September 8, 2024 Brad Barrett

**Mark 2:13-22**

**Jesus, Friend of Sinners**

Last week in my daily morning reading of the Bible, I read a remarkable and shocking story. A story of great evil by a man, and of great mercy by our God.

The setting is about 650 B.C. It’s about a boy named Manasseh—his father, the king of Judah, dies. (Judah is a tribe of Israel.) Manasseh is then crowned king. And he grows up to become one of the most wicked kings of the people of Israel in biblical history.

Let’s read an excerpt from the story.

*2 Chronicles 33:1–13 CSB Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the Lord’s sight, imitating the detestable practices of the nations that the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites…*

*He passed his sons through the fire in Ben Hinnom Valley. He practiced witchcraft, divination, and sorcery, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did a huge amount of evil in the Lord’s sight, angering him…*

*Manasseh caused Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to stray so that they did worse evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites…*

*So the Lord brought against them the military commanders of the king of Assyria. They captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze shackles, and took him to Babylon.*

Manasseh was receiving the just and righteous punishment from God that he deserved.

But read what happened next:

*When he was in distress, he sought the favor of the Lord his God and earnestly humbled himself before the God of his ancestors. He prayed to him, and the Lord was receptive to his prayer. He granted his request and brought him back to Jerusalem, to his kingdom. So Manasseh came to know that the Lord is God.*

Few men in the OT are as evil as Manasseh. If you want a poster child for unspeakable darkness and depravity, this man is the one. His behavior is shocking. Killing his own sons as sacrifices to his gods, which are really demons.

But more than being shocked by Manasseh’s sins, I am shocked by God’s mercy. The Lord was merciful, willing to forgive one of the more wicked men in biblical history and bringing grace and a measure of restoration to his life and to the nation of Israel.

This story connects us to the first of two short stories we are going to read this morning.

We are in Week 6 of a sermon series reading through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, written by his disciple named Mark.

Our first story deals with sinners. People who are living lives in rebellion against God…not unlike King Manasseh’s…but God has mercy on these sinners just like he did towards the ancient king in Israel.

**Passage**

**Mark 2:13–17 (CSB)**

**13** Jesus went out again beside the sea. The whole crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.

**14** Then, passing by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, “Follow me,” and he got up and followed him.

**15** While he was reclining at the table in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who were following him.

**16** When the scribes who were Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

**17** When Jesus heard this, he told them, “It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

First, some background and details.

Levi in verse 14: When we compare this story to Matthew’s gospel account, it seems that Levi is another name for Matthew, one of the Twelve Apostles.

More important than this, though, is that Levi and many others….the emphasis is on “*many*”…are tax collectors.

Why is this important, and even shocking, that Jesus would associate with tax collectors?

For some historical background, tax collectors in those days were much different than an IRS agent in the United States.

* Typically people like Levi collected more tax than they were due, so therefore they were extortionists and thieves.
* Most tax collectors in those days were Jews working for the oppressive Roman government, i.e., Gentiles, so they were “unclean” to the religious Jews. Essentially, tax collectors were unholy, and they were working for the enemy. Perhaps this would be similar to World War II days in Europe when people, say a citizen of France, became collaborators and informants for the Nazis. Both during and after the war, those collaborators were despised and considered traitors.
* Generally Levi and others like him were considered outcasts from society. They were so hated and untrustworthy that they were disqualified to be a judge or witness in a courtroom. They were not considered reputable.
* Also, they were considered a disgrace and a shame to their families.

All of this made them highly contemptible to the broader Jewish community, and especially to the religious leaders. And they are lumped in with another group of unwanteds: “sinners.” Altogether, this group of people are outcasts. Unloved. Unwanted. Even despised.

So that background is helpful when we read this short passage. For Jesus to fraternize and dine with such outcasts of society was shocking. And worse, it was scandalous.

The scribes (teachers of the law) were part of the religious party of Jews called the Pharisees. While the Pharisees knew the Scriptures very well…they memorized and studied the Bible…they were generally a proud and disobedient group. Their religion was only on the surface, not from the heart.

So to them, this Jesus who only recently appeared on the scene claims to be religious, even sent from God—how dare he fraternize with these outcasts from society! Surely he will become spiritually and ceremonially unclean—UNHOLY—by mere association!

It’s difficult to know how to compare these tax collectors and sinners to today. Perhaps it would be like Jesus having dinner with drug addicts, gang leaders, and prostitutes.

How many of us would be shocked if one of your pastors ate at a local restaurant with a group like that?!?!

Not only is Jesus dining with these sinners and outcasts of society, he is friends with them. Jesus is friendly toward these sinners. Let that sink in: Jesus, the Son of God Almighty, the Creator of all things, and who is holy and pure and hates sin….this Jesus is friendly toward sinners.

Doesn’t that seem counterintuitive, and even wrong?

It’s important we reflect on this moment in history.

**What is our view of Jesus?**

Do we see him as friendly toward sinners? If so, what do we mean when we say, “Friendly?” Does that mean to us that he is very permissive, like a spoiler grandfather who lets his grandchildren get away with murder? Or perhaps our view of Jesus is someone who is constantly angry? Yelling at demons and Pharisees?

We see here in Mark 2 that Jesus is friendly. Kind. And to people we would not expect. To sinners. Outcasts. People who are unwanted and shamed, on the fringe of society, too sinful for religious circles.

Jesus invites the lowly, but what does he invite them to? In the doctrine of our modern-day, American culture, perhaps we think Jesus invites them to have a better self-image. And to feel better about themselves because they are amazing unto themselves. Or we think he invites them to feel strong, not weak, because within themselves they are strong. Or we may wonder if Jesus invites them to feel OK about their sin, to be content with evil and actually to glory in their sin. Their sexual sin. Their idolatry. Perhaps we think Jesus says, “Hey, who am I to judge you for your sins? You do you. Whatever makes you happy.”

Are such things what it means that Jesus is friendly toward sinners? No, not at all.

So in what way is he friendly?

In vs. 14, what does he say to Levi? “*Follow me*.” Follow me.

To the weak, the outcast, and the sinful he invites them to himself to follow him. He invites them to himself. To follow him. Walk with him. Trust him. He invites them to be cleansed by him. To find freedom in him. To find their identity in their Creator. To glory that they know the most important, glorious, beautiful, famous Person in the world.

Look again at vs. 17. Jesus says, “*The sick, not the healthy, need a doctor. I came for sinners…for those who are spiritually sick.”*

Doctors today don’t spend 12 years in training to help healthy people. They train to help the sick. Those with broken bones and appendicitis and cancer and heart disease. And the clinics and hospitals that employ them advertise and say, “If you’re sick, come and see us. We’ll heal you.”

Jesus invites the people to COME as they are, but not to STAY as they are. Jesus came as the Great Doctor of the Soul, not primarily to heal bodies (though he surely is able), but to save people unto eternal life.

A few weeks ago, we read in Mark 1:15-16, Jesus said, “*The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news… Follow me.*”

Repent! Turn from the disease deep within your soul…disease called sin. And follow me. Walk with me.

This is the gospel that Jesus proclaimed and so we proclaim.

**Application**

What does this mean for us?

Some of us in this room—we identify easily with the tax collectors and sinners. We are outcasts. We feel alone. Misunderstood. Mistreated. We feel dirty. Broken. Ashamed. We feel hopeless to ever become truly clean and whole and accepted. If this is you, Jesus speaks to you, “Come to me. Dine with me. Walk with me. I want to be your Friend. I am the Great Physician of the Soul. Let me make your whole.”

Others of us here this morning…though we might not want to say it out loud…we identify with the Pharisees. We don’t see ourselves as needy. In fact, deep down we think we’re better than others. We know it’s not very Christian to even think this, but we look down on all the sinners out there. Whatever our category is for “*bad sinners,*” we’re grateful we are not one of them. We think, “I don’t need a spiritual doctor. I’m healthy. I’m in good shape. Only those who are spiritually lazy and overweight need a doctor. If only they could be like me!”

To those of us who may be like that, plain and simple, we are missing out on Jesus. We are missing out on the joy and the love that comes from Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. We are missing out on being found in him, finding glory in him and from him, finding a forgiveness and strength and hope that will never fade….never fade with time and age and loss of memory and strength. We are missing out on an identity with God that brings a peace and joy that actually gets better and better as the years go on, even into our last days on earth as an old man or woman.

Jesus invites us….calls us…even commands us to follow him. And when we look to him and dine with him, there we find the best healing of all: the healing of our souls before our Holy God.

Wednesday evening my wife and I attended the first week of a marriage class that Stonebrook offers called ReEngage. For some reason that day, I was feeling particularly introspective. Perhaps a bit tax collector-ish. And I wondered, “Can I really be a great husband and love my wife like Christ loves his Church? Can Jesus really change me? Can he truly help me to love like he does, with great patience and kindness and humility?

In my introspection, I began reflecting on this very story in Mark 2. I thought about Jesus’ invitation to these sinners to simply follow him. And I thought, “Jesus invites me to himself. I don’t have to be the perfect husband first, and *then* come to Jesus. No, I come to him as I am. He will love me. He will eat a meal with me.

And then, as I dine with him, he will change me.”

On that day, I was greatly comforted and strengthened by this story of Jesus, who is friendly to sinners.

The love of Jesus is a transformative power to change us from the inside out. If we want good soul health, we will find it in Jesus. If we want good mental health, Jesus is our Source. If we need our guilt and shame cleansed, Jesus invites us to himself today. If we want to be recognized and known and accepted, you will never find a better Source than Jesus.

What this means for us is that we need to know Jesus better. We need to know him as he *truly* is.

How can we do this?

* Read the Gospel of Mark every morning. A chapter or a portion of a chapter. And read it 3 or 4 times. Study who Jesus really is.
* Come every Sunday and hear more about Jesus as we sing and preach about him.
* Talk about what you are learning at the dinner table, and ask good questions.
* Many of our Community Groups are weekly discussing the passage from the previous Sunday. So if you’re not in a Community Group, consider joining one.

In all such things, let us come to Jesus, in whom resides all authority and compassion to heal bodies, command demons, and to forgive sins. Let us come to Jesus, friendly to the outcasts and sinners, ready to bring light to the darkness within.

**Vs. 18-22**

Let’s read the next section.

**18** Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. People came and asked him, “Why do John’s disciples and the Pharisees’ disciples fast, but your disciples do not fast?”

**19** Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the groom is with them, can they? As long as they have the groom with them, they cannot fast.

**20** But the time will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

**21** No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new patch pulls away from the old cloth, and a worse tear is made.

**22** And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost as well as the skins. No, new wine is put into fresh wineskins.”

First, what is fasting in the Bible? Fasting is simply abstaining from food for some duration of time, typically for the purpose of focusing on God more, often accompanied by time in prayer and worship.

In the law of Moses—Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy—fasting was required only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Regular weekly fasting was not part of the law of Moses. But by the first century such fasting had become an important part of the practice of Judaism. Fasting had become a prerequisite—a manmade rule— of religious commitment.

It’s like saying, “If you’re a good Jew, you will fast…not as required in the Law on the Day of Atonement. No, if you’re a good Jew, you will fast all the time.” We will see throughout Mark’s Gospel, that the Pharisees over-valued their traditions and manmade rules and undervalued the actual Scriptures and issues of the heart.

This is important. The religious leaders focused primarily on external performance, not the heart. They figured, “As long as we follow our rules, it doesn’t matter what’s going on inside us. The pride, hatred, criticism, and other such qualities.”

The Gospel of Luke records a parable by Jesus that explains their pride:

*Luke 18:11–12 CSB The Pharisee was standing and praying like this about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.’*

He was doing some good things, but he was full of arrogance and self-righteousness.

Back in Mark 2, the implication in their question about fasting seems to be, “Jesus, what’s wrong with you? We can’t take you seriously if you don’t abide by the rules of our day.” But Jesus will have none of this. He won’t yield to the rules made up by man. He won’t yield to man’s pride and vain attempts at self-righteousness. He won’t focus on the externals all while neglecting the internal, the heart.

Jesus’ ways are not the religious leaders’ ways. So to explain this, He gives 3 metaphors or parables to make a vivid illustration: the bridegroom, shrunken cloth, old and new wineskins. His point is, we must not try to fit Jesus into *our* way of thinking, *our* preconceived ideas of what or who he is.

We must let Jesus be who He is. And follow him. Walk with him. Dine with him.

**Application**

What does this story mean for us today?

We must recognize how easily we can become like the Pharisees. We take something good, like fasting, and make it into a set of rules that becomes our hope for life. Rules about prayer, reading our Bibles, coming to this building and serving X times per week, how many times a week I should talk with non-Christian friends about Jesus, how much money I should give. Or perhaps even rules about which political party a good Christian should belong to.

We might think, “As long as I do these external things, I am righteous. Acceptable to God.”

Years ago I had a good friend who was incredibly generous with money. He was an example to me. But sometime later, I discovered that he had a secret life of sexual sin, and when that got revealed, he told me that the core reason for his generosity was because his guilt and shame was crushing him, and he was trying to find peace by doing more.

Generosity is a good thing, right? But not like he did it. He gave money not by faith and in love. He did it to seek self-righteousness. Instead, he should have come to Jesus. To repent, as Jesus called him to in Mark 1. And to follow Jesus, walk with him, dine with him. To look to Jesus as his Savior and his righteousness, instead of trying to save himself by his generosity.

Let us examine our lives: Do we have manmade rules that go beyond Scriptures…rules that we boast in? Rules to attempt to feel better—rules that attempt to ease the guilt and shame—rules that make us seem better Christians than others—when we fulfill them?

If so, we must cast them aside, come to Jesus and say, “Jesus, I don’t want to live for my own made-up rules…my vain attempts at self-righteousness. I want to receive you as you are. I want to follow you. Help me to humbly walk before you, to follow you, to worship you, and to love you. And if any religious practices like fasting and prayer and reading help me to follow you better, great. But help me to have my hope in you, not in my external practices.”

**Conclusion**

Let us seek to know Jesus as he really is.

We come from a variety of backgrounds that shape who we think Jesus is.

1. Some of us grew up in solid, godly Christian homes, and we were taught well who Jesus really is according to the Gospels.
2. Others of us know the right things in our heads, but in practice we’ve slipped into ways of thinking that diminish Jesus and elevate OUR attempts at self-righteousness like the Pharisees did.
3. Still others of us may have grown up in a family that never went to church. And our main understanding of Jesus is inconsistent, perhaps confusing.

No matter our background, let us give Jesus the dignity and honor he deserves by seeking to know him intimately. To know him in truth. To follow him like the tax collectors and sinners did. To let him be who he really is rather than trying to fit him into a box of our own imagination. He is our only Hope. And he is better than anything we can create or imagine.

Wednesday morning, I reflected back on a song we sang last Sunday, “He Is.” The chorus says,

He is

Hope for the hopeless

Rest for the weary

Help for the hurting

He is He is

Mending the broken

Bearing the burdens

All that you're needing He is

The song brought me great comfort Wednesday morning when I listened to it. So simple, yet so powerful.

He is. He really is the One we need. Jesus, Friend of sinners.

Let us let discover Him. And simply follow him. To know him. Love him. Obey him. And serve him.