

## **A Friend of Sinners (Part 2)**

**Mark 2:13-17**

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Well good evening, and welcome to Sunday Evening Online. It is a joy to be with you again tonight and to study an amazing episode from the life of our Lord. Before we get started, join me and let's pray together and ask for the Holy Spirit to give us insight into His Word. You pray with me.

Our Father, we are so grateful for our Lord Jesus Christ. We're grateful for the fact that You gave Him to us, not only, and especially, to die in our place. But Father, thank You for the life He lived, the life of perfection that teaches us so much about what it means to live a life that pleases You as one who has experienced Your grace. Lord, I pray that tonight you would open our eyes to see Christ, we would see Him in a fresh way, we would see Him interacting in ways that instruct us and give us open hearts. Lord, help us to be more in love with Him, to be more devoted to Him as a result of our study, and more committed to following Him. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we are studying together Mark chapter 2, one of my favorite stories from the gospels. I invite you to take your Bible and turn there with me. And as you're doing that, I want to begin by just reminding us all that there are ways that we distance ourselves from sinners that are so unlike our Lord. You know, I think, the most extreme example, of course, is those professing Christians who disengage from unbelievers by living apart from them—in monasteries. That was popular in the early days of the church, the early centuries of the church fathers. There were some who started that and, of course, through the era of the Roman Catholic Church, and it continuing to this day.

We may not be that unengaged, or disengaged, from unbelievers, but I'm afraid there are some flawed views about our interaction with unbelievers that are out there. Let me just remind you of some of those. You know, first of all, I think there's the mistaken view that: "They are our spiritual enemies," especially when it comes to some of the moral issues of our times and the social issues like abortion, homosexuality, gender issues, etc. While we strongly disagree,

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unbelievers are not the enemy. They're not the spiritual enemy. You know in Matthew 13, Jesus says the enemy is the devil in the parable of the tares. And, of course, Paul says in Ephesians chapter 6 that we do not wrestle "against flesh and blood." They are not our enemies. They're our mission field. But it's easy for us to begin to get that in our minds.

Another flawed view of unbelievers that I think we can have is: "We must entirely separate from them because if we don't their sinful choices and the potential influence that they can have on us and our families will be seriously detrimental." One verse that's often used to sort of make this point would be Psalm 1 verse 1: "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!" I preached through that passage, and it's important to understand that what the psalmist is saying is that the blessed man doesn't take the advice of the ungodly. He doesn't copy the behavior of the ungodly. And he doesn't intimately associate himself and connect himself to those who scoff at God and of the things of the faith. But it doesn't mean that we are not to have any interaction. Yes, we need to be careful, especially as we think about immature believers, we think about our kids. We need to exercise caution in what they're exposed to, but that doesn't mean no association with unbelievers. In fact, Paul says exactly the opposite in 1 Corinthians 5 where he says when "I wrote to you not to associate with sinners of all kinds, I was not talking about unbelievers because then you'd have to leave the world." So, he's not at all encouraging that.

Another view, and this isn't as common in our circles, but it's out there. "We should dress and behave in such a different way culturally that we stand out." In other words, the difference isn't our character; the difference is some sort of a cultural, whether it's how we dress or some other interaction, and that's not uncommon. If we meant character, then the answer's "yes." We're to live out the Beatitudes, and that alone makes us salt and light, Jesus says in Matthew 5. But first century Christians didn't dress any differently than those around them unless the issue of modesty is involved. But other than that, they wore what everyone else wore. And they culturally looked very much the same. What this approach really does, I think, is it alienates unbelievers and it cultivates spiritual pride.

A fourth flawed view of interaction with unbelievers is this idea that: "As much as possible our time should be spent with believers." And there's a lot of truth to that. But the other side of that isn't true. And that is, it's okay then if there's really no time that we have with unbelievers. Let's

be honest, we're all tempted here. I am. You are. But we must think about ways to engage with unbelievers. It is our mission. Matthew 28 reminds us, we're to go and to bring the gospel to bear to make disciples.

And then on the other extreme of these views is the view of some that: "We must become exactly like unbelievers in order to win some." Now all of those flawed views are contrary to the Spirit and example of our Lord. And I think in no New Testament passages is that clearer than in the one that we want to look at again together tonight. Because in Mark chapter 2 we learn both the mindset that we ought to have toward unbelievers, and we even learn practical tips for how to reach out to them. So, let's look at Mark 2 again. Mark 2 verses 13-17. You read along with me.

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."

I noted last time that the enemies of Christ were always criticizing Him, and one of the most common criticisms had to do with those He associated with—people like Levi and people like Levi's friends in this story. But the spotless, pure, Son of God actually sought out that very kind of person to be His disciples and to be His friends. There's a lesson in tremendous grace there, a lesson in hope for me and, I think, for you as well. The point of this paragraph is that Jesus' mission was to seek the repentance and salvation of sinners and, to accomplish that, Jesus actually pursued them. The theme is obvious in the call of Levi, the tax collector. And it's also obvious in the banquet that follows the call of Levi. So, just to remind you, the story of Levi unfolds in two distinct scenes. Last time we saw the first scene: "The Sovereign Call of an Undeserving Sinner" in verses 13 and 14. Verse 13 says, "He went out again by the seashore; and

all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them.” This scene takes place where the international highway that cut across Israel intersected just north, the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee, with the dock in Capernaum where the tax booth of Matthew was located. This shows you the location on the northwest corner of the sea, of the lake there of Galilee, and then here is a little closer up picture of Capernaum as it is today. In Jesus’ day, it would have been a more thriving city. But you get some idea of the feel of that area. In verse 14, the text goes on to say, “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.” As I pointed out last time, Matthew had undoubtedly heard about Jesus, perhaps even heard Jesus, because remember Capernaum, where Matthew lived and where he had his tax booth, was where Jesus had made His ministry headquarters. Jesus had done so much there in the city of Capernaum that unquestionably Matthew had heard about Him, had heard some of what He taught, and likely had even personally heard Him teach. It’s in that context, Jesus shows up one day and calls Matthew to salvation. He calls him to repentance and faith. “Follow Me!” And Matthew responded. He got up and followed Him. That is the sovereign call of an undeserving sinner. He was the worst of people as we uncovered last time, and yet Jesus calls him to Himself.

Tonight, we come to the second scene, and it occurs sometime later at Matthew’s house there in the city of Capernaum. The second scene we’ll call: “The Supreme Example of Pursuing Sinners.” “The Supreme Example of Pursuing Sinners.” The second scene begins with “A Disciple’s Mission” in verse 15. Notice what’s written there. “And it happened that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and with His disciples.” Now when we read that verse in the context of Mark’s gospel, it could sound like this meal just happened, kind of accidentally. Nothing could be farther from the truth. We don’t know when this meal happened. It might have been the evening of the same day that Jesus called Levi to follow Him in salvation, and Levi followed. Or it might have been a few days later. But whenever it happened, we know it definitely wasn’t accidental. Luke makes that clear in Luke 5:29 in his account. He says this: “Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with Him.” So, this was deliberate. Levi gave this intentionally.

The word *reception*, the Greek word for *reception*, is used in the Septuagint (in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) as well as in the New Testament, and it's used of "a banquet or a feast" typically. And Luke actually calls it in the Greek text "a mega feast." Sounds like a great thing, doesn't it? It may make some of you hungry for dinner. But this was a sit-down dinner with all the trimmings. Or more accurately for the first century, this was a reclining dinner. Because in the first century, if you had a casual meal, you would sometimes eat that casual meal, often actually, sitting down like we do today. But for special banquets and feasts, those sorts of things like this one, they would recline. In fact, in a wealthy home like that of Levi's, typically there would have been an upstairs area, an upper room, as well as a downstairs area, and somewhere in that area (and I can see I located my circle there in the wrong place. It should be just to the left to mark the u-shaped table there at the upper end of this slide). And that's how it was arranged typically. The tables were in a u-shape, and they were about typically 12 inches off the floor (something like that), eight to twelve inches, and the guests would recline to eat. Around the table, around that u-shaped table, there were pads or cushions or, in some cases in really wealthy homes, couches—long enough for the entire body of the guest. And those pads, or cushions, would have been laid at an angle to the table, and each guest would have lain on his left side, leaning on his left elbow, and then he would have eaten with his right hand. The hands were washed before and after the meal and sometimes during because each guest dipped from the serving dish to his own plate and brought the food to his mouth with his bare right hand. Typically, a banquet like this would have been in the evening. That's when the most elaborate meals were typically held. Now, for this feast, we note that Matthew had gone all out. We're told he'd invited all of his friends and co-workers. Mark says there were many tax-gatherers and sinners that were dining, or reclining, with Jesus as well as Matthew himself and the other four disciples that are mentioned. So, Matthew apparently had to not only use his normal dining area, but probably had to convert some of the other rooms of his house—perhaps the upper room of his house, maybe even his rooftop—into some temporary dining banquet rooms. Verse 15 says, "For there were many of them, and they were following Him." There were many tax collectors and sinners, and many of them apparently had a real interest in Jesus. And some of them were even beginning to follow Him.

Now why did Matthew throw this mega feast, this huge party? Well, there are several possible reasons. Obviously, I think, it's just a sort of spontaneous expression of his gratitude and joy for

what Christ has done for him. I think he wants to honor Jesus. But I think it becomes clearer as the story unfolds, he also wants his friends to meet Jesus, his new Master. He wants them to come to believe in Jesus as he has. But here's the key point I want you to realize. Jesus is not merely an uninterested observer at this feast. Look again at verse 15 because the pronouns can be misleading. Notice what's written: "It happened that He (that is Jesus) was reclining at the table in his (that is, Matthew's) house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples." So, the dinner was in Matthew's house, and the guests were Matthew's friends, but Jesus is the real host of this feast. And that's going to become clearer in just a moment.

There's a second act, and the second act in this scene is a "Legalistic Objection." Verse 16 says, "When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors." Scribes of the Pharisees—now we met these men many times before in our studies of the gospels. The scribes were responsible for copying, teaching, and interpreting the Torah, the Law. Most of them were members of the sect of the Pharisees. They couldn't go into Matthew's house (I'll explain why in just a moment). So instead, like a bunch of nosy neighbors or perhaps like the homeowner's association police, they were apparently straining to look in through the front gate. And with a kind of strange, bizarre mixture of glee, this sort of sadistic glee and self-righteous horror, they see the new rabbi in town. The new rabbi, who has moved from Nazareth to Capernaum who's created such a stir, He is actually eating with sinners and tax collectors. Now, why would they have a problem with that? Well, for several reasons. First of all, it was likely unclean food when you consider the group that was there. It was probably prepared in unclean dishes. It was in a house that was unclean because of the person to whom it belonged and because of the presence of so many tax collectors who were ceremonially unclean. The food had probably not been properly tithed, as was required by the rabbis, and because Jesus was a rabbi hanging around the morally defiled. In effect, the big issue was that He was disobeying their interpretation of the Torah.

"The Mishnah" which later documented some of the rules that they lived under, said this: "He that undertakes to be trustworthy (in other words to be a leader, to be a righteous man) may not be the guest of one of the people of the land"—the *am ha'aretz*, "the people of the soil," is the idea. It goes on to say, "He who undertakes to be an associate...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." One of the six

things that's inappropriate for a scholar, the Mishnah says is that: "He should not recline at table in the company of ignorant persons." And, then it adds this: "Let not a Pharisee eat the sacrifice of the people of the land." So, these were all the objections that were in their mind as they see Jesus at this feast, this banquet.

Verse 16 says, "They said to His disciples." Now this is just a curiosity, but why did they say this to His disciples and not to Jesus? Well, I mean, maybe they were cowards who didn't like confrontation. It's possible that Jesus was still in the house, they couldn't get to Jesus, and so they said it to the disciples instead. It's even possible they had a more insidious sort of goal, and that was to undermine the disciples' confidence in Jesus. Regardless of why, they get immediately to the heart of their concern. Notice verse 16: "Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?" Tax collectors as we noted last time were the worst of the worst. They were the dregs of first-century Jewish society. They were irreligious. They were traitors to their own people. They were complicit with foreign oppressors, extortionists, dishonest, and they were infamous—infamous—for their wild, immoral lives. And, not just tax collectors, but sinners. Sinners were Jews who were irreligious, and usually that meant two things: It meant that they failed to keep all of the strict rules of the rabbis, and it also meant that they, even by God's law and standards, were morally corrupt. In fact, this word is used, you remember, in Luke chapter 7 verse 37 when it says, "There was a woman in the city who was a sinner." Turns out in the story, she's a prostitute. According to the Mishnah, sinners are gamblers, money lenders, those who race doves for sport, those who trade on the Sabbath or Sabbath year, thieves, the violent, shepherds, and of course, tax collectors. They're tax collectors and sinners.

But in Jesus' mind, sinners are sick. They need a doctor, spiritually speaking. They need to repent and be spiritually healed by God. Jesus was eating with people like that. He was flaunting their rules. He was ceremonially defiling Himself, meaning by their standards He couldn't participate in the worship of Israel. But most likely, I think the thing that was largest in their minds as they saw Jesus, the new rabbi in town eating at Matthew's house, was that He was falling short of proving Himself to be a righteous man before God; and therefore, He was not earning His way into God's acceptance and favor. That was the Jewish mindset of the first century. That was Judaism in the first century. You remember Paul in Romans 10 said, "Not knowing about God's righteous," the gift of God's righteousness, they went about "to establish

their own.” This kind of pharisaic thinking was so instilled in first-century Judaism, that it was still a temptation in the early church. You remember, even after Peter went to the home of Cornelius in Acts chapter 11 verse 3, he’s accused of this: “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” How dare you! And of course, let’s be honest, this problem didn’t go away with the first century. There is still a temptation for every one of us to think like Pharisees, to distance ourselves from unbelievers, and to criticize others who don’t.

Well, the third act in this second scene in this story is “A Biblical Correction”— “A Biblical Correction.” Notice verse 17: “And hearing this,” (Jesus either overheard their comments to the disciples, or He heard a report from the disciples of what the scribes had said to them.) “Jesus said to them.” Jesus then goes on to make the same point in two different ways: First of all, He uses a common proverb in both secular and in religious writings. Notice verse 17: “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.” Literally, the Greek text says, “It is not those who are the strong ones who need a physician, but those who are (and this is a Hebrew kind of expression) having badly.” The point is, well people don’t need a doctor. Sick people need a doctor. And here’s the underlying point Jesus is making. Would you ever criticize a doctor for hanging around sick people? Can you imagine? “Doctor, why do you keep hanging around all those sick people?” William Hendriksen writes:

When He associates (when Christ associates) on intimate terms with people of low reputation, He does not do this as a hobnob, a comrade in evil, 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.

I love that quote. He’s not contaminated with the diseases of His patients, but He gets close to them in order to heal them. So, there’s the proverb. It makes the point, but then Jesus follows that up with a clear-cut statement of His mission. Verse 17 goes on to say, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Now let’s break that down because there’re really two parts of that statement. “I did not come to call the righteous.” Who are the righteous that don’t need Jesus? I mean clearly the Scripture makes it very clear that there is no such category as the righteous. Romans chapter 3 puts the nail in that coffin forever. There’s no Jewish person, there’s no Gentile, there’s no one on the planet who is righteous, “No not one.” So, this has to be irony that



Jesus is using. Jesus is saying that there are some people who think they are righteous, and Jesus says I didn't come to help them. He only helps those who are aware of their sin. You see, the Pharisees thought they were righteous. They thought they needed nothing from Jesus. They didn't think they needed grace and only grace. Jesus didn't come for people like that. Can I just say to you? If you think you're good enough, righteous enough, a good enough person to make it to God on your own, then Jesus didn't come for you.

He said, "I did not come to call the righteous," and then He completes the statement, "I did come to call sinners." That's everybody. Everyone is a sinner. But Jesus came for those who know that they're sinners, who are aware of it. You remember the Beatitudes in Matthew 5: those who know they're beggars in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who know they don't have it but who want it. He came to call sinners. So, what exactly did Jesus come to call sinners to do? Well, Mark chapter 1 verse 15 says He came saying, "Repent and believe." That's what He called sinners to do. Or Luke 5 verse 32: "I have come to call sinners to repentance." You see, Jesus did associate with sinners and tax collectors, but He never condoned their sin. Instead, He considers them spiritually sick, those who desperately need a doctor, the lost who need to be found (Luke 15), and He came to call them out of their spiritual disease (Isaiah 1 describes that beautifully), and to call them to the wellness that's found in knowing God through Christ Himself. He came to call them to repentance and faith. What a story! What a way Jesus sets the Pharisees straight.

What about for us? What do we learn from the second scene in this story? We saw the sovereign salvation given to an undeserving sinner. But what do we learn from this second part of the story? There really are four powerful lessons that I want you to consider briefly with me. First of all: "Jesus' mission was to seek the repentance and salvation of sinners, and to accomplish that mission He purposefully pursued them." Alan Cole writes, "Deliberately seeking out the sinful was the whole purpose of His mission." And I love the way Lange in his commentary on this passage says it. He says,

Jesus' action (in this story) was actually more revolutionary than they could have ever imagined. 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 the fellowship of God.

What an amazing Savior we have! This was His mission, and He sought sinners out. He came and sought us, didn't He? He found us in the middle of our sin. He sought us to make us His friends.

There's a second lesson here, and that is: "The invitation to the gospel of forgiveness in Christ is for sinners!" This again is such an encouragement. You see, if you realize you're a sinner, that doesn't disqualify you. It qualifies you because Jesus only extends help to those who know they're sick, to those who know they need a doctor, to those who know they're sinners and they're desperate and they're needy, and they know they lack righteousness, but they desperately want it. They're dying of hunger and dying of thirst. Those are the people Jesus extends the offer of the gospel to. So, if you find yourself in that place, let me just say, even in this story, Jesus is extending the same call to you. He's saying to you friend, "Follow Me." It doesn't matter who you are; it doesn't matter what you've become. He invites you to turn from that life and to become His, to follow Him. He is a friend of sinners—not to live and stay in their sin, but rather to be rescued from it, out of it, and made a trophy of His grace. That could be you today. I invite you to turn in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ. Follow Him, and He will receive you.

There's a third lesson, and that is: "We must follow both the example and the instruction of our Lord, and pursue and use social interaction with unbelievers to seek their repentance." We must "pursue and use social interaction with unbelievers to seek their repentance." This point is made even more powerfully when you see how Jesus makes it in Matthew's gospel. Look at Matthew chapter 9 where Matthew describes this same story, of course his story, and notice what he writes in Matthew 9 verses 12 and 13. When Jesus heard what the Pharisees had said, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick." And then notice Matthew 9:13, "But go and learn what this means." I love that. Jesus says, listen, go and learn what your own Scripture teaches. And then He quotes Hosea 6:6. He says, "I desire compassion, and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." You know what Jesus is saying to them? He's saying true compassion toward needy people is more important before God than religious externals. You and I need to express that compassion toward the unbelievers in our world. We need to use the social interaction we have with unbelievers, and we need to pursue

additional social interaction with unbelievers to, as Jesus did, seek their repentance. I really am confronted by, convicted by, a statement that Kent Hughes makes about this story. He writes:

Perhaps none of us espouse such pharisaical beliefs, in fact we loathe them. 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 non-believers as little as possible. We attend Bible studies that are 100 percent Christian, a Sunday School that is 100 percent Christian, prayer meetings that are 100 percent Christian. We play tennis with Christians. We eat dinner with Christians. We have Christian doctors, Christian dentists, Christian plumbers, Christian veterinarians, and even our dogs are Christian! The result is, we pass by hundreds without ever noticing them or positively influencing them for Christ. None of us are Pharisees philosophically, but we may be practically.

We need, like our Lord, (and I am convicted and confronted of this as much as I'm sure you are) we need to use the social interaction we have for the gospel, and we need to pursue social interaction to that end as well. This is hard. It's hard, especially for people who were raised in Christian homes and maybe have never really mixed with unbelievers. It's hard for those who have been Christians and part of the church a long time, but this is what we're called to do. You know, when it comes to unbelievers, we can practice isolation or assimilation. Both of those are forbidden by Scripture. There's a third way, and that is mission. That is, we pursue their souls as Jesus pursued their souls. How do you do that? I love the very practical example Matthew sets here. I mean, think about what Matthew did. I would just list these three points for you to consider in terms of how to make this happen. First of all, like Matthew, spend your own resources to buy friends for eternity. That is, use your resources as he did. He threw a party. He invited people to dinner. There's so many ways you and I can reach out, and we need to do a better job of that. Secondly, start with your own circle of friends and acquaintances. That's what Matthew did. Here're all these people that are his co-workers in the same field, and he reaches out to them. And a third lesson he teaches us here is, use social interaction to create an opportunity to share the gospel. Here's a meal, and yet this was an intentional meal. It was to expose these people to Jesus.

When Oliver Cromwell ruled England, the story's told that the nation ran out of silver, and he sent his soldiers looking for additional silver, so they could mint some more coins. And the soldiers word back 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, to which Cromwell reportedly replied, "Melt down the saints and get them back into circulation!" That's a pretty straight forward reminder. We need to get back into circulation.

There's a fourth lesson here as we finish our study and that is: "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 see, this is just a preview of coming attractions. Jesus hosted this dinner, and He's going to host another one. Some day we will literally sit down with Christ at a great feast prepared for sinners like us. And according to Luke, Jesus Himself will serve us. This is astounding. Listen to Luke 12:37 as He speaks of His return. He says, "Truly I say to you, that He (speaking of Himself in this story), He will gird Himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them." Folks, that is grace. Jesus is the one who hosted this meal for Matthew's friends, and He's the one who will host an extraordinary banquet for us sinners who have come to know His grace. You see, Jesus was then and always will be a friend of sinners. Aren't you glad of that? I thank Him for that reality.

Let's pray together. Father, this passage greatly stirs and encourages our souls as we think about the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ, of Your own heart through Him. Father, it also convicts us. I pray that You would help us consider how to carry out in a very practical way the example and the instruction of our Lord. Lord, may we be those who seek sinners with the gospel as well. Lord, give us a heart for people around us. Help us to raise our eyes. Lord, these times are difficult because of the "shelter in place" and all of the complications that go with this time period. But, Father, help us to do what we can, to seize opportunities, to make opportunities as we are able in order to be Your ambassadors—Ambassadors for Christ, bringing the good news of the grace that's found in Him. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Good night. Have a great week.