

Not The Righteous, But Sinners

In today's text we see another instance of Jesus' handling opposition in the midst of His teaching ministry. What we learn from this passage is truly amazing.

Mark 2:13-17

¹³ He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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?" 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."

I. Jesus calls sinners. (vv. 13-15)

What we mean by "sinners" and what the first century Jews meant by "sinners" are a bit different. In the minds of the religious leaders of Jesus' day, a "sinner" was someone who gave no heed to the 613 commandments of the Torah. They were people with whom righteous folks would not associate in any way. Therefore the religious leaders were amazed that Jesus, clearly a great teacher and miracle worker, would violate all of the religious customs of the day — customs which were specially designed to promote holiness and to preserve the truth. Notice, however, that when Jesus calls tax collectors and sinners, he calls them to two things:

A. Followership (v. 14)

Jesus doesn't just "hang out" with sinners. He doesn't just welcome them. He changes them.

B. Fellowship (v. 15)

When Jesus calls us we are called into His Church. Each of us is a scoundrel, now in a family of scoundrels, who are living together, loving each other, and exhorting each other to leave out old "tax collector bags" and to become more like the Savior.

II. Jesus only calls sinners. (vv. 16, 17)

The Pharisees were about to have their world completely rocked. It was enough that Rabbi Jesus associated with notorious sinners, but now He was going to teach them something even more radical.

In verse 17a, Jesus cites a well-known proverb that probably made sense to the Pharisees and adequately justified His behavior in verses 13-15. But in verse 17b, He goes way beyond anything they could have imagined: He says not only that He came to call sinners, but also that He did not come to call the righteous, like the Pharisees!

The only way for us to know Jesus Christ and to join His Church is for us all, each one, to confess that we, on our own merits, have no greater standing before God than the most contemptible and notorious people — the tax collector, the prostituted, the murders of this world. Only then can we enjoy the healing work of the Great Physician.

Discussion Questions

1. What does sit mean to be “called” by Jesus Christ?
2. What does it mean to “recline at table” with Christ? ...with your fellow “tax collectors”?
3. How do we properly issue the call of Jesus to the sinners of our day? How should we adjust our strategies so that they look like His strategy?
4. How do we cultivate our need for Christ so that we always think of ourselves and His salvation in keeping with verse 17?

Going Deeper

1. When have you recently thought of yourself as a person who is naturally righteous rather than sinful? What was at the root of that thought or action?
2. How can you properly address these heart attitudes?