

Jesus Wow! Series Part 11

Tim Johnston 21/6/20

Jesus calls Levi

Mark 2:13-17

Sermon Summary

Two groups of people are featured in Mark 2:13-17: tax collectors and Pharisees.

In the era that Jesus walked the earth, tax collectors were despised while Pharisees were revered.

1. Those appointed by Rome to collect taxes on behalf of the Empire were persons of dubious behavior. So long as they remitted to Rome the set target, anything above that was regarded as the collector's profit. With the clout of Rome behind them, there was little the populace could do about the heavy-handed methods those collectors used. They were regarded as "collaborators" – a term we used of traitors during the second World War.
2. The Pharisees were the Jewish experts in The Law; the Law of the Torah, found in the Christian's Old Testament. People in Israel looked up to them and respected them. Yet, they were in conflict with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry.

The most well-known of tax collectors in the New Testament is the one known as Levi, working the Capernaum precinct. Jesus comes upon him and his booth (tax office) at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and the record of Jesus' discourse is extraordinarily brief. Jesus tells Levi, "Follow me." And he does so – immediately. [NOTE: Levi and Matthew are one and the same; Levi was his Hebrew name, Matthew his Greek name. Greek was the *lingua franca* of the commercial and political world, while Hebrew was the common language of the people. Tax collectors were required to be bi-lingual.]

A tax collector was regarded by the common people as a sinner, one who had sold his righteousness to the Romans. The ordinary Hebrew regarded righteousness as belonging to the Pharisee, and, therefore, worthy of copying. Any form of sinning was regarded as unrighteous – and one never ate a meal with a sinner, for that would make one unclean.

Yet, in this story, Jesus not only makes friends with a sinner but also has a meal with him. Shame! The Pharisees present saw Jesus as guilty by association.

The Pharisees queried some of Jesus' disciples as to why he was associating with sinners. Jesus overhears and replies that it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Jesus is not just justifying his own behavior, but is turning the spotlight on them.

Our scriptures are obvious in their teaching: Nobody is righteous, no not one (Romans 3:10). Unfortunately, the Pharisees thought they were! The comments of Jesus are designed to break the pride that Pharisees had in themselves.

Read the story recorded in Luke 18:9-14. It is a different take on the two classes of people in Mark's gospel. It shows the stark difference in attitude of some who are conscious of their own righteousness – and full of pride – the Pharisee compared with the other who knew his true condition, the tax collector whose humble actions showed it. The tax collector thought the Pharisee was perfect in his righteousness by the nature of his position in society – that is why he kept his distance.

Tim Johnston told of a time – in the era of the Hare Krishna movement – when he asked a question of one of its proponents. Although the “monk” was trained to be serene, his eyes momentarily showed the anger that was truly within his heart.

How do we answer a question put to us by a strong, angry atheist? How can we give a counter argument if we don't have hope?

You don't have to do anything to receive salvation apart from recognizing your inability to change things yourself and to be prepared to fall on your knees and give yourself to God.

But – a danger! As we grow in Christian knowledge, we are in danger of becoming like a Pharisee. The change can be subtle, by adopting a superior attitude. We need to watch for that happening within ourselves.

We can easily look down on others if we are not careful. When we do, we are distancing ourselves from them – and from Jesus. It is not our good deeds and intelligence that are important when helping fellow Christians; it is the humble, sincere attitude of our heart that is paramount.

We are judged by our Father on our fellowship with others, not on our breadth of Biblical knowledge. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

Billy Graham used the same hymn at the close of his rallies: “Just as I am”.

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bid'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God I come! I come!

What makes you different from others in society?

A person can be put off Christianity by a feeling of inferiority when they are in the company of mature Christians. They accuse us of acting superior – that we are always right and they wrong. How many of us Christians have given this false impression? We are all equal at the foot of the cross.

Discussion Questions

Read Mark 2: 13-17.

1. Why did Levi (aka Matthew) jump up instantly and follow Jesus?
2. Why did the Pharisees attack Jesus for eating with the tax collectors and sinners?
3. Have you ever hesitated being seen in company with those who are clearly regarded as sinners in our society? Did you hesitate because you were afraid other church people would see you with them? Tell your story.
4. Are you willing to be “guilty by association” as Jesus was? Explain.

Read Luke 18: 9-14

5. What was right with the Pharisee’s prayer? And what was wrong with it?
6. What is right about the tax collector’s prayer? Is anything wrong with it?
7. As we grow in Christian knowledge, how are we in danger of becoming like Pharisees?
8. Was your saving moment a humbling moment? Describe it. Do you need another humbling moment today?

**Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bid’st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God I come! I come!**