

A Friend of Sinners (Part 1)

Selected Scriptures

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Well, good evening. And welcome to “Sunday Evening Online.” I’m excited about tonight and the next couple of weeks as we look together at one of my favorite passages in the gospels. Before we begin, let’s pray together and then we’ll turn to God’s Word. You pray with me.

Father, we are so awed by Your grace in Jesus Christ. I pray that tonight as we turn to the gospel record and as we see Him in all of His beauty that You would cause us to love Him more. And cause us to be more committed to follow Him even as we listen to Him call another one of the disciples to Himself. Lord, I pray that You would change us as a result of our study of this passage together tonight and next week and the time before us. So we just ask for Your spirit to open our minds and hearts to understand the truth, to receive the truth, to be changed by the truth, and we ask that most of all You would help us to see in fresh and profound ways the loveliness, the beauty of Jesus Christ our Lord in whose name we pray. Amen.

Well, I do want us tonight to look together at a passage that as I mentioned is one of my favorites and I want us to consider the topic from this passage, *A Friend of Sinners*. And that’s really a summary of the passage that we’ll consider together. I want us to turn to Mark chapter 2 but before we actually read the text together, let me give you some context.

I think it’s important for you to understand that first century Judaism was completely bereft of any concept of grace; at least a free unconditional grace. It was so permeated by merit and worthiness and effort that they just didn’t have a category for the kind of grace that the Scripture describes. In fact, Alfred Edersheim, one of the great Jewish scholars wrote:

Rabbinism knew nothing of a forgiveness of sin, free and unconditional. Inward repentance only arrested the degrees of justice. That which really put the penitent in to right relationship with God was his good deeds.

In a classic passage from the writings of the rabbis you have an explanation of this. Basically, the rabbi said if there was a breach of a positive command, that is something you were supposed to do, the Scripture commanded you to do, you failed to do it, then you had to give immediate and persistent prayer in any hopes of forgiveness. If on the other hand there was a breach of a prohibition then there had to be repentance and it couldn't ultimately be resolved until the Day of Atonement. If it was an intentional sin, so now were' talking about something that you knew was wrong, you chose anyway to do, then there had to be repentance, it had to be dealt with on the Day of Atonement and you had to in some way suffer, in a temporal way, for the fruit of that sin. And if there was a willful profaning of the name of God the only resolution, the only hope of dealing with that was death. It was that cultural context to which we have to read Mark chapter 2.

I invite you to take your copy of God's Word and turn to Mark chapter 2 and let's look together at verses 13 to 17:

[And He] Jesus 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."

Now you have to understand where this fits in the flow of Mark's gospel. This begins the opposition to Jesus. In fact beginning in chapter 2 verse 1 and running through chapter 3 verse 6 you have a series of encounters, five narratives in which there is growing opposition to Jesus. As a result of these interchanges Israel's leaders become antagonistic, they become hostile, even eventually murderous towards Jesus. And this antagonism really was the result of or was expressed because of several things.

First of all, in the first twelve verses of chapter 2, Jesus claimed to forgive sins. You remember with the paralytic He said, "Son, your sins are forgiven you." And in that context they immediately responded to Him with animosity. In the passage we're going to consider Jesus' companionship with sinners was a huge issue in their opposition. In chapter 2 verse 18 through verse 22 Jesus unwillingness to keep their traditions and then beginning in chapter 2 verse 23 and running through chapter 3 verse 6, Jesus' violation of their Sabbath regulations as you know, was a huge issue as it unfolded through the life of Christ and the ministry of Christ. So it was out of these circumstances that the opposition to Jesus' came. But the problem that they had in the text we just read together was one for which they constantly criticized Him. It was one of their most constant attacks and it had to do with the people that Jesus surrounded Himself with. In fact keep your finger here in Mark chapter 2 but turn back to Matthew chapter 11. Matthew chapter 11 and I want you to see Jesus' response to this. Matthew 11 and notice verse 16 [to 20]:

Jesus said, "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to other children and say 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'" The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, 'Behold a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Their criticism in that passage of Jesus was partly true and partly false. Obviously their insinuation that Jesus was a sinner like those He hung around was absolutely false. He was perfectly holy. But it was true that He was a friend of sinners. And here's the really good news. He still is. Jesus is

still a friend of sinners. This magnificent story in Mark 2 is one of my absolute favorites because like Paul and maybe like you, I feel that I am the worst of sinners. Well, welcome to this passage because so was Levi and so were his friends. But the holy and harmless one, the spotless and pure Son of God sought them out to be His disciples and His friends. So let's look at this story together.

The story of Levi unfolds in two very distinct scenes. We're going to look at one of those scenes tonight and we'll begin to look at the next one next week, Lord willing. So the first of these scenes has to do with the sovereign call of an undeserving sinner. The sovereign call of an undeserving sinner. We see this unfold in verses 13 and 14. Notice verse 13 begins, "And He went out again by the seashore." You remember that just before this in the twelve verses that begin chapter 2, Jesus heals the paralytic. You remember the four friends bring their friend and let him down through a hole in the roof into Jesus' presence. Jesus forgives his sins and then heals him. And after this occurred Jesus went out by the seashore from the confines of a house that was too crowded to even enter and Jesus went for a walk by the shore of the sea of Galilee. He probably initiated that as His sole purpose but it's so common for Jesus to want to be in that environment because He loved being out in creation. It's ironic, isn't it? He loved being in the middle of the creation that He as the eternal Son of God had been the agent in creating. But He wasn't able to enjoy the solitude and the peace of that place very long. Because the text goes on to say, verse 13, that "... all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them."

The verbs in that sentence both implied this happened in sort of recurring waves. People kept coming to find Him and to hear Him and He kept teaching them as they came. This is how His day unfolded. At some point between the waves of people verse 14 says, "and as He passed by He saw Levi." That's interesting who this man was. By the way, these are a couple of pictures I wanted to show you, just of the area where this is unfolding. [shows pictures on screen] You can see this is an aerial view of what is today left of Capernaum, the city; there's some ruins there of the synagogue and some other structures. And you can get just an idea for Jesus' walking by the seashore, having taken a break from the ministry in the house. And as He is on His walk through the city of Capernaum, He saw Levi as He passed by. Now, this man Levi, he's called that in Mark and Luke. Matthew in his gospel calls himself not Levi, but Matthew. But both Levi and Matthew refer to the same person. We know that because Matthew's gospel, reporting what's clearly the

same account that we have here in Mark 2, calls this man Matthew. When the names of the twelve are listed Levi doesn't appear but Matthew's name does and Matthew is the only one called the tax collector. So putting all that together it's very clear that we're talking about the same person here. So who is this man? We don't know much about him but let me just share with you what we do know.

What we do know is quite interesting. We don't know if he always had two names, both Levi and Matthew, or if like Peter, Jesus changed his name from Levi to Matthew after He called him. If He did it makes for quite an interesting play on words. Because Levi, the man who took so much from so many as a tax collector, becomes Matthew which means "the gift of God." The man who stole from God's people becomes God's gift to God's people. We also know that he was Jewish. Both of his names clearly are Jewish. We know that he lived in and perhaps was from the town of Capernaum. It's likely because of the size of the town that he knew the other four disciples who had lived in Capernaum. Andrew and Peter and James and John and perhaps even, and this is awkward, but probably even collected taxes from them. Verse 14 also tells us that he was the son of Alphaeus. Now another one of the apostles is also called the son of Alphaeus, James the Less. They are unrelated and are not the same person. And it's very unlikely they were brothers.

So, one other thing we know about Matthew that's not as important and that is simply that he knew several languages. He knew Hebrew, he knew Greek, he knew Aramaic. We know that from the gospel that he wrote and so we know that this man had received a decent education. But the most significant thing about this man comes in verse 14. Notice what it says: "He was sitting in the tax booth." Literally *at* the tax booth. Matthew was sitting in or near the entrance of the tax collector's booth because he was a tax collector. Now for you and me with our knowledge of the Scripture we know a little bit about that. We know that's not good. We know that's not a label you want. That's not an occupation you wanted in the first century if you were Jewish. But to fully appreciate what Jesus is about to do you need a little background. Let me give you a little understanding of the Roman taxation system.

You see Rome had created a vast empire and she needed money to fund that empire. To fund her armies, to fund government salaries, road maintenance, public works, the support of the imperial

household, the dole of grain for the Roman masses. And so to help all of that take place the Roman had created a system to collect money from all the provinces that they controlled. This system was called “tax farming.” It was essentially a network of tax franchises. At the very top of the food chain were the Roman Equestrians. These were noblemen who bid for the right to collect taxes over entire provinces. The Roman Senate determined a fixed amount that was due from each province and then they sold the right to collect that amount to the highest bidder. They allowed the winning bidder then to not only collect the taxes but to keep whatever surplus was collected. This Equestrian then would subdivide the province that he won in the bidding process and he would make similar arrangements with the “publicani” as they were called or the chief tax collectors which is exactly what Zaccheus is called in Scripture. And then those chief tax collectors would be over districts within that larger province and they sold the rights for cities and then within cities they would be subdivided and so forth. So it was a system of larger and smaller tax franchises. You can imagine that there was within this framework a large opportunity for all kinds of extortion and stealing.

Well there were two categories of taxes that Romans had to pay. The first were “fixed” taxes. This included a poll tax; you paid a certain amount of money per head in a certain age category. There was a ground tax; one tenth of all the grain that you harvested, one fifth of the wine and the fruit that was grown. You paid this partly in kind but partly you converted your crops to money and paid it money. And then you also paid an income tax of one percent. This was collected, this portion of the taxes, was collected by a general tax collector. Now that’s only half of what was done. In addition the other category of taxes had to do with “customs and duties.” And this was far reaching. This section of it there was a use tax. You say, a use tax on what? Well, on axles, on wheels, on pack animals, on pedestrians, roads, highways, admissions to markets, uses of bridges, road, dams, ferries, harbors and on and on the list went. So there was this use tax as you traveled around the roads. There was also import and export taxes and there was a sales tax. This was on normal items between 2.5% and 5%. On luxury items it could be up to 12.5%.

A tax collector in this category, by the way, was collected by a customs house official, but a tax collector in this category could force a traveler to unload all of his pack animals, search everything that he had including even his private correspondence, and then this custom house official could

charge whatever he decided to charge. This was the kind of tax collector that Matthew was. Now the main centers for customs and duties in Israel were three cities: Caesarea by the Mediterranean, Jericho coming across from the Gentile areas to the east, and Capernaum. Based on the size of Matthew's home we'll see next week in verse 15, Matthew was a very healthy man and the reason for that is because he had managed to land a very lucrative spot for the customs and duties business. He was in a very strategic location for several reasons.

First of all it was in the city of Capernaum which was a decent sized city in the ancient world. Population between 1,500 and 10,000 residents. It was on the north side of the Sea of Galilee so as boats came across to either deliver their wares or to take them to other parts of the Sea of Galilee, he was there. There was a major harbor there with a promenade and a seawall, even piers that extended out 100 feet into the lake. In fact, here's what the modern harbor of Capernaum looks like. [shows picture] That gives just a feel for the kind of thing that would have been true in Matthew's day.

But in addition to all that it was also strategic because it was on a main international highway that ran from Egypt to Damascus. Capernaum straddled that international highway. Went from Egypt all the way to Mesopotamia. And so it was a crucial junction and all the traffic going through there, Matthew could stop them and charge them what he chose. Here's just a little map [shows picture]. The red arrow points to Capernaum and then you see the roads here in red, is that major international highway and it came right through the city of Capernaum and right through Matthew's tax stand where he was free to collect the duties.

In addition one other thing that makes his location strategic is that it's at the border between Galilee and Decapolis. Between the territory of Herod Antipas and Phillip the Tetrarch. And just like between states in the U.S. you have all of the points to weigh trucks and to collect duty, in the same way this was true as you went from one area of the ancient world to another. So Matthew was very well strategically located for economic prosperity.

What about his character?

Well Matthew was not religious at all. In fact when someone like Matthew became a tax collector he was excommunicated from the synagogue. He was also considered a traitor to his own people because he had become complicit with the foreign oppressors, with the army that had taken control of the land of God, the land of Israel. He was also dishonest; tax collectors were assumed to be. They were often extortionists. If a person couldn't pay then they would loan the money at high rates, like a loan shark, like the mafia they attracted a criminal element of thugs and enforcers.

The Jewish Mishna prohibited Jews from taking *any* money from tax collectors because it was assumed that it was the equivalent of robbery because they had unlikely gotten the money dishonestly. In fact, they were also disqualified from being judges or even from being witnesses in court. Jews were allowed under the rabbinical thinking to lie to tax collectors with impunity. That's just how bad they were. They were utterly immoral. They engaged in everything that their ill gotten gains could buy. They were infamous for their wild lives. In fact, they were so bad that the Talmud lists customs officials like Matthew as the moral equivalence of murderers and robbers. In an interesting turn, if the tax collector so much as touched your house, it became unclean and had to go through the process of ceremonial cleansing.

So you need to understand who Matthew was. He had become a pariah to his family, to his neighbors, to his nation. He'd gotten rich by extortion and bribery. That is the kind of man Matthew was, that's the kind of business he was engaged in, it's the kind of people he associated with, it's the kind of reputation that he had with people in his home town. Now with that background look again with me at verse 14. "And Jesus said to him, 'Follow Me.'"

Now it's unlikely that this call came out of the blue. Instead Matthew had probably been exposed to the truth about Jesus in a couple of ways. Through Jesus' previous ministry in Capernaum. Remember Jesus had made Capernaum His ministry headquarters. And so in that context Matthew had been exposed to that ministry over the time Jesus had been there in Capernaum, in a number of ways. He had undoubtedly heard about the call of some of the acquaintances he had there. He heard about Jesus teaching in the synagogue, of Jesus healing and casting out demons. Because His tax franchise was located on the main road headed out of Galilee he probably heard about Jesus' ministry in all the synagogues across Galilee. And Jesus had just before this incident healed

a paralyzed man in a house that was packed with people. So you can bet as they left that house word spread quickly around this city of Capernaum about what Jesus had just done.

He'd also been exposed to Jesus through Jesus' teaching there by the sea. It was right there by the stand that Matthew had, his customs stand, and in verse 13 it said Jesus had been teaching wave after wave of people. And undoubtedly there were tax collectors among the crowds who heard Jesus and possibly even Matthew himself. Now Jesus shows up at Matthew's place of business and gives him just one brief command: Follow Me. Follow Me. It's an imperative in the Greek text and it's the kind of verb that calls for ongoing action. We could translate it like this: "Become and continue as My disciple." For Matthew this was a call to salvation. In the gospels, "Follow Me", not always but frequently, is a synonym for saving faith. It means believe in Me to the extent that you are willing to turn from your current life of sin and submit to Me as your teacher and your Lord. Follow Me.

This was a crisis moment for Levi. But the crisis didn't last long. Notice verse 14 says, "And he got up and followed Him." Matthew at that moment made a radical break with his past. It reminds me of my own father who was a nightclub musician and of the night that he walked away from his bass fiddle and the big band era band that he was involved in and all the lifestyle that went with that. And he left that bass fiddle there and he walked away and he went home and he began to follow Christ. For Matthew, this was a radical step. You see if you were a fisherman and you left your boat, you could later come back to it. But if you were a tax collector and you walked away from your tax franchise there was no coming back. In fact Luke describes Matthew's commitment like this. Luke 5:28, "And he left everything behind and got up and began to follow Him."

You know I love this because it really is a perfect example isn't it, of salvation, of genuine salvation? Because you have the fact that Matthew heard the truth. Undoubtedly just like the apostles Paul his conscience was deeply disturbed when he heard the truth and he found himself drawn to Jesus, drawn to His teaching. And he's sitting there at his customs booth collecting taxes, perhaps even troubled by all that he's seen and heard. And he looks up and there's Jesus. He'd heard the truth, he'd been exposed to the truth. He also was called by Christ Himself to follow Him. That's how it always is. Jesus doesn't verbally call us like He did Matthew. Instead He calls

us through His Word, through His Word being taught. The Father calls us to Himself through the Scripture. That leads to his response. He responded in faith and repentance. He walked away from his life of sin, left it behind him, and put his full and complete confidence in Jesus Christ. That's true salvation.

Now don't miss the point of this story. Anyone reading this in the first century would have been left with just one overwhelming thought and it's this: there is no sinner beyond the reach of the grace of Jesus Christ. In fact, it's really hard to come up with a 21st century equivalent to what Matthew was. I mean you can be a drug dealer, mafia, gangster, terrorist, that's the category that Matthew fit. But Jesus reaches out and rescues even a sinner like that. It really reminds me of what Paul said about himself. Turn to 1 Timothy. First Timothy chapter 1 verse 13 [to 16]. This is what Paul writes:

... even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason... [Paul says] ... I found mercy... [here's why God saved me] ... so that in me as the foremost... [as the worst; I was a murderer of Christians] Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

Paul, like Matthew before him, was a powerful example of the reach of the grace of Jesus Christ. There's no one beyond the reach of the grace of Christ. I don't care who you are, I don't care what you've done, I don't care what you've become. If you will turn in faith and repentance to Christ like Matthew did on that fateful day, Jesus Christ will rescue YOU. He will make you new and He will make you one of His disciples.

Kent Hughes, in his commentary on Mark's gospel, relates a story about a huge block of marble that was dragged into the city of Florence. It was to be the next sculpture of the great sculptor Donatello. It had been cut from the famous marble quarries in Carrara. But this particular block of

marble contained a number of imperfections. So Donatello actually refused it and it lay on the grounds of that great cathedral unused. But one day another sculptor saw this flawed block of marble and decided that it would perfectly fit a sculpture that he intended to craft. And so for two years the sculptor worked on that damaged block. On January 25th in the year 1504 the greatest artists in Italy gathered to see that sculpture from that rejected block of marble. Botticelli, Leonardo DaVinci, they were all there. The veil was pulled away and the sculpture was immediately applauded as a great masterpiece of art. Today it's still considered to be a great masterpiece. It's Michelangelo's famous sculpture of David. You see, he saw that damaged block of marble but because of his great skill he saw beyond the flaws and saw what he could do with it, what he could make. That's exactly what happened that day in Capernaum. Jesus saw the terribly damaged life of Levi. All of it self-inflicted. But Jesus also saw what he would make. Not because of the material at all. But because of His own power and because of His own grace. Jesus didn't see Levi; He saw Matthew, an apostle who would write one of the four great records of his earthly life.

And in so doing Jesus illustrated for us all that there is no sinner beyond the reach of His grace. You see why I love this story and why you should love it too. Because we're all like Paul. We're all the worst. If you understand anything about your own heart that's your perspective. And the good news is Jesus is a friend of sinners. Not to leave them in their sin but rather to call them to Himself from their sin to follow Him. If you're in Christ celebrate that. Remember that. Love Him more. Follow Him more profoundly because of it. If you've never trusted Him then you need to, like Matthew, turn from your life of sin and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Join me as we pray.

Father, we are truly overwhelmed by this story of grace. And we are overwhelmed because it gives us hope, each of us. Lord, we understand that we are no better than Matthew. Our sins may have been different but in the end they were the same in culpability before you with the same result of eternal destruction in hell forever. But we thank You that Jesus Christ is a friend of sinners. And that just as He called Matthew to Himself He called us. Lord, we love You and we thank You and we pray that You would help us now that You have brought us into a relationship with Yourself to follow You each day. We have begun to follow. May we continue to follow every day of our

lives learning from You as our Lord and Teacher. Father it's in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray these things. Amen.

Thanks for joining us and have a great week.