-11 “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

So how do we do this as Christians? Motyer in his commentary sums up succinctly the challenge for us when he writes that “The example of Jesus is again our model. He was sustained by his prayers to the Father, and in his fellowship with his disciples (despite their inadequacy). From these, and his deep knowledge of the Scriptures, he drew sustenance to go into the most unlikely company and not only survive in it but actually win others to faith within it. We are called neither recklessly to risk ourselves nor timidly to secure ourselves, but to find the point of life-giving tension between the two. Provided we are living in prayerful fellowship with other believers and continue to deepen our understanding of Scripture we need to be amongst those who are not believers in order to reach them with Christ’s Gospel.

My closing questions for you are these. Who, for you, are the equivalent in our day of the tax collectors and sinners, the unchurched of this generation, and can the same accusation that was levelled at Christ be levelled at us, Matt 11:19 are we “a friend of tax collectors and sinners”. If not, why not, and what do we need to change in order to fulfil Christ’s Great Commission to make disciples and teach them to follow Christ?

Amen.