



Mark 2:13-17
Jesus Came to Call Sinners

Summary: Jesus calls unlikely people to join His team.

This morning I get to try and help you see just one of the many mind-blowing, life-altering, boundary-defying, things Jesus did. I get to set before your eyes unexpected and surprising Jesus. And, to be honest, for some people, disappointing and confusing Jesus. Because, when you read Scripture and see the kinds of things He did, and kind of people He called to be close to Him, sometimes it's shocking. It's easy for us to overlook, but Jesus confused people. Jesus upset people - often because He was reaching out to *others* - those who were marginalized and ignored, excluded, shut out. Jesus invited outsiders in. He helped them, healed them, re-established, and re-purposed them - and that didn't always go over well.

I'm excited about the things we'll see this morning, because I believe there's life-changing stuff in here. I believe God has a message for some of us that's going to change things today. So, be warned, be prepared. Jesus is coming for you.

Remember, we jump into our text Jesus is in Capernaum, a city in northern Israel, on the shore of the sea of Galilee and He's been both working miracles and sharing a message - a call to people to repent, to stop living for themselves and put God at the center of their lives.

Mark 2:13 Then He went out again by the sea; and all the multitude came to Him, and He taught them. **14** As He passed by, He saw Levi the *son* of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him.

Many of you have heard of Levi before, and it's not because he and Mr Strauss designed some fantastic denim. You know Levi as Matthew, the disciple of Jesus and the author of Matthew's gospel. Changing names is a common theme in Scripture after someone has an encounter with God. Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai become Sarah. Jacob becomes Israel. Simon becomes Peter. Saul becomes Paul. Joseph becomes Barnabas. In each case, the person's encounter with God was so transformational they seemed like a new person.

So, before Matthew wrote the gospel, he was Levi. And here is where we get back to that idea that Jesus can be kind of hard to understand at times, even hard to hang out with, because He does things like calling a tax collector to become His disciple.

Remember who else Jesus called to follow Him? Back in chapter one Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow Him. These were two sets of brothers.

Now, most siblings have a little fight every now and then, but they get along for the most part. And it's reasonable that Simon and Andrew got along with James and John because they were all fishermen. They could swap stories, may have even worked together at times. You can imagine these four guys clicked with each other and especially with Jesus. They had a comfortable crew.

But now Jesus reaches out to this new guy to join the group. He didn't ask the fishermen if they thought it was a good idea. He didn't poll them on their preferences, He just made a unilateral decision – this guy Levi is going to join us too.

What?!?

Levi is a tax collector. He's probably collected taxes from Andrew and Peter and James and John. It's entirely possible that Levi's authority and the fishermen's livelihood collided at times. It's not a stretch at all to imagine the fishermen already knew Levi and didn't like him.

You see, Capernaum, where all this happened, was an important city for Rome. It was a key military center, but it was also a border town sitting near the boundaries of Galilee to the west ruled by Herod Antipas and the region ruled by his brother Philip to the north and east. Capernaum was a busy port for fishing and shipping on the Sea of Galilee and also a major intersection for land travel. People from as far south as Egypt and as far north as modern Turkey would travel on roads that brought them through Capernaum. Similar roads brought those traveling from the Mediterranean coast inland to Syria and Damascus to the east. All of this business and travel meant taxes and tolls and it was the job of men like Levi to collect them.

But, and this is super important for you to understand: the fees weren't fixed and they weren't published. Imagine every time you went to pay your taxes the rates changed. Imagine every time you went to use the toll roads the price changed and it wasn't because of the time of day or volume of traffic, it was just because the person setting the fees felt like you could pay it. That's how Roman tax collection worked.

They actually called it *tax farming* and the tax collectors were always looking for a bumper crop. Rome set a certain tax value on each region, what they expected to receive from it. It was up to men like Levi to make that mark. But anything they could collect above and beyond their mark was theirs to keep. The system was marked by intimidation, manipulation, and corruption.

You never knew exactly what you owed. You never knew what was legitimately fair. And if you tried to push back you could wind up dead or in jail because the tax collector was backed up by the legal and military power of Rome. It was an ugly system. And Levi was the face of it in Capernaum.

Now, maybe you could understand that, you could accept it, if Levi was a Roman too. If he was just another one of those outsiders, those invaders, those occupiers who had taken over your land. You could understand it because that's what *they* do.

But Levi wasn't a Roman, he was a Jew. A Jew collecting taxes from others Jews for the Romans. Taking money from his fellow countrymen that would be used to support the empire that occupied their homeland and built Roman temples to foreign gods. You have to know - he wasn't getting invited over to anyone's house for dinner.

In fact, tax collectors were excommunicated by the rest of the Jewish community. They were excluded from the synagogue and could not serve as a witness in a Jewish trial. They were grouped together with thieves and murderers. When you read the New Testament you come across phrases like "tax collectors and sinners," "heathens and tax collectors," "tax collectors and harlots" or prostitutes. They're always portrayed as among the worst people in society.

And if you grew up in church, you know that. You've heard that. This is all familiar to you.

But something new stood out to me as I studied the passage this week, it was the question *why?* Why would Levi do it? Why would Levi take such a position when he knew the consequences? What was the problem he was trying to solve and why did he think *this* was the way to do it?

There *has* to be a motivation. And it's almost certainly *not* the money, or at least, it's more complicated than that – the money is just a tool to solve another problem. If he needed the money, *what did he need it for?* That's the question. Was it to make him feel better about himself? Was it to get the attention of other people and make them think better of him? What did he need so badly that he thought this was the best way or the only way to get it?

You've got to really chew on that question because truth be told, there's a little bit of Levi in each of us. Most of us have made a compromise of some sort along the way in order to get what we thought we really wanted. Maybe you gave yourself away sexually, used your body to get what you wanted. Maybe you gave away your integrity and compromised your values. Maybe you tried something you said you'd never do. I don't know what it was, or what it still is for you, but I know this: it is not uncommon to make compromising choices when you're trying to solve deep rooted problems or satisfy deep rooted desires.

And if you've done it, you know, it's a horrible place to be. There are moments when you know what you're doing, or what you did, is wrong. You know it shouldn't be this way. You wish you hadn't done it. Wish you hadn't agreed to it. You wish you could go back and undo it. Untake that photo. Unsend that text. Unmake that appointment. Unsay that thing.

When you feel that conviction, that self-condemnation, the guilt, the shame, the compromise, the judgment of others, there are two ways you can go. You can go along with it, give in to it, listen to it and condemn yourself. Agree with judgment. Agree with the conviction and let it grind you to pieces.

Or you can fight it and justify it and make excuses for it – all the reasons why it’s not really that bad, or it’s not really like that, or why you had to do it. But either option – soaking in it or justifying it - creates pressure in your life. Either way creates angst. It agitates you, dominates your thinking, interferes with your sleep, maybe even slaps a label on you and shapes the way people think about you or talk about you now.

I’m inclined to think that Levi was not a truly happy man. He had money. He had power. He had position. But I do not think he had deep, durable, happiness. Put yourself in his position – he likely faced abuse, anger, and scorn all day, every day, at work. Most of his interactions at the tax office involved a mixture of deception and manipulation – on both sides. Was it worth it? Was he getting enough out of it all to solve his original problem?

When you look at things this way, it begins to change how you see someone like Levi. You start to feel sorry for them. You start to wonder, how much do they feel trapped by their own circumstances? Someone might say ‘well, he brought it on himself.’ And maybe they’re right. But can people like Levi, people who have made a compromise in order to get what they thought they wanted, can they see a way out of the mess they’ve gotten themselves into? Can they see a path of escape? And is it a path that actually solves the original problem they were trying to deal with, or will they still be left with that too?

Let me give a very clear example of what I’m talking about in terms that have nothing to do with ancient tax collectors, but still involve making bad choices. What do you do with the person who’s had an affair and now realizes how stupid it was, or that it didn’t fix anything? Is there a way for them to go back to their spouse? Is there a path to healing? Can what they broke ever be restored? Are there unforgiveable sins?

And if you’re the person who did it, the person who compromised, who made the bad choice, have you changed who you are *forever*? Is your only option really just to sit in Levi’s tax booth and ride out the consequences for the rest of your life? Yes, you deserve them. Yes, you did it to yourself. But is there a way out? Is there a way to change? Or are you just a punching bag for your demons, other people, and your own self-loathing now?

Remember, there’s a question way down at the bottom of this situation. It’s the question **WHAT** brings you to the place where you choose to become a tax collector, to trade your place in the community for something outside? What kind of need are you trying to fill emotionally, psychologically, physically, or financially? What are you trying to do or become? What’s your real motive? And what if you let God solve your problem instead of trying to solve it yourself?

What if Jesus showed up in your life and said, “[Follow Me.](#)”

Because, don’t miss this – that’s exactly what happened. Levi didn’t come to Jesus. Levi doesn’t search Jesus out. Levi doesn’t stand in line hoping to meet Jesus with all the rest of the crowds. Remember, Levi wouldn’t have even been allowed to come to the synagogue to hear Jesus when He was teaching there. But Jesus comes to Levi.

Friends, Jesus came to Levi – the one who sold himself out, cut himself off from his own countrymen. The one who compromised. The one who tried to solve his own problems his own way. And Jesus says, [Follow Me](#).

It's not an offer, it's a command. A directive. An imperative.

"[Follow Me](#)." 'Come, be with Me. I know people don't like you. I know they're mad at you. I know they call you names. I know even very religious people look down on you and say things about you. But I'm telling you, [Follow Me](#). Come to Me. Be with Me.'

Who does that apply to in this room today? Who hears the words [Follow Me](#) and wonder if God means you? Because He does. Come to Jesus. [Follow](#) Jesus. Be forgiven by Jesus. Be made whole by Jesus. Be made clean by Jesus. Find a new name from Jesus. He does not turn people away. Not even people like you.

Perhaps you can understand why Levi responded to this call instantly and completely. Luke says he [left all he had, got up, and followed Jesus](#).

When Jesus called James and John they left their fishing boats with the father. They could always come back. Peter actually did go back to fishing for a bit after Jesus' death while he tried to figure out what happened. But Levi knew this was it. He was going to be all in. There could be no going back to his old job or his old life – you were either an outsider or an insider, and Jesus invited Levi in.

So, the most natural thing was to invite Jesus in too. Levi invited Him over for dinner and to meet some of his friends – other people making their way on the outside of society.

[Mark 2:15](#) Now it happened, as He was dining in *Levi's house*, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him.

I'm going to say again – I think Jesus would make many of us uncomfortable with the things He did, the places He went, and the people He met. But listen, Jesus didn't go to enjoy Himself, He didn't go in order to hang out and have a good time. He went because it was a chance to be around people who needed help.

And notice, Jesus was always a thermostat and never a thermometer. A thermometer is changed by its surroundings – whatever you're taking the temperature of affects the thermometer. Jesus was thermostat. A thermostat affects the surroundings. It makes hot things cold and cold things hot. Yes, Jesus was there with many tax collectors and sinners, but He didn't follow them, [they followed Him](#).

Of course, this didn't go over well with everyone.

16 And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, “How *is it* that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?”

There are two things you need to know here. First the Pharisees are the ultra-serious religious conservatives of their day. And the scribes were like second year Bible College or seminary students, the people who think they have it all figured out.

Second, they used the word **sinner** to refer to people who did not live by all their religious rules. So the people they call **sinners**, were not necessarily moral monsters. To the Pharisees a thief was a **sinner**, but so was the person who did not wash their hands in the right ceremonial way before eating. The scribes and Pharisees saw a clear distinction between themselves and those they felt were not committed enough to the faith.

So, they can't believe Jesus would associate with this spiritual scum. That's actually the word the New Living Translation uses for the Greek text, it says “**Why does He eat with such scum?**” The good religious people couldn't understand why Jesus would spend time with these outlaws and outcasts, these people who paid so little attention to what it meant to live a “good” life. This doesn't make sense to them, so they ask – what's going on? Why is He doing this?

17 When Jesus heard *it*, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

Well, when you put it that way, it kind of makes sense, huh? You expect doctors to see sick people. Imagine a doctor who won't see sick people because she's afraid of being infected herself. We can understand at one level, right? But still, the patient needs help. And someone has to be willing to go offer it. Jesus never expects the patient to heal themselves and then come to Him for rehab. In fact, He *seeks out the sick* and comes to them before they even ask, just like we see with Levi.

Levi went to work that morning prepared for another day of collecting taxes and tolls – he has no idea this would be the day Jesus completely transformed his life.

Friends, the same thing could be true for you. I have no doubt, no doubt whatsoever, that Jesus is speaking to some of you today. He's calling you, pressing some of the things you're hearing deep into your heart and mind. He's showing you how the things you're hearing apply to your life and your situation right now. He's calling you to **Follow Him**. And you're sitting there in your seat, just like Levi sitting in his tax booth, trying to decide: does He really mean me? Does He really mean now? Does He really mean this? He does.

So let me point out four specific things for you to think about.

First, the call came to Levi. He didn't seek it out. Maybe you weren't looking for God to show up and touch some part of your life today, but here He is none-the-less. He knows

what you need before you even ask. And He knows that He is willing to do things for you that you might never ask. Note this my friends: God initiates. He comes to us, or He prompts us to come to Him, but either way, reconciliation is His idea before it ever occurs to us. Jesus tells Levi, *I'm willing to be seen with you*. I know who you are, I know what you've done, I know what people will think and say, and I don't care. I want you with Me. My friends, Jesus says the same thing to you.

Second, it is a call to leave and not just follow. When Jesus calls you, He calls you to leave certain things behind – remember, Luke tells us, Levi **left all and followed Him**. Jesus calls sinners to repentance. That means to turn around and head in a new direction. There are things you're doing that need to stop, and things you haven't been doing that need to start. That all happens *after* you hear the call – you don't have to get your life together first, but when you hear the call, it *is* a call to change. That's how the healing comes and He will help you do it.

Third, it's a call to community. We often focus on the me-and-Jesus aspect of our relationship with God. And that's good – passages like the 23rd Psalm remind us that the Lord is our Shepherd, it's very personal between us. He walks with us even through the valley of the shadow of death. And passages like John 15 remind us of the importance of abiding in the vine, again very personal, us and Jesus.

But when Jesus calls you to Himself, He's also calling you to join the other people who are already with Him. That can be hard at times, both for you and for them. Andrew, Peter, James and John had to deal with the fact that Jesus also called Levi and they had to learn: you can't be a fisher of men with contempt in your heart toward those who need salvation. You have to ask God to help you see the soul beneath the sin and to remember: we're all sinners saved by grace. Let it never be said that you or I as a Christian, or this church, were the reason why someone wouldn't come or couldn't follow Him.

Church, it's really, really easy to become scribes and Pharisees and forget that Jesus calls **sinners** closer to Himself. Jesus, the Great Physician restores and renews the identity of men like Levi and women like Mary Magdalene or the Samaritan women at the well, or the one caught in adultery. They were sinners, but Jesus called them to come to Him and find forgiveness. Which, in a sense, is just another miraculous healing. Only this time it's not a fever or leprosy or paralysis, it's relational, emotional, and psychological healing which, again, can be just as much of a miracle.

Fourth and final point I want to make. Up until this moment, Levi has spent his life in government service. Now he's entering the **service of the True King**. He'll be a civil servant of another sort in the Kingdom of God instead of the empire of Rome. He'll do it with honesty, integrity, and out of concern for others. The man who once pressured people to pay taxes will now offer them the gospel free of charge and he'll write it all down so it's available to others long after he's gone.

The man committed some horrible sins. Made some really bad choices. Hurt some people seriously as he did what he felt he had to do to meet his own needs. But God redeemed his life and the second half of it was almost unrecognizable compared to the first.

Could God do something like this for you? Of course. *Would God* do something like that for you? Well, listen, do you hear His voice? Can you hear the Shepherd calling? [Follow Me](#). Follow ME today. You weren't looking for Me, but the call came anyway. You're not sure how it's going to turn out. Follow Me anyway. You're not sure where it's all going. Follow Me anyway.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 2:13-17 Jesus Came to Call Sinners

Summary: Jesus calls unlikely people to join His team.

NOTE: Some may have seen the series *The Chosen* which represents Matthew as somewhere on the autism scale demonstrating signs of Asperger's or OCD. While this certainly is possible, please remember it represents the imagination of a creative team and has no link to Scripture. If you are familiar with the show, I encourage you to work hard not to let what you've seen in the series begin to interpret everything you read in Scripture. You've seen one possible idea of what Levi/Matthew was like, there are other possibilities too.

- What are the benefits of seeing Scripture presented on the stage or in movies and television?
 - What are the drawbacks or what cautions are helpful?
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- What is more difficult for you – believing that Jesus would call you to follow Him or responding to other people that He has called? Are you more likely to be Levi or the fishermen?
 - What groups do you have a bias against? Who would Christians consider tax-collectors today? Who do Christians treat as outsiders? _____ and sinners.
 - o How can we repent and ask God to help us to see tax collectors the way He does and love them with His love?
 - How does someone become a tax collector? What kind of problem might they be trying to solve by taking this drastic option?
 - o Is it possible to enjoy being a tax collector?
 - o Have you ever been a tax collector yourself? What did you leave behind to follow Jesus?
 - What do you learn about Jesus' heart from His call of Levi and His willingness to come to dinner with those in need of a physician? What does this communicate to about His acceptance of and willingness to be with you?