



Dinner with Jesus

Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-31

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Holy Spirit, as we turn to Your word, we know it's power. And so, Lord, pray that it would change us and make us more like You. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Well, this summer we are reading through the Gospel of Mark together as a church and all the sermons are going to come from the book of Mark. And last week we gave you all a reading plan with short readings a couple of times a week, complete with sticker charts so you can monitor your progress over the summer. And last week when I said that even adults would get a sticker chart, in every service people applauded. All right, every week I drop pearls of wisdom and crickets, but say "sticker chart" just once and everyone's like, "Yeah, sticker chart. Yeah." So, we have clearly connected with your inner preschooler and last week we talked about the word, gospel.

And the word gospel means good news. And we talked about how the gospel doesn't just change me and you so that we can go to heaven. The gospel changes everything. The gospel changes workplaces and homes and schools to look more here on earth as it does in heaven. And today we're going to read a passage about what the gospel looks like in action, in real life. But before I do that, I want to ask just a question. True or false, Jesus loves and welcomes us just as we are?

True.

True, right? Some of you... Yes, it's true, right? It's true. Some of you, though, are looking at me like, "I sense the trick question coming." With good reason. It's not for nothing that I taught all those years. I know how to write a tricky test question, which we'll get to in a minute. Mark 2, "As Jesus walked along, he saw Levi sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him and Levi got up and followed Him." Now we lose just how shocking this would've been. But back then, tax collectors were despised because they charged their fellow Israelites way more than the Roman government was charging, and they kept the difference as their profit. And they got very rich by collaborating with an oppressive, colonial power to extort their fellow Israelites. People lost their homes, people lost their livelihood because of tax collectors. So, everyone hated them.

So, when Jesus said to Levi, "Follow me," this would've made people furious. This would've enraged people. But it gets worse or better, depending on how you look at it. "While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Him." Okay, in this culture to eat with someone was the highest form of social acceptance. It said that you were friends. So, you can kind of imagine people going, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, Jesus, whoa. Okay, yeah, I'm all for this grace and love stuff, but to welcome them as friends? Jesus, you have gone too far. Jesus, you have gone too far with his gray stuff. These people are traitors. They have robbed us. Not cool, Jesus, not cool." Because this would be the equivalent today of drug dealers or human traffickers. That's kind of the category that tax collectors were held in. So, this is shocking and offensive.

Then it says, "When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw Him, they asked His disciples, 'Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" I love that last question, "Why does he eat with sinners?" Oh, I don't know. Maybe because there's no other kind of person you can eat with. Because if you don't eat with sinners, you're not even going to eat with yourself because you're a sinner, right? And that word, sin, it was originally an archery term which meant to miss the bullseye. So, sin is missing God's best for us. And just a good rule of thumb, okay? When the Bible talks about sin or when you hear sin in a sermon, good rule of thumb, it's always best to think of our own sin rather than other people's sin.

Because the world has had quite enough of judgmental Christians, don't need any more of that. So in this sermon, Jesus is talking about our own sin, not other people's sin. And right now, some of you may be thinking, "Sin, oh man, I have so many. Where do I begin? I need to sort them into categories maybe." A good place to begin is always prayer. And then others of you may be like, "I don't. What are my sins? I'm having a hard time thinking what my sins are." You could always ask your spouse or your children or your friends or your neighbors or your parents, they may be able to fill you in a little bit and also pray there as well.

Then the text goes on. "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.'" So, at first, Jesus offends the religious leaders. This sentence could offend us, because if you and I were sitting there, we might've been going, "Jesus, wait a minute, what do you mean? I'm not sick. I'm not a sinner. I mean, I vote for the right people. I do good things. I go to church. And yeah, okay, I collect taxes, but somebody has to, and at least I don't over charge as much as Fred does. Have you seen how much Fred charges? Jesus, I'm not a sinner, other people are sinners."

But when Jesus says, "I have come to call sinners," it begs the question, call them to what? Because see, there's a word here that's implied. Mark is all about action. So, he keeps things very brief. He doesn't give a lot of details. That's what's going on here. But in Luke's gospel, Luke tells the exact same story only with more details. And in Luke's gospel, Jesus says, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." It's the same word that appears just a few verses earlier in the passage we looked at last week and it says, "Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, 'The kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news.'"

And that word, repent, has some negative connotations as the angry Christians telling everyone else they need to repent or else they're going to go to hell and all of that stuff. But the word, gospel, means good news and repent is a good news word. Repent is a good news word. And I'm going to tell you why in a minute. And the word, repent, means two things: change our worldview or turn around 180 degrees and go the opposite direction of where you were headed. So, back to my question, true or false, Jesus loves and accepts us just as we are? Did Jesus love and accept Levi just as he is? Absolutely. Yes, he did. It's just that that's only half of the truth. The full truth is Jesus loves and accepts us just as we are and loves us so much He doesn't leave us the way He found us. He calls us to change. He calls us to repent. He doesn't say to Levi, "Levi, collaborating with an oppressive, colonial power to bankrupt your fellow Israelites, you're doing what's best for you. Well done, Levi. You do you, thumbs up."

He does not say that, because it's harming Levi and it's harming other people. The Bible says that Jesus came full of grace and truth. Grace that forgives our sins, but truth that tells us that we have sin and it's both and we are forever falling off one side of that horse or the other, aren't we? Too much grace, too much truth, there are grace people, there are truth people, but it's both. In what proportion? Is it like 60% grace and 40% truth or 50% or 50? No. 100% grace and 100% truth in equal measure.

When I was growing up, I was told that if you want to give some constructive criticism to someone to use the sandwich method, some of you may have heard of this, right? Say something nice and then give the criticism and then end with something nice so that the criticism is sandwiched between the nice. Any of you ever hear of this? Now, the sandwich method, I mean, it can be helpful when done right, but done wrong, as it often is, you know what else it's called? Manipulative. Because so often the criticism cancels out the two nice things. "Hey, I like your shirt. Blue's a good color for you. You have the moral character of pond scum, but you look good in brown too." Right? The criticism negates the nice, your great but cancels the, "You are great."

Jesus says, "I love you no matter what, period, full stop. And," not but, "and I love you so much I'm going to call you to do some different things than you've been doing, so that you can become who I created you to be." That's called repentance. And the order matters. Grace and truth, which comes first? Grace. The Bible says it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance. It's only when you know that if you are honest with your sins that you're going to be met with grace and love and kindness, that we feel free to confess those sins because we know we're not going to be judged by them. It's God's kindness that leads us to repent and that's why Levi responds so quickly.

His whole life religious people have said to him, "You're a bad, bad man, Levi." But when he encounters Jesus' kindness and love, he leaves everything behind to follow Jesus. And later his name has changed to Matthew and he becomes one of Jesus' 12 disciples and he writes the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus says to him, "I love you and I have a purpose for you and your sin cannot cancel my purpose. I'm going to put you on my senior leadership team, Levi." And Levi is so starved for that kind of love that he leaves his sin behind.

None of us have a sin problem. All of us have a closeness problem. We're not close enough to Jesus because when we get close to Him and experience His love, we begin to

want to repent and do things differently to become the people He created us to be. First comes Jesus' love and grace and then Jesus calls sinners to repentance. And here is where I have failed you in my preaching, for which I need to apologize. Because I don't talk about repentance enough. And that is not helpful for you, because repent is a good news word, but it often doesn't seem that way to us, right? In our culture, we've got all these negative images. We think, "Okay, repent. That means I got to feel guilty and miserable about what a terrible person I am." No, no, no, no, no, no, no. It's not about feeling guilty.

Jesus calls us to repentance because He loves us. And if we're headed in a direction that is not good for us or not good for others, or at bare minimum is going to keep us from His best, He wants us to turn around, which is what the word repent means, and go a better direction because He loves us. It's not about feeling guilty. It's even in the metaphor, even in the metaphor. If I'm headed in this way toward my sin and I turn 180 degrees around and go this way, what am I focused on? My sin behind me or what's ahead of me? Repentance is not about looking back in the past at my sins and thinking, "I'm such a bad person." Repentance looks to the future and says, "Wow, look who I can become in Jesus." Which is why repent is a good news word.

Levi goes from being a tax collector to one of Jesus' disciples. It wasn't about what he'd done in the past. It was about who he could become in the future. It's forward focused. And in the Bible, the word, repent, is usually not followed by, or else. Repent or else you'll go to hell. It's not usually followed by that. It's usually followed by the word, and. Repent and. In last week's verse, Jesus said, "Repent and believe the good news." The Apostle Peter says, "Repent and return to God and your sins will be wiped out and times of refreshing may come from the Lord." It's not about dwelling on past sins, it's about embracing future possibilities. Because see, grace without truth isn't grace, because it says, "Just keep doing the stuff that's hurting you and others. No change is necessary." That's not actually grace or love. But truth without grace isn't truth, because it leaves out the truth that with God, with God's grace, we can change.

But grace and truth together say change is both necessary and possible through Jesus. And the through Jesus part is super important, because we can't do it ourselves. Because see, sin isn't just something I do. It's also our attitudes and what we think and what we feel. And it's a condition I have. Jesus says it's not the healthy you need a doctor, it's the sick. His metaphor for sin isn't good and bad. It's sick and healthy. It's a sickness. Sin is a sickness like cancer and it affects everything. It affects how we spend our time, our money, how we treat others. It affects our attitudes toward others and what we think and what we feel. Sin infects everything.

The car I drive is a 25-year-old pile of junk. It is a mess. The turn signal only works if I hold it in the exact right position. The engine has all kinds of problems. It is literally going to die any moment now and it's not worth fixing, so we need to get a new car. But I have been resisting getting a new car. But my wife's argument to me was, "Scott, look how long we drive our cars. We've driven this car for 25 years. Scott, this new car might just be your last car." What is she implying?

But my real reason for not wanting a new car, and I'm a little embarrassed to admit this, is I am proud of driving my broken down car because there's something about being the

senior pastor of Bellevue Presbyterian Church, which sounds kind of bougie, right? Ooh, he must drive a Lexus or something like that. But instead, I drive this ugly car. I am proud of that contradictory image. That's image management, that's sin. Even in something that sort of looks kind of noble, right? Oh, look, he could drive a better car, but he doesn't, how sacrificial our senior pastor is. Oh, whatever. I mean, yeah, there's a little bit of that, but it's my image, it's sin. That's sickness. It affects everything. And I can't fix it myself. I need a savior and Jesus dies on the cross to pay the price for my sins that I know has to be paid or there's no justice in the world.

And then he calls me to turn around, repent, and begin the process where through His power, I become more like Jesus and go a different direction. See, because Jesus didn't come just to get us in heaven, but also to get heaven into us. So that more and more we participate in the kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of me, which is what sin is about. That's what sin is. It's me. Sin is when we say, "You know what? We know better than God what's good for us." Really? Really? Don't you think the one who designed us knows us better than we know ourselves and what's good for us and isn't. Again, that'd be like my broken down car. If my broken down car could talk and said, "You know what, Scott? I know that the people who designed me said that you need to put oil in me, but you know what? I don't like oil. I like root beer. So, could you put root beer in me instead? I know better. I know what's better for me. I know better what's good for me than those people who designed me."

Well, that wouldn't work for the car and it's not working for us. Just look around: racism, war, poverty, strained relationships we have with coworkers, children, spouses, neighbors that we're just sure is all their fault, can't have anything to do with us, right? To repent means to say, "Jesus made me. He knows better than I do what will make me thrive, so I'm going to follow Him. I'm going to do what He says to do from now on." And one of the best ways to know what He tells us to do is to read the Bible, which is why we're doing this. One reason, not the only reason, but one reason we're doing this Bible reading plan.

Because what you will find in the Bible on almost every page is that Jesus loves you just as you are, not as you should be, period, full stop, no caveats, terms and conditions, if, but, and, footnotes, no fine print, no fast talking disclaimer at the end of the ad. Jesus loves you just as you are and there's not a darn thing you can do about it. And, not but, and at the same time loves you so much not to leave you the way he found you, but to call you to turn around and become new in him. And the Bible is most helpful when it tells us what we do not want to hear because we are really good at just assuming that what we want must be what God wants. I've shared with you before, I have had so many people look me in the eye, people who are having an affair, cheating on their spouse, look me in the eye and say, "I prayed about it and God told me it's okay because He wants me to be happy."

He said no such thing. God said no such thing. See, if all we hear, if we never hear Jesus tell us something that we do not want to hear, it's not Jesus we're listening to. He made us. He knows what will make us thrive. His ways are best. So, He calls us to repent. And the reason we can repent is we know that when we do, we'll be met with grace and love and mercy and kindness if we just admit it. But so often we don't admit it because we are

so terrified that people are going to think we're a bad person or we don't want to feel guilty or miserable and all of that. So, we deny our sin even to ourselves we deny it or we try to hide it. We don't repent, we repaint. Paint over it. Look at all my good stuff. I'm only going to show you the good stuff. Don't look at the bad stuff about me. But it's not working.

We still feel shame. We still feel guilt. So, how about we go a different direction? Jesus compared sin to being sick. Sick people can only get better if they admit they're sick and that they need a doctor. And if we really understand the deep, deep love God has for us, we will not be afraid to admit our sin because we'll be met with nothing but grace and love and kindness. So, in the words of a 21st century philosopher, Beyoncé, "This ain't Texas, ain't no hold'em. So lay 'em down, down, down, down." Lay your cards down and admit your sin and you'll experience the grace of Jesus.

So, action step for this week, two things. First, join in the Bible reading plan of Mark to hear His love for you as well as His commands that will make you thrive. And if you didn't get it last week, you can pick up the reading plan in the lobby today. It's also on our website. The sticker charts are also out there, because we know how much you like sticker charts, so they're out there. And then second, pray two things, "Jesus, help me experience Your unconditional love." And then second, pray, "Jesus, tell me something about me that I do not want to hear so that I can repent and be whole." In that order. Because it's only when we experience His love, that repentance is not about feeling guilty and miserable, because that's not what it's about. But when we experience His love, it's about looking forward to who we can become in Christ. And as you pray, leave space and time to hear those thoughts that maybe aren't your thoughts, but come from God.

I've shared with you before that, after my first wife left me, I didn't tell anybody. Didn't tell my parents, friends, didn't tell anybody, but I've never told you how that began to change for me. So, a month after my first wife left me, she and I were supposed to come here to Seattle for the summer to live with a family who had been really great mentors to me for a number of years. I lived with them one year when I was an intern at University Presbyterian Church right out of college. And then I just returned to live with them many summers after that, when I was in graduate school, I'd come back here for the summers and I would live with them.

But this summer, because my first wife had left me, it was just me this time. And I told this family that my first wife was in Europe for the summer, which was true. She was. I just didn't tell them about the part how she wasn't coming back to me. Because while mostly in my mind I was blaming her: she left me, it's her fault, it's not my fault, it's her fault. Deep down, in a way that I had not yet even admitted to myself, I knew. I knew I had skin in this game. I had neglected her. I had been self-absorbed. I only paid attention to her when I wanted something from her. And deep down, in ways I couldn't even acknowledge it, I felt shame. I was embarrassed. And that's why I didn't tell people.

Well, one night after dinner, when their kids had left the table, this couple stayed at the table with me, kind of like how Jesus ate with Levi. And the husband said, "Scott, what's going on? Where's Lisa?" And there was something in the tone of his voice that assured me of two things. First, if I told them, I would not be judged, I would only be loved. And second, neither would they say, "Oh, it's okay. You're the innocent victim here. It's all her

fault. You did nothing wrong." Because as much as we want people to tell us that, it's not love. Because if you really love me, you're going to want the best for me, which would include wanting me to turn away from hurtful behaviors and move in a different direction toward God's best for me. And that's what repentance is.

So, I told them and they were incredible. The way they responded, I knew that I was loved, I wasn't judged. I knew that and, not but, and at the same time, somewhere in that conversation, the husband said to me, "Scott, this is a failure on your part. And God is going to use it and God's going to use it to grow you and show you a better way and you're going to become a better person." Which also felt like love. And it eased the pain because now I wasn't alone in it. And they gave me a vision for my future of who I could become and the good things God could do with me. And telling them was one of the first times in my life when what I knew about God's love in my head got to my heart, and I experienced Jesus' grace and truth that sets me free.

This is the good news. This is the gospel. Jesus says to you and me, "No matter what your record, no matter what you've done or haven't done or has been done to you, no matter how much shame you feel, no matter how stained you are, no matter how dirty your uniform gets in the game of life, I love you just as you are, not as you should be. Full stop. And your sin does not cancel My plans for you. Your sin does not cancel My love for you and I am going to take you and I'm going to lead you from here and make you more like me." There is a cure that makes the wounded whole. There is a cure that heals the sin-sick soul and His name is Jesus.

So Jesus, thank You so much. It is Your kindness that leads us to repentance. And so, Lord, we bring to You our sin and we agree with You that it is sin and we lay it at Your feet and ask that You make Your forgiveness for us feel real. And Lord, we repent. We want to go the other way. We want to go Your way. So, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, help us to do just that. Jesus, You are a good God, and thank You that we can come to You in honesty and know that we will be only loved and made new in Your name, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Why do you think Jesus called Levi (later Matthew), a despised tax collector who forced his fellow Israelites to pay inflated taxes, to be one of his disciples? Why pick someone so despised and crooked?
- Reading both Mark and Luke's account of the same story, how would you describe Jesus' approach to Levi? Permissive? Punitive? Something altogether different than either, and if so, what?
- John 1:14 says that Jesus came full of "grace and truth". Grace for our sin, but truth about our sin. Are you more of a grace person or a truth person? What is important about each?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.