

Introduction:

I'd like to begin this morning by asking you all to think back for a moment to the time before you knew were a Christian, when you were living in spiritual darkness and being led around by the sin in your life. Admittedly, some of you may not remember that time, and that's ok, maybe your thoughts go to a time when you had wandered away from the faith. I grew up in a Christian home, but for a long time I was a wanderer. I lived a life that was ruled by worldliness and rebellion toward God. It was a time in my life when I felt the most despair, the most hopelessness, and I would try to bury my sin by piling vices on top of them in an attempt to muffle how loud those voices were. Look now and see what God's grace has done. I was once wretched and poor and blind, but God made me see; He made you see. He took your spiritually dead heart and breathed life into it by opening up your eyes to what Christ had done for you, and He did it through other believers who have tasted and seen the mercy of God. Think for a moment of the person that brought you to Christ. Because they understood their need for a savior, they knew that you too had that same need. God worked through their compassion and love for you so that you would know the truth, repent of your sins, and place your trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. But I wonder what would have happened to you, to me, if those people deemed us to be unworthy of that message of grace. If my mother had stopped praying for me when I was still in my wandering. If pastors and people in this very Church didn't continue to reach out to me, welcome me in their homes, and show love to me... I probably wouldn't be standing here today. If you see someone that is lost, dead in their sins, and you do not pity them, if you do not pray for them, if you do not share of the grace of God in Jesus Christ with them, how can we say that we ourselves have experienced the power and glory of God's grace? As Christ tells us, those who have been forgiven of much, love much. If, as Christ-followers, we are to emulate and do as our Lord did, then let today's scripture prick your heart like it does mine every time I read it. Let it convict you if it can, and let that conviction motivate you to show others the grace and mercy that has been shown to you. Today's text finds us in the second of five different confrontations with the religious elite of Jesus' day. For the past couple weeks, we learned about the priorities of Jesus, to teach and preach to others and His priority of the healing that comes from the forgiveness of sins over the physical healing of miracles. Last week, we witnessed Jesus' authority being questioned by the religious elite, and this week we will see Jesus' morality being questioned by them because of who he chose to spend time with. What kind of people did Jesus come to save? For most Christians, this should be an easy question to answer. We know that Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost in the darkness of their rebellion against Him. And all of humanity are subject to sin against Him and all have become sinners... But then the question becomes, do we truly believe that God can save any sinner? Has His burden to seek and to save the lost become our burden as well? And if we believe in the mission of Jesus to save sinners, are we taking the message of Christ's salvation to those who need to hear, those who need a savior, regardless of who they are?

Jesus Calls a Tax Collector – The Call of a Sinner (2:13-14)

13 He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

In verse 13, we see Christ continue displaying his priority of preaching and teaching when he goes out to by the Sea of Galilee once more. Last week, we saw that when Jesus taught in a house it became overcrowded. And as people came from every quarter to hear him, it would make sense that He would go out to an open place. But something curious happens in verse 14, it says that Jesus passed by a tax collector named Levi who was sitting at a tax booth and calls the man to follow Him. To understand the weight of this account it's essential to understand what it meant in this culture to be a tax collector. In those days, when Roman rule

sought to tax its subjects, they sought after Jews who would “do their dirty work” for them and they would enforce the people to pay. But as an incentive, the Romans allowed these tax collectors to overcharge their countrymen and skim off the top (and you thought the IRS was criminal). Essentially, these are Jewish men, working for Rome who are known for lying and stealing. They are traitors to their own people and had gained a reputation of being thieves. Any respectable Jew went out of their way to have no fellowship with them. In fact, James Edwards comments that “A Jew who collected taxes was disqualified as a judge or witness in court, expelled from the synagogue, and a cause of disgrace to his family. The touch of a tax collector rendered a house unclean... Jewish contempt of tax collectors is epitomized in the ruling that Jews could lie to tax collectors with impunity...” They were a constant reminder of the Roman occupation and a source of disgust and disdain. And yet, Jesus calls this man, Levi, a sinner, in almost the exact same way in which He called His other disciples. What’s more, Levi is a tax collector by the Sea... meaning he probably taxed fisherman of their hard earned money after selling what they caught! I can only wonder what was running through Peter’s mind as he watch this happen. Jesus calling a known traitor and thief to be his disciple. In this we see a glimpse of what Christ’s heart for His Kingdom looks like. It is composed of the unlikeliest of people, and sometimes even the most unlikeable people. Who are we to judge what God has in store for them? Who are any of us to say who would be unworthy of Christ’s call to discipleship? Levi the tax collector, who we know from the other gospels was renamed Matthew, would go on to write a gospel account of his own, and the early church fathers say he did the work of an Apostle, preaching the gospel and eventually would be martyred for his faith. In Levi’s response to Christ’s call to discipleship we see the authority of Jesus and the effectiveness of His call. Like the other disciples, Levi’s heart was immediately changed. He immediately left his tax collection booth and followed the Lord. He left behind the source of his riches; he left his position of security and comfort for traveling, hardship, and eventual martyrdom; he left his old life for a new life with Jesus. While every person is a sinner and equally in need of salvation, the call and response of Levi is a reminder to all of us of both the power and authority of Jesus to save any sinner and to change any heart, no matter how dark and hardened that heart is. Overjoyed by his new purpose and direction in life, like Zaccheaus, Levi invites Jesus to his house that very day.

Jesus Eats with Sinners – Association with Sinners (2:15-16)

15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

After his conversion, Levi hosts a large dinner party bringing together people from two different worlds: Jesus and His disciples and his friends of ill repute. As a tax collector, Levi would have likely had a rather large house by the standards of that day. You can probably imagine for a moment what this might have looked like: a house packed with people laughing and telling stories; maybe Jesus continued to teach the people around them while they ate, or maybe they were simply enjoying His presence. In Scripture, sharing a meal with someone communicated fellowship with someone else, especially after an offense had occurred. Think of stories like Jacob eating with his uncle Laban after being pursued by him, or King David inviting Saul’s grandson Mephibosheth to eat with him at his table. Eating a meal in someone’s home not only communicated friendship, but often times forgiveness. Most commentators point out that this meal between sinners and the Son of God is a foreshadowing of the Messianic banquet in the age to come, the marriage feast of the Lamb and His bride. But in this moment, for Jesus to share a table with tax collectors and sinners would have been a shock to many and caused the religious leaders to grow in their distrust of Jesus. While the scribes of the Pharisees ask a simple question in verse 16, it’s better understood as an accusation. They aren’t curious; they’re contemptuous. They are appalled that a man claiming the authority of God would reject their religious norms and dine with sinners. In order to understand what the Pharisees are really saying and get a better look at what is really going on here, we need to know a few things about these men. The Pharisees were known for

their religious zeal in keeping Torah, or the Law of God handed down to them in scripture. They did this in order to stay ritually clean, which would grant them greater access into God's Temple in order to worship Him. Jewish religious life for the Pharisees revolved around staying ritually clean because God commanded it and in so doing they were able to enter the Temple grounds to offer sacrifices. It was said that he who strives to know and keep the Law is worthy of honor. But their zeal for keeping the Law drove them to write additional laws, and traditions, that were meant to help keepers of the Law to come nowhere close to breaking the Laws of God. But, what ended up happening was that these men tended to elevate their own laws as if they too were as valuable as scripture and the extra burden was often too much for the average working-class citizen to bear or take mind of. So when these men looked inside Levi's house and saw all manner of people who didn't keep to their laws, they saw uncleanness and unworthiness. What's more (remember what I said earlier) Jesus was eating with tax collectors, whose very touch would have made an entire house unclean. It is ironic, then, that these religious elites who were known for their purity and greater access to the presence of God at the Temple stand outside as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords shares His presence with the lost, the humble, and the pitiable. That is why this scene is often called The Scandal of Grace. It is scandalous to the Pharisees because it betrays their religious sensibilities and traditions. They were trying to put shame on Jesus by asking their question but they are so blinded by their own pride and self-righteousness that they can't see the gift of grace that Jesus was offering right before their eyes. And so, Jesus responds to their question:

The Reason Jesus Came – The Salvation of Sinners (2:17)

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus begins his answer to the Pharisees with a well-known proverb of that time, one that they likely would have agreed upon as teachers. The analogy is simple, a physician tends to the sick and not the well because they are in need of healing. Likewise, our great physician, Christ, has come to heal the relationship between sinful humanity and God, reconciling them to Himself and redeeming those who come to Him for healing. But the saddest part of this story for me isn't that the Pharisees had rejected fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners. No, it's that they probably think themselves to be healthy. In their hearts, they were probably proud of themselves for being in such good health and not needing someone to take pity on them. They are fools who think they have healed themselves when the cure for their disease is right in front of them. As the Apostle John says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." They are blinded to the truth, by their own arrogance and pride, that they are just as much in need of a savior as that wretched tax collector sitting next to Him. Jesus goes on to make the analogy crystal clear for them and for us, He wants to make absolutely certain that His purpose in coming is not mistaken. The reason Jesus dines with sinners is that these are precisely who He came to save – people who are humble enough to admit that they are in need of rescue. None are well apart from Christ, but the self-righteousness of the Pharisees makes them even more lost than the person who knows they are a sinner... Some of the hardest people to reach with the message of the gospel are those who think they are already saved when in fact they are not. This short story from the ministry of Jesus is a clear warning to the self-righteous and a comforting balm to the lowly in spirit. As American church attenders we can very easily find ourselves in the position of the Pharisees. Because of comfortable lifestyles and the pursuit of worldliness we are susceptible to trusting in our religious habits and practices. Your church attendance will not save you, how much you tithe will not save you, your avoidance of immoral behavior will not save you. Don't misunderstand me, those are all good things but think carefully... are you believing that God will find favor with you if you do those things? And what's worse, has your heart grown cold toward those who are less pious than you? Or not living up to your expectations of what a good Christian should be like? It is a serious temptation; I know this because I have felt that temptation. Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees should remind us of our true position as sinners and of the dangers of the temptation of self-righteousness both in ourselves and others. Furthermore, it should soften our hearts towards those who need the healing of their souls by our great Physician and we are all called by Him to take

the message of His salvation to the world, no matter who it is or what they have done. As our example, Christ went out of His way to pursue the lost and we must not avoid avoid sinners in need of salvation. "... Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Before I close, I would urge you all not to miss this crucial point. The conversion and calling of Levi and others in this passage is a good and helpful reminder; it is a promise, that all who repent of their sin and believe in Christ Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins will be saved. On that day when you stand before the Great White throne of the Almighty and He asks "why should I let you in? On what basis should you be allowed in my presence for eternity?" The correct answer will not be "because I was good Christian who went to church and followed all the rules..." Woe unto you if that is your answer. The correct answer will always and ever be, "I have done nothing to deserve the glory and honor and majesty of your presence. In my life, I have betrayed you, Lord, I have sinned against you and against others. I have fallen short. I have done nothing to deserve you... But He, Christ, has done everything. It is He who washed me with His blood, He who bore the weight of my sin and your righteous anger, it is He who bought me, forgave me, and reconciled me to yourself... It is through Him and nothing else." If you have not yet trusted in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, do not wait any longer. There is nothing more that you could do that would make Him love you any more than He does right now. "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." Repent and turn away from the sin that holds you in bondage, despair of your own power to save yourself and reject the thought that anything but the saving power of Christ can save you. Because that is all He asks... a broken and contrite heart that cries out to Him for healing. I'd like to close with this:

Admittedly, I was not the one that titled my sermon today, Pastor Ben actually had named this sermon long before he asked me to preach today. But after doing some research, I liked it so much that I decided to keep it. It is a reference, (at least I think it is) to a famous hymn written by a Protestant minister who lived in the 1700s by the name of Joseph Hart. As I read about Joseph, I found a man that I could really identify with. He grew up in a strong Christian home and was taught what a good Christian should look like. He likely went regularly to Church in his early life and avoided immorality. But at some point in his young life he was pulled away into worldliness by the vices and vanities of youth. So for a time, he wandered into temptation and sin. In 1751, in his fortieth year, he was led to see the importance of the Christian faith and so he abandon his immoralities. He had received the true doctrine of the Gospel, and became strictly moral in his conduct. He resorted to daily prayer, and the reading of Scriptures. But for five years, he would admit, that he felt no sense of God's love for him and this pained him for several years. But then, after hearing a sermon from George Whitefield on pentecost of 1757, he felt that the true light and grace of Christ had been brought to his soul. At 46 he had become a new convert, a consistent and happy Christian. He entered upon, and continued to the end to live, a new life to the glory of God. In the spring of 1759, only 9 years before he died, he published 119 "Hymns, etc., composed on Various Subjects, containing a Brief Account of his Experience, and the Great Things that God had done for his Soul."

Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy

3 Let not conscience make you linger,
nor of fitness fondly dream;
all the fitness he requireth
is to feel your need of him.

4 Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
lost and ruined by the fall;
if you tarry till you're better,
you will never come at all.

5 I will rise and go to Jesus!
He will save me from my sin.
By the riches of his merit,
there is joy and life in him.

Jesus came to save sinners.