

**Series:** Twelve

**Title:** What Does It Mean to Be A Disciple?

**Text:** Mark 2:12-17

**Date:** September 8, 2024

### **Verse 13**

After telling of the way Jesus healed a paralytic, Mark transitioned to tell about how Jesus called another disciple. More specifically, he told of how Jesus called one named “Levi” to “follow” him (Mark 2:14). Mark’s account in 2:13-17 can be regarded as accompanying his account of Jesus’ call of Simon, Andrew, James, and John in Mark 1:16-20. Mark would later give more detail about the identity and ministry of Jesus’ disciples in Mark 3:13-21.

In describing Jesus’ call of Levi, Mark began by saying, “He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them” (Mark 2:13). The original language of verse 13 contained two imperfect tense verbs. Such language depicted an ongoing action in the past. Mark’s words were intended to portray waves of people descending upon Jesus. As Jesus went out beside the sea, groups of people rushed to see him from every direction.<sup>1</sup> They had heard reports of Jesus’ teaching. Rumors had spread about how he taught with an air of authority that was not found in the popular rabbinical teaching of the day (Mark 1:27-28). As a result, people were hungry to hear truth from the new popular preacher. When Jesus preached, he preached a rather simple message. He explained truth related to the kingdom of God and he called people to “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

### **Verse 14**

In traveling to teach God’s Word, Jesus encountered another man who would be added to his group of disciples. Mark recorded, “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” (Mark 2:14). Levi was a common name in first-century Judea. It was normally given to boys who were thought to have been born into the lineage of the tribe of Levi, the tribe that was given by God to manage the Old Testament temple rituals that foreshadowed the coming of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to meeting Jesus, it is likely that Levi had witnessed some of Jesus’ miracles and heard some of Jesus’ teaching. He was undoubtedly aware of Jesus’ fame. Perhaps he had hoped to meet Jesus personally. It is likely that there are many details related to the disciples’ calling that are not recorded in Scripture. One should not assume that the Twelve blindly followed Jesus without having met Jesus and interacted with his teaching to some degree. It is not as if Jesus randomly showed up on the seashore, cried out “follow me,” and the disciples glibly agreed to alter the course of their lives to enter into a new rabbinical school. Faith was indeed involved in the Twelve’s response. Yes, they did willingly forsake families, vocations, and more. However, it should be known that, prior to following Jesus, the disciples likely had levels of interaction with Jesus that are not spoken of in Scripture. We can only speculate concerning such things. However, for the sake of our current consideration, it is helpful to note that there were likely several events that played into Matthew’s conversion and willingness to follow Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Volume 2: Mark*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 69.

Mark's record indicated that Jesus met Matthew "sitting at the tax booth." Such a booth was normally on a main road, in a highly visible location. Roman authorities wanted tax payers to have no excuse for evading taxes. In addition, the location of a tax booth on a main road served the purpose of collecting taxes on goods that were being transported for sale. Roads throughout Israel were used to collect tariffs on goods that were traded between Syria and Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Roman officials strategically placed tax collectors along roads in order to collect tariffs on goods.<sup>4</sup> The New Testament bears witness that tax collectors were greatly despised by the general populace in Israel. Such individuals were regarded as traitors and co-conspirators with the Roman Empire. The New Testament contains another famous story concerning a tax collector named Zacchaeus who became a disciple of Jesus (Luke 19:1-10).

In calling Levi to himself, Jesus said, "Follow me." Our Lord used the same words when he enlisted Simon and Andrew as disciples (Mark 1:17). The original language of the text literally meant "to go behind someone."<sup>5</sup> It was often used to depict the way pupils followed closely behind rabbis in marketplaces and public places. Staying in step with their master, learners were keen to observe the way their master acted and spoke. They walked closely so that they might see how he responded to opponents in debate. Being nearby, they were prepared to receive a lesson from the Torah or Mishnah at a moment's notice. Jesus used language from first-century rabbinical schools to depict the way his disciples are to "abide in" him (John 15:4-5). Discipleship is primarily a relational endeavor, not a ritualistic or rule-oriented one. By staying near to Jesus through the Word of God and prayer, believers can learn from Jesus as disciples.

Upon receiving Jesus' call, Levi followed immediately. Mark said, "And he rose and followed him." Levi had an instantaneous response, one that was similar to the response of Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Mark 1:18, 20). Levi's speed in obeying Jesus is instructive for modern believers. True discipleship requires speedy and prompt obedience. Those who want to grow into Christ-likeness can't be reluctant or hesitant concerning the claims of Christ. When the Lord makes demands through his Word, they should be prepared to say what Paul said at his conversion — "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10).

### **Verse 15**

After Levi was converted, he invited Jesus into his house to share a meal. Such an invitation may have been offered in accordance with first-century customs of the ancient Near East. Perhaps a momentous occasion like spiritual conversion required a celebration in which one would host family members and close friends in his or her home.<sup>6</sup> One's new spiritual teacher or rabbi would have certainly been invited to such a party as well. Maybe a similar sort of thing was in view in events related to Lydia's conversion in Acts 16:11-15.

Mark described the scene at Levi's house, saying, "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" (Mark 2:15). In some ways, Mark's words would have been scandalous for first-century readers. To see a Jewish rabbi feasting with a group of tax collectors would have been a rare sight indeed. As mentioned earlier, tax collectors were despised. They were Jewish nationals who had agreed to work for the Romans. Their chief responsibility was to collect taxes from their native kinsmen. Many times, tariffs and fees were inflated and unreasonable. Most tax collectors were regarded as greedy extortionists who were

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<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Let's Study Mark*. (Edinburg, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Schnabel, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Schnabel, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, 29.

in league with an idolatrous regime. Caesar claimed to be divine, so he was regarded as a blasphemous person. On top of this, the Caesar's image was inscribed on the coinage that was used throughout Judea. Thus, paying taxes, along with buying and selling through the exchange of Roman currency, was sometimes regarded as a form of blasphemy. See Mark 12:13-17 for more background on the Jewish perception regarding first-century Roman taxes.

Despite these things, Jesus spent time with tax collectors. Not only did Jesus spend time with tax collectors, Scripture seems to indicate that Jesus enjoyed the party. The Bible says our Lord "reclined at the table" in Levi's house. The verb "reclined" is significant. Jesus didn't just sit or stand at Levi's party. He reclined and relaxed. The language indicates that Jesus enjoyed his time at a festive meal.<sup>7</sup> Many know the feelings of awkwardness associated with attending a party, wedding, or funeral in which one must associate with people who are different. Jesus did not exhibit such awkwardness. Though he was the spotless, sinless Son of God, he lovingly embraced company with tax collectors and sinners.

The word for "sinners" in verse 15 had a special meaning in first-century Israel. It was often used by Jewish nationalists to speak in a derogatory way of people who were deemed "people of the land."<sup>8</sup> It was used as a label for unsavory individuals who did not live by the standards prescribed in the Torah. Such people were known to live like Gentiles. They had little to no respect of the traditions of the scribes and elders. The requirements of the Mishnah were of no concern to them. Jesus' association with such individuals revealed his posture toward sinners. Self-righteous religionists would have thought that it was uncanny and inappropriate for a rabbi to interact with sinners, but Jesus came to Earth for the purpose of saving such people. The apostle Paul would later testify, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Timothy 1:15).

### **Verse 16**

Seeing Jesus with a group of cultural misfits, the religious elite were flabbergasted. Mark said, "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?'" (Mark 2:16). Mark's words highlighted the escalating tensions between Jesus and religious leaders. The scribes had previously questioned Jesus' teaching methods in Mark 2:6-7. Eventually, the scribes would be the ones who orchestrated Jesus' death (Mark 14:53).

Mark's language in verse 16 emphasized the relationship of the scribes to the Pharisees. He spoke of "...the scribes of the Pharisees." The language pointed out the fact that the scribes were a special group that came out of a movement known as "the Pharisees." The group was formed by descendants of a Jewish sect known as "the Hasidim." The name for the group came from the Psalms. It simply meant "faithful." Initially, the title was used in a derogatory sense by other Jews who saw the Pharisees as being too radical and strict.<sup>9</sup> In time, however, the Pharisees began to use the title of themselves, regarding it as a badge of honor to be called "faithful."

Pharisees were originally concerned with preserving Jewish culture against the rising tide of Greek Hellenization.<sup>10</sup> In Jesus' day, they had also become preoccupied with resisting Roman rule. They were zealously committed to the Torah. Through writings known as "the Mishnah," they had created 613 extra-biblical commands to accompany the Hebrew

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<sup>7</sup> Schnabel, 71.

<sup>8</sup> Schnabel, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Schnabel, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, 29.

Scriptures. Of those commands, 248 were positive and 365 were negative.<sup>11</sup> Pharisees called this additional list of commands a “hedge.” The Mishnah was believed to be a protective barrier that safeguarded one from even getting close to breaking God’s Law.<sup>12</sup> In Mark’s gospel, Jesus would later speak to the uselessness of Mishnaic Law by rebuking his religious opponents for “...teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7).

In asking “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” the scribes touched on a point of Mishnaic Law. The Old Testament law did not strictly prohibit such activity, but the Mishnah did. In its effort to make “a hedge” around Levitical food customs, it outlawed eating with people who did not follow God’s Ceremonial Law. The reasoning for such a requirement was three-fold. First, if one ate with sinners, one might unwittingly eat food that had not been blessed by a tithe. Tax collectors were notorious for not tithing on their earnings. According to Old Testament Law, disobedience in regard to the tithe brought a curse on one’s household. Thus, the Mishnah mandated that one couldn’t eat with sinners, since sinners normally don’t tithe.

Second, the Mishnah outlawed eating with sinners on the basis of ceremonial cleanliness. In eating with sinners, one might unknowingly eat food that had not been prepared according to kosher standards.<sup>13</sup> Appeals were likely made to the resolve of Daniel in Daniel 1:8, despite the fact that ceremonial customs probably weren’t the reason for Daniel’s abstinence from Nebuchadnezzar’s food. Regardless, first-century Pharisees heaped up strict and unnecessary laws concerning eating with sinners. They were driven by an unhealthy fear of ceremonial uncleanness.

Third, the scribes were aghast at Jesus’ association with sinners because their manmade laws said that mere physical contact with a sinner rendered one unclean.<sup>14</sup> Jesus not only spent time with sinners, Mark said he “reclined” with them (Mark 1:15). Such reclining undoubtedly involved physical contact. Interestingly, Mark’s gospel tells of another meal in which Jesus reclined with friends. In telling of the first Lord’s Supper, Mark said, “And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating...” (Mark 14:17-18). John’s account of the first Lord’s Supper actually tells of the way John leaned and reclined on Jesus chest during the meal (John 13:25). Though such a posture may seem strange to first-century Western ways of thinking, leaning on the chest of a close friend at a meal would have been perfectly acceptable (and even expected!) in the first-century, ancient Near East. Given the reality of such customs, it is clear to see that Jesus likely came into physical contact with sinners and tax collectors at the feast described in Mark 2:13-17. In their mind, the Pharisees had every right to be outraged at Jesus’ behavior.

For God’s people, Jesus’ posture at the meal in our text contains glorious gospel truth. Perhaps Mark was strategic in using the same word for “reclining” in verse 15 that he would use later in speaking of the Lord’s Supper. The meal with sinners in our text ultimately pointed to the work of Christ on behalf of sinners. By reclining with people who were far from God, Christ gave a foreshadowing of how his work at the cross would bring sinners near to God.

### **Verse 17**

Upon hearing of religious leader’s complaints, Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Jesus’ words highlighted important realities related to his work on behalf of sin. First,

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<sup>11</sup> Ferguson, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ferguson, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Schnabel, 72.

they pointed to Jesus' ultimate purpose in coming to Earth — to save sinners. Jesus encapsulated the mission behind his incarnation in Luke's gospel, saying, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Second, Jesus' words unearthed the dire consequences of self-righteousness. If one does not regard him or herself as being spiritually sick, one will not run to Jesus for salvation. Jesus came to save sinners. The reality of human life is that all are marred and marked by sin. However, not all see their sin. Many reject Jesus because they never see their need for Jesus. It is only when one has an honest evaluation of his or her sinful condition that one will be compelled to embrace Christ as savior.

Of course, Jesus' rebuke in Mark 2:17 did not mean that self-righteous religionists cannot be saved. The grace of God can reach all sorts of sinners, even sinners who mask their sin with manmade religious devotion. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are examples of religious men who saw their need for a savior (Mark 15:42-47; John 3:1-15). The Apostle Paul is too (Philippians 3:4-8). When one sees his or her sinful state for what it is, he or she is well-positioned to experience the soul-saving work of Christ.