

A Friend of Sinners (Part 2)

Mark 2:13-17

January 25, 2009

Tom Pennington, Pastor

Countryside Bible Church

I invite you to turn with me again to Mark's gospel as we continue our study of the life of our Lord through the eyes, really, of Peter as he through his young friend Mark helps us to see what transpired in those days when our Lord walked upon the earth. You know when you think about our own interaction in the world and Christians interacting with unbelievers as our Lord did. It's really interesting, if you read the New Testament, how there have been so many aberrations through the history of the church. Because the way Christians end up responding and interacting with unbelievers is so different from that of our Lord. Of course, the most extreme example, if you look back in church history, is monasticism where people withdraw themselves from the world in an effort to somehow be closer to God. Even today among evangelicals there is a call to a new monasticism, living communally with other Christians.

Now, for most of us, we're not interested in that, we're not planning to go that direction. We're not that disengaged from the world around us. But, the question I want us to begin with tonight is simply asking ourselves this question, what are our own flawed views about interaction with unbelievers? None of us are hermits. None of us are into the monastery or the nunnery. But what are our own flawed views? Let me just address a couple of them that are common among Christians.

Some believers see unbelievers as their spiritual enemies; especially when it comes to the issues of our time, the moral and social issues like abortion and homosexuality. And those are issues on which we should take a stand, on which we should speak because the Bible does. But remember, as we think about the issues, to disengage them from the people. Paul said in Ephesians 6, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood." Jesus in Matthew 13 said, "The enemy is the devil." People, even people who hold terribly flawed moral views are not our enemies. In fact, if you want a little contradiction to that view read Titus 3, where Paul says, look "remember that you used to be just like them, therefore show every consideration for all men."

There's a second flawed view, and that is that we need to entirely separate from unbelievers because their sinful choices and the influence that they can have on us might rub off. We'll

Available online at: www.countrysidebible.org

Copyright © 2009 Tom Pennington. All rights reserved.

Unedited transcript for personal use only.

somehow be tainted by that. We'll be influenced to evil, and so we must withdraw from them, not a monastic sort of way but into our little closed door Christian communities where we have very little interaction with unbelievers. But counter to that is Paul in 1 Corinthians 5, the Corinthian church thought that's what he meant when he said don't associate with immoral people and the list that he gives there in 1 Corinthians 5 and he said, "No, no you misunderstood. I didn't mean don't have anything to do with unbelievers who are involved in those things because then you would have to leave the world. Instead, I meant any so-called brother who's involved in those things."

A third flawed view is that we must not isolate ourselves from unbelievers, but we should dress and behave so differently that we stand out as believers. And here, by behave, I don't mean the fruit of the spirit, I mean external behavior. There's no indication that first century Christians dressed any differently than first century secular people except where modesty was involved. What this approach really does is alienate unbelievers and create a spiritual pride within the believers who hold to it.

Number four, as much as much of our time as possible should be spent with believers so there may end up being frankly and practically no time for us to spend with unbelievers. Well we just studied the great commission; just a couple of weeks ago, and Jesus made it clear that we have a mission. We are here for a mission. All the things we do with believers, we will do better in heaven; but the one thing that we need to do with unbelievers, we will not be able to do in heaven.

On the other extreme of this flawed sort of approach with unbelievers, are those who believe we must become exactly like unbelievers in every way, the language we use, the entertainment we allow, even if it's contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture in order to win them. All five of those views are contrary to the spirit and example of our Lord. And perhaps in no New Testament passage does that become clearer than in the one that we'll look at tonight. If you watch closely as we go through the passage tonight, you'll learn both the mindset you should have toward unbelievers as well as some very practical tips for how to reach out to them. Let me invite you to turn with me to Mark 2 and let me read beginning in verse 13.

"And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. As He passed by, He saw Levi, the *son* of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

And it happened that He was reclining *at the table* in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?” And hearing *this*, Jesus said to them, “*It is* not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

The enemies of Jesus Christ constantly criticized Him and one of their most consistent attacks was on the basis of the people that He had always around Him. People like Levi, or Matthew. People like Matthew’s friends that we’ll meet tonight. But the spotless and pure Holy Son of God seeks people like that to be His disciples, to be His friends.

The theme of this paragraph, the rather poignant theme of this brief paragraph is this; Jesus’ mission was to seek the repentance and salvation of sinners and to accomplish that mission, He purposely pursued them. That theme is obvious in the call of Levi the tax collector, it’s also obvious in the banquet that follows. Now the story of Levi unfolds in two distinct scenes. We saw the first scene two weeks ago, and it’s the sovereign call of an undeserving sinner. Matthew had been acquainted with Jesus through a number of ways in His ministry there in Capernaum.

Matthew was a tax collector at the strategic point of the international highway that crossed and the wharf that came off the Sea of Galilee. He collected customs. And Jesus walks up to him and in a moment of time confronts him with himself and says follow Me. Matthew in a moment of crisis is faced with a choice. Is he going to believe this One who claims to be the Messiah of Israel, the one who has the authority to forgive sins, who has done all of these dramatic miracles? Is he going to obey Him or is he going to continue in his occupation? And he makes that choice, he follows Christ.

Tonight, we come to the second scene and this scene occurs sometime later in Matthew’s house in Capernaum. The second scene is a supreme example of pursuing sinners, a supreme example of pursuing sinners. First of all, I want you to see that that was Matthew’s mission as it should be our mission. Notice verse 15, “And it happened that He was reclining *at the table* in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples....” Now, that translation could make it sound like this meal was just an accident, it just sort of happened. But that’s not the case at all as you’ll see in a moment. We don’t know when this meal

happened. It could have come on the evening of the very day that Jesus called Matthew, or it may have been a few days later. So, it may have been on the very night that Matthew came to believe in Jesus Christ, or it may have been shortly thereafter. We can't be sure, but whenever it happened, it certainly wasn't an accident that this meal occurred.

Luke tells us this, it says in Luke 5:29, "And Levi gave a big reception for Jesus in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other *people* who were reclining *at the table* with them."

It's interesting, the Greek word for "reception" here is used several in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Most of the time when it's used it refers to "a banquet" or "a feast". Luke actually calls it a "mega" feast; the Greek word mega, great, "a great" feast. It was a huge party, it was a sit-down dinner with all the trimmings, or more accurately, it was a reclining dinner, as we'll see in a moment with all the trimmings. That's just to give you a little feel for what was going on here, so you can appreciate the moment.

When you look at what happened with meals in the first century, most casual meals were eaten sitting down, as we do, but at low tables rather than our higher tables. Not so much in chairs but sitting on the ground with a small short table in front of you, those were casual meals. But on special occasions or for special banquets or feasts like this one, they reclined. And in a wealthy home like Levi's, there would have been a special room devoted to eating; a sort of ancient precursor to our dining room.

Typically, the tables in that room, that dining room which isn't what they called it, but that's its function, would have been arranged in a U shape and they stood, the tables only stood about 8 to 12 inches, maybe a little higher off the floor, so the guests, on occasion if it was a casual meal, would sit cross legged in front of that little table, or if it was a special event like this a banquet, they would recline. Around the table were pads or cushions or even in very wealthy homes, couches that were long enough for the entire body, and the couch would have laid at an angle to the table and the person would have reclined on their side on their left elbow. They would eat then with their right hand.

This, by the way, explains why there were hand-washings both before and after the meal because basically you served yourself from the serving bowl onto the plate in front of you, and you ate without utensils, you used your hands you used your bare right hand. In most Jewish homes there would have been a blessing said over the food. Matthew was irreligious so prior to his

coming to Christ, he may not have done that in his home, but certainly with Jesus there that would have happened. The main meals in the first century were at noon and in the evening. After the meal in that period of time there was typically a period of music in wealthy homes or extended conversation just as there is today. Meals where I grew up in the south in Mobile Alabama were two, three-hour events, not for the eating so much but for the talking, and it was very much like that in the first century.

Here's what it would have looked like, here's a rendering, the best I could find. This is a sketch that the artist has made of a first century wealthier Jewish home. You can see that there would have been an open inner courtyard. The roof is cut away so you can see into the rooms, but over the whole area except that center courtyard, there would have been hard layered dirt, a roof all the way around. You see in the very back the dining area, you can see there the low table, and this is a casual meal, so they're seated around it. If it were a more formal meal, there would have been couches. It may be because of the number of people Matthew invited. Many of the first century houses had large roof areas, and he may have actually converted a portion of that for this occasion, we just don't know.

It goes on to say in verse 15, "for there were many", there were these tax collectors and sinners dining with Jesus and His disciples "for there were many of them, and they were following Him." There were many tax collectors and sinners, and there were many of them who had a real interest in Jesus and who were apparently beginning to follow Him. And Matthew had invited them. Now Matthew had several reasons I think for throwing this party. Obviously, it is in one sense, as one writer says, a sort of spontaneous expression of his joy and having come to the knowledge of his Messiah, the forgiveness of his sins. He also wants to honor Jesus, notice it was a reception, Luke said, given for Him, that is for Jesus. In addition to that, and most important to our story, he wants his friends to meet Jesus his new Master. He wants them to come to believe in Jesus as well. But Jesus is not there as a sort of disinterested or uninterested observer.

Look at verse 15 again, because the pronouns in the first part of the verse can be confusing. Let me give you a different version of it here. "And it happened that He, that is Jesus, was reclining at the table in his, that is Matthew's house." We know that from the other gospel accounts. "And many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples." Now, you put that language together, and it appears that while dinner is in Matthew's house, and while in one sense Matthew is holding this or hosting this for Jesus, it's also true that Jesus is the real host of this feast; and this will become even clearer in a moment.

Now, you have Matthew on a mission; his mission to reach out to his former colleagues and friends, and he's invited them all to this feast. But as you would expect, there's always some nay-sayers, there's always the critic, those people born in the objective mood as they say, and they're there this time as well so there's a legalistic objection to what Jesus is doing. Look at verse 16, "When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors,"

We've met these men, the scribes before; they were those responsible for copying, teaching, and interpreting the Torah. And these scribes, most of them were members of the sect of the Pharisees, the strict, the legalistic branch of Judaism that wanted to make sure that there was no mix with any pagan culture, and they were very legalistic in their interpretation of the Old Testament.

They, the scribes, couldn't go into Matthew's house, or they would have been tainted. So, like a bunch of nosy neighbors, or like the homeowners' association police, they're sort of looking around through the door, through the window trying to discover who it is that's in there with Jesus. Maybe they waited until they started filing out, and you know with a mixture of sadistic glee and self-righteous horror, they see that the new Rabbi in town, the one who moved from Nazareth and has caused such a stir here in Capernaum, is eating with sinners and tax collectors. Now, for us, it's like well, what's the problem with that? You have to take yourself back in time. You have to think like a scribe.

He's thinking, first of all, the food they're eating is probably unclean food. Secondly, it was probably prepared in unclean dishes. Thirdly, it's in a house rendered unclean by the presence of those who were ceremonially unclean. The food probably was not properly tithed, they tithed you remember even their spices. He's hanging around with people who are moral reprobates. And perhaps most importantly for them, He was disobeying their own interpretation of the Torah, the law; because the Mishnah, the collective body of Pharisaic wisdom, that was compiled later, said certain things about this situation. Let me just give you a couple of quotes.

The Mishnah said, "He that undertakes to be trustworthy" in other words a Pharisee, one of the good guys, "may not be the guest of one of the people of the land." That was a derogatory expression, sort of the expression is the "ham arets", it's like the low life's. You can't hang around the low life's if you want to be accepted by God. It went on to say, "he who undertakes to be an associate," that is one of them, "may not be the guest of one of the people of the land nor may he receive him as a guest in his own raiment. It says, one of the six things inappropriate for

a scholar, “he should not recline at table in the company of ignorant persons, those who have not been trained in the knowledge of the law.” Let not a Pharisee eat a sacrifice of the am arits, the people of the land, the scum of the earth. This was the mind set of these people.

And so, in light of all of that, they come and say to the disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?” Now, the first question that comes to my mind here is why did they say this to the disciples? Why didn’t they say this directly to Jesus? Well, we really don’t know, but there are a couple of options. One is that they were just cowards who wanted to avoid the confrontation with Jesus, because they knew they would be bested. That seems unlikely.

Another option is that Jesus is still inside the house. The disciples are outside the house, and they can’t go in, so they are sort of trying to find out what’s going on and asking this of the disciples.

There’s another option that’s even more insidious, and that I think may play in, and that is, they are trying to undermine the disciples’ confidence in Jesus. Trying to sort of downplay this new Rabbi and help these ignorant fishermen see that, in fact, maybe He’s not worth following. Regardless of their reason, they immediately get to the heart of their concern. Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?

Tax collectors, as we noted last time were the lowest of the low. They were the dregs of first century Jewish society. Because they were irreligious, they couldn’t go into the synagogue. In fact, they were excommunicated from the synagogue. They were traitors to their own people. They were complicit with Rome, the foreign oppressors. They were extortionists and thieves. They bilked people out of money at huge interest rates. They made up taxes so that they could line their own pockets. They were dishonest. They were infamous in their moral lives. They were wild people in how they lived: tax collectors and sinners.

Now the word “sinners” could mean a couple of different things. It may simply mean those who fail to keep their interpretations of the law, or it may include those who were morally corrupt. I think both were involved. Why would He hang around those people? By the way, this second word “sinners”, the Mishnah says that sinners and here are a few categories of sin they group into this category of sinners. They’re gamblers, money lenders, those who raise doves for sport (anybody here raise doves for sport?), those who trade on the Sabbath year, thieves, the violent, shepherds, and of course tax collectors. But in Jesus’ mind these people were sick and needed a doctor, spiritually speaking. They needed to repent. So, Jesus is eating with them, and the

scribes are saying, “Why would He eat with these people if He’s, in fact, a Holy Man?” This was a major issue to them. And this became such a problem that it permeated their involvement with Christ. You see it. Let me just show you a couple of texts.

Turn over to Luke 7, Luke 7:34. Jesus is talking about this generation and their response to Him and He says you know John the Baptist, verse 33, this is Luke 7:33.

“... John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine,” [living a sort of ascetic life] “and you say, ‘He has a demon!’” [I,] the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

This became something that was huge to these religious leaders of Israel, verse 39, “Now when the Pharisee who had invited ... [Jesus] saw this, [woman who came in you remember to anoint Jesus] he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.’”

In Luke 15 you see the same spirit coming through, Luke 15:2, or look at verse 1.

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and [He even] eats with them.” Which was a sign in the first century of intimacy and companionship.

Over in 19:7, I just want you to see this, this keeps coming up, this is a major issue to these people. Luke 19:7, here you have Zaccheus and the story of Jesus going to his house and verse 7 says, “When they saw it they all *began* to grumble, saying, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.’” He’s the low life, what kind of Rabbi would do that? What kind of holy person would engage with those kinds of people? Morally corrupt.

There’s a temptation isn’t there for all of us to think like that? To distance ourselves from unbelievers and to criticize others who don’t? That was the Pharisaic response, the legalistic objection to what Jesus was doing. But I want you to go to verse 17 and see the biblical correction to their thinking, verse 17. “And hearing *this*,” [we don’t know if Jesus overheard the conversation, or if His disciples told Him, but hearing this Jesus speaks directly to the scribes, and Jesus is going to make the same point in two different ways. First of all, He’s going to use a

common-sense proverb that was well known in both secular and religious writings. He says,] “*it is not those who are healthy*” [literally the strong ones in the Greek text,] “who need a physician, but those who are [having badly,] sick....” Those who are bad off, is how we would say it.

It’s those who are bad off that need a doctor, not those who are strong. Well people don’t need a doctor. Sick people need a doctor. Here’s Jesus’ point, would you criticize a doctor for hanging around sick people? How could that doctor who’s so interested in wellness, go and hang around all those sick people? Hendrickson writes in his commentary,

When Jesus associates on intimate terms with people of low reputation, He does not do this as a hobnobber, a comrade in evil, like birds of a feather flocking together, but as a physician. One who without in any way becoming contaminated with the diseases of His patients, must get very close to them in order that He may heal them. [It’s what Jesus was saying. If I’m going to heal them spiritually, I’ve got to get close to them.]

The second part of His response is a clear-cut statement about His mission. Look at what He says, verse 17. “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Now there’re really two parts to that statement, and I want you to look at both of them. That second statement, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” First of all, I did not come to call the righteous. Now let me ask you a question, who are the righteous in that sentence? Who is He talking about? Who are the righteous who don’t need Jesus? Clearly the entirety of Scripture makes it clear that there is no such category. There is no body who is righteous. Romans 3 says, “there is none righteous” what, “no not one”. So, this has to be irony that Jesus is using. He’s saying there are some people who mistakenly think they are righteous. And Jesus said I didn’t come to help them.

He only helps those who are aware of their sin. The Pharisees thought they were righteous, and so, they needed nothing from Jesus, and Jesus didn’t come to help them. If you think you’re good enough; if you think you’re righteous enough; if you think you’re a good enough person to make it to God on your own, then listen, Jesus didn’t come for you. I did not come to call the righteous that is those that think they are.

I did come; notice the second part of that to call sinners. Everyone is a sinner. But Jesus came for those who know it, those who understand it about themselves, who’re aware of it. You remember the first beatitude, Jesus’ great sermon on the mount. What does He say? He says if you want to live the blessed life if you want to come into My kingdom, this was, those beatitudes

were like the path into the spiritual kingdom of Jesus Christ; if you want to come into My kingdom, here's the very first step. Blessed are the poor in spirit. The word He uses for "poor" there, there were a couple of different Greek words for poor. It's not the word for the sort of day to day poor who eke out a living who have work and manage to make ends meet. It's the word for "beggars". Jesus said you want into My kingdom, here's where it starts. You have to realize that you have nothing, that you are a spiritual beggar.

Most of us rarely see beggars. When I was in India a number of years ago, we traveled throughout the country of India, and there it was almost like being back in the first century because there is a begging caste, those whose parents purposely deform their bodies when they're young so that when they're older they can be more effective at begging. And as we would to some of the sites, up to some of the Hindu temples, I remember one in particular. It's graphic in my mind. There was a man sitting there, an older man whose body was the most misshapen body I've ever seen, and Chris Williams, my friend who was taking me through, told me that that had been done to him purposely. And there he sat. All he could do; all he could do was lift up his little cup and beg. Please sir, won't you help.

Jesus says you want into My kingdom, that's how you have to start in spirit. You have to realize you come to God with nothing. You come only able to do one thing from God and that is to beg, please won't You help. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners. The way in is to recognize that, to realize that.

By the way what exactly did Jesus come to call sinners to do? Well, here in Mark's gospel you go back to 1:15 you find His message, the first message that Mark records for us. This was what he said, ... "The time is fulfilled, ... the kingdom of God is at hand;" [My spiritual kingdom is here now, you want in, here's how you get in.] "repent [of your sin] and believe in the gospel."

There it is. Jesus said, repent and believe. Luke in his parallel account says that Jesus said this in its fuller form, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Jesus didn't condone the sin of these people. The Pharisees had it all wrong. He wasn't there to sort of enjoy their company without confronting them, and by the way, neither should we as believers. He considered them the spiritually sick who needed a doctor, the lost who needed to be found, and He came to call them to repentance and faith. That was His mission, and He made this clear to these Pharisees who objected to His interacting with sinners. Now, let me draw four powerful lessons from this episode in the life of Christ.

Number one, Jesus' mission was to seek the repentance and salvation of sinners and to accomplish that mission He purposefully pursued them. He went out seeking. Remember what He said, "I have come to seek and to save." I am on a rescue mission. I'm going to go seek these people who need to be rescued. William Lane writes,

Jesus' action here was actually more revolutionary than the scribes could imagine, because when Jesus shared a meal of fellowship with the tax officials and the common people, it was Messiah who was sitting with sinners. When Jesus broke bread with the outcasts, Messiah ate with them at His table and extended to them fellowship with God if they would repent and believe.

Jesus came on a mission. That's the lesson from Jesus' perspective, and we can thank God for that, can't we? Because we are the beneficiaries of that mission. If you're here tonight, and you've come to Jesus Christ, you know you're a beggar in spirit because that's the only way you get in. If you're a real Christian, you understand that, and so, you can rejoice that Jesus Christ came on a mission to pursue sinners because He pursued you.

There's a second lesson here. The invitation to the gospel of forgiveness in Christ is for sinners. Now that seems obvious, and yet I don't know how many times I've talked to people who would say something like this to me. Well you just don't understand what I've done; you don't understand the kind of person I am. Here's the good news. You're a sinner, you're a terrible sinner, you're the worst of sinners? The good news is Jesus came for you. If you realize that you are a sinner, that you are a spiritual beggar, that doesn't disqualify you; it qualifies you. Jesus' help is only extended to those who know they are sick; to those who know they need a doctor; to those who know that they are desperate and needy and beggars and hungry and thirsty, who know they're dying of hunger and dying of thirst. To them Jesus becomes the bread of life and the water that never stops.

The good news is if you've wondered because of the sinner you are, how Jesus would receive you if you were willing to turn from your sin and believe in Him? You don't need to wonder any more. It's answered in this passage. This is how Jesus would respond to you, the way He responded to Matthew and to Matthew's friends, the lowest of the low in that culture.

There's a third lesson. It's: we must follow both the example and the instruction of our Lord and pursue social interaction with unbelievers to seek their repentance. This point by the way is made even more strongly when you see how Jesus makes it in Matthew's gospel. I want you to

turn back to Matthew 9. Same story Matthew provides us with, but it gives us a little more of what Jesus said to the Pharisees in response to them. Matthew 9:12,

But when Jesus heard ... [their objection, their concern,] “Why ... [are you] eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” He said [to them,] “*It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means.*” [and He quotes from Hosea] “I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

You cannot imagine the slap in the face that that was to the scribes, because they used almost those exact words, “go and learn” to the ignorant, untaught people of the land when they were trying to teach them the Torah, the law of God. Go read the Bible is how we would say it. Jesus to these people who absolutely prided themselves on being knowledgeable of the Old Testament memorized large portions of it; Jesus says to them, “have you ever read the Bible? Go and learn. Be a student. Think about it.” And He quotes Hosea 6:6. Notice what it says, God says, “I desire compassion, and not sacrifice.”

Now that’s an overstatement, it’s a statement, a hyperbole like you have to hate your parents. He’s not saying he didn’t want sacrifice. God commanded sacrifice of Old Testament Israel. What He is saying is this. True compassion toward people is more important before God than religious, external celebrations, and practices. You think you are so spiritual with all of your little rituals and all of your sacrifices and your fastidiousness with all of those external things, but you’ve missed the big picture, go and learn. God wants compassion in the heart of people toward other people rather than religious externals.

Let me ask you a question. How are you doing on following the example of Christ in purposely pursuing social interaction with unbelievers to seek their repentance? Kenneth Hughes was right when he wrote,

Perhaps none of us espouse such Pharisaical beliefs. There isn’t one of us here who would join the Pharisees in saying, “Why would Jesus do that?” In fact, he says, we loathe those beliefs. But many of us live them out nevertheless. We come to Christ, and in our desire to be godly, we seek out people like us. Ultimately, we arrange our lives so that we are with nonbelievers as little as possible. We attend Bible studies that are 100% Christian, a Sunday school that’s 100% Christian, prayer meetings that are 100% Christians. We play tennis with

Christians. We eat dinner with Christians. We have Christian doctors, Christian dentists, Christian plumbers, Christian veterinarians. Even our dogs are Christian. The result is we pass by hundreds without ever noticing them or positively influencing them for Christ.” [Hughes ends by saying,] “None of us are Pharisees philosophically, but we may be practically.”

I admit that purposefully interacting with non-Christians for the purpose of reaching them with the gospel is initially uncomfortable. I’ve been there, I understand that. At times it still is uncomfortable. That’s especially true for people who were raised in Christian homes who never have really mixed with unbelievers, for those who have been Christians and a part of the church for the long time. But folks listen, there are three possible responses to unbelievers, and the first two are unacceptable for Christians. The first is isolation; the second is assimilation, where we assimilate their lifestyle and everything about them. And the third is mission, and that’s what should be happening.

Look for a moment back in Mark’s gospel chapter 2. I want you to just look as I go through, at the practical example Matthew sets in this story. Let me just give you some imperatives based on his example. Spend your own resources to buy friends for eternity, as Jesus said. Here’s Matthew, he’s using his money to fund a feast to reach his comrades, his colleagues with the gospel. Have you ever thought about ways you could do that? I have an acquaintance who literally did this. Who, as a Christian business man, would sponsor events, nice dinners where he’d invite his business colleagues and their spouses, and there would be someone there to present the gospel. And the dinner was free, and they were very effective in reaching people for Christ. That’s what Matthew did. Start with your own circle of friends and acquaintances. That’s what Matthew did, those people he knew. If you don’t know any, then find some. Use social interaction to create an opportunity to share the gospel.

Preaching magazine, a number of years ago, reported an incident from the reign of Oliver Cromwell. When Oliver Cromwell ruled England, the nation ran out of silver to mint its coins. And so, Cromwell’s soldiers reported to him that the only silver they could find in the country was in the great cathedrals. It was the silver in the statues of the saints. Cromwell reportedly said this, “We’ll melt down the saints, and get them back into circulation.” Maybe that’s what needs to happen to us. We need to be melted down, so we can get back into circulation. There’s a fourth lesson. This meal that Jesus had with these sinners, especially with Matthew and the others who really had become His followers, was a preview of coming attractions. The day is coming when Jesus the Messiah will sit down with sinners to whom He has extended

grace at a great feast, in the presence of His Father. You can read about it in Revelation. And in Luke 12 we're told that we will sit down with Christ at this feast prepared for sinners like us and Jesus Himself will serve us. That's grace. You see just a little of it at this feast thrown for these tax collectors and sinners. That's like a bird's eye view of what will one day be done on a grand scale. When sinners like us will sit down with Jesus, and He will forever be a friend of sinners. Not sinners still committed to their sin, but sinners called to repentance and redeemed. Jesus, what a friend for sinners. Are we?

Let's pray together.

Father, we are deeply moved by what we see in Christ. First and foremost because we are sinners, and we know it because You brought us to the place where we understand our own spiritual bankruptcy. And Lord, it thrills our souls to see Jesus respond to sinners like Matthew and like his friends as He did. We thank You, oh God, that through His Word and through His faithful followers, He has called each of us who are in Christ to repentance, and we have come. And now we are His friends. Father, we thank You as well for the message it sends to us.

Oh God, forgive us for living insulated lives, isolated lives. Forgive us for being communal in our approach to Christianity. Father, however awkwardly; however difficultly we do it, help us to reach out to branch out to befriend unbelievers, to have meals with them, to reach into their lives with the goal of sharing the good news of Christ and calling them ultimately to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Father, thank You for Jesus Christ. Thank You for His mission to seek and to save that which was lost, because we were. And we'll always praise You and love You for that grace even when we sit down with You and with our Lord around the great feast in eternity celebrating His goodness. God, we'll never forget the grace You have shown us.

We pray it in Jesus name, Amen.