

## Wheelersburg Baptist Church 7/11/04 Brad Brandt

### Mark 2:13-22 "Jesus and Sinners" \*\*

Main Idea: Jesus' attitude toward sinners produced controversy. Indeed, He cared enough to be controversial. In Mark 2:13-22 we see two things about Jesus that produced controversy.

I. Jesus' associations were controversial (13-17).

A. He reached out to unlikely people (13-14).

1. Discipleship is personal.
2. Discipleship involves change.

B. He spent time in unexpected places (15-16).

1. He went after down-and-outers.
2. He went after up-and-outers.

C. He operated by an uncomplicated perspective (17).

1. You can't help people who don't think they need it.
2. You can help sinners.

II. Jesus' actions were controversial (18-22).

A. His disciples didn't fast (18).

B. He explained why (19-22).

1. You don't fast when it's time to celebrate (19-20).
2. You don't sew new cloth into an old garment (21).
3. You don't pour new wine into old skins (22).
4. You don't make the Messiah fit into a man-made, religious system.

Response: Ponder three questions...

1. What do sinners think of you?
2. What do *you* think of you?
3. What does Jesus think of you?

Jesus is a friend of sinners.

Is that a good thing? "Sure it is," you say. "I wouldn't be in church today were it not true." That's right, of course. None of us would be here apart from His amazing love for sinners.

But the fact that Jesus is a friend of sinners refers not only to you and people like you, but to all kinds of sinners including folks whose sin may be offensive to us.

Not long after we moved into our current facility in 1990 we faced a dilemma. We now had a beautiful, new place to worship the Lord. We also were attracting new people, *sinners* to be precise. Two of these sinners happened to be young boys who were quite mischievous, both from rough home situations, both non-churched, both with a "destructive bent," if you know what I mean. One of our children's workers came to me, visibly upset, and said, "You know about... (and he named the two boys). Well, so-and-so told me he's upset about how the boys are disturbing things around here in our new church, and that I need to tell them not to come back. What should I do? They need to be here, don't they?"

It was a deciding moment for our youth ministry. What's more important—a spotless facility or reaching sin-stained young people? Do we really want Jesus to be a friend of sinners?

Did you realize that at this very point Jesus was controversial? There's no escaping that fact. Jesus' attitude toward sinners produced controversy.

Granted controversy is often a bad thing, for frequently it's generated by self-interest. But at times it's the caring thing to do to risk controversy motivated by the glory of God and the good of others.

Many people have a twisted and narrow view of Jesus. Mark shows us who He is *really*, as we have been seeing in our current series, "Straight Talk about Jesus," an expository study of the gospel of Mark.

The real Jesus cared enough to be controversial, especially in the way He related to "sinners." Indeed, from Mark 2:1 through 3:6 Mark records five controversies that took place in Jesus' life while He was in the Capernaum area:

2:1-12 Jesus told a paralytic his sins were forgiven.

2:13-17 Jesus ate with sinners at Levi's house.

2:18-22 Jesus didn't teach His disciples to fast.

2:23-27 Jesus picked grain on the Sabbath.

3:1-6 Jesus healed on the Sabbath.

Each of the controversies pitted Jesus against the religious leaders of the day. We're going to focus on the second and third incidents this morning. In Mark 2:13-22 we'll see two things about Jesus and His relationship with sinners that produced controversy.

#### I. Jesus' associations were controversial (13-17).

By "associations" I'm referring to the kind of people with whom Jesus associated. Who did Jesus spend time with? In the account before us we discover three realities concerning the Master's associations.

A. He reached out to unlikely people (13-14). Verse 13 begins, "Once again Jesus went out beside the lake." The lake, of course, refers to the Sea of Galilee. Mark revealed the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry in chapter 1 and showed His emphasis on ministry in the Galilee region. He set up headquarters in Capernaum. It was in Capernaum that, as we saw last time, Jesus healed the paralytic. Now He heads back to the lake.

Verse 13 tells what happened next, "A large crowd came to him." That's not surprising. Jesus attracted crowds wherever He went, including individuals who were hurting and searching, others who were curious, and still others who were just looking for a good show from the "Miracle Worker."

Please note that Jesus went *to the people*. Here He went to the lake, to a place where He could meet people. Indeed, the Good Shepherd had come to seek the lost.

What did He do when the multitude gathered? What He did wherever He went. Verse 13—"And he began to teach them." It's what people needed most from Him, not miracles but teaching. Not entertainment but edification. He taught them, not in the synagogue now but by the lake, right out where they lived and worked.

But there was one particular man on Jesus' omniscient heart that day. Yes, no matter how large the crowd the Savior sees individuals and not just masses.

Verse 14—"As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him."

One of the things you can't help but see when reading Jesus' biography is that He deliberately spent time

associating with people considered outcasts by the religious. Though Himself sinless, He was a friend of sinners. Case in point, Levi.

Levi was actually his given name. We know him better as "Matthew" ("gift of God"), his apostolic name. Matthew, the man the Spirit of God later used to write the first book of the New Testament. But that was much later, indeed, that would have been the last thing you would expect Matthew to write if you had come to his tax booth prior to this day.

You see, this man Levi was an agent of Herod Antipas, the half-Edomite. He was a tax collector and as such was considered a traitor by Jews.

Mark says he was sitting at his collection booth. There was a major trade route that ran from Damascus to the Mediterranean coast that ran through Capernaum. Travelers had to "pay up" at Capernaum—and Levi was there to do the collecting.

Levi was a hated man. It's well-documented that the tax collectors of the day took advantage of the people by overcharging them and keeping the excess.

How ironic! Levi—what a good name, named for the son of Jacob in charge of the priesthood. But this Levi is a sellout, a man who used his own Jewish people to line his pockets with gold.

The text doesn't say but I assume Levi has been listening to Jesus, either in person or at least by second-hand report. Hardly a person in Galilee hadn't heard of Jesus by this time.

As Levi pondered Jesus' message he began to see himself differently. He was no longer a powerful rich man, but a poverty-stricken wretch wearing rags of self-righteousness. He began to loathe his own sinfulness. He started to long to be set free from the greedy passions of his depraved heart that enslaved him.

And Jesus came to him, to HIM! He came right to his place of employment, right to his tax desk, and spoke two words that would change his life forever. *Follow me.*

That's just like Jesus, isn't it? Jesus wants the person no one else wants. Jesus offers friendship to the person all others would scorn to call a friend.

Follow me. That simple command teaches us two critical lessons about discipleship.

*1. Discipleship is personal.* Follow me, Jesus said. What an invitation! Jesus didn't tell Levi to go get his life cleaned up and then maybe, just maybe, there might be room for him on the waiting list. No, the invitation was clear. Follow me.

But it's more than an invitation. It's a command. Follow me. To be a disciple you must come to know the person of Jesus Christ. You must acknowledge the painful truth about yourself and your sin, then acknowledge the wonderful truth about Jesus the Savior, and follow Him. It's personal.

*2. Discipleship involves change.* To follow Jesus meant that Levi had to do something. What? He had to get up out of his seat and walk away from his tax booth. Just think what he was leaving—money, position, power, and more. It costs to be Jesus' disciple. Luke says that Levi "left everything behind" (Luke 5:28).

It's possible this cost was greater for Levi than any of the other disciples. Think about it. If it didn't pan out for Peter, Andrew, James, and John, for instance, they could always go back to fishing. But there was no turning back for Levi. When he left his table that day, he burned his bridges. He said, "All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give. I will ever love and trust Him, in His presence daily live. *I surrender all.*"

He did. And it was worth it. As Samuel Rutherford would say, "O my sweet Lord Jesus, a smile from Thee is better than kingdoms."

Levi lost his toll booth, but he gained the kingdom. He said goodbye to big paychecks and comfortable living, but for the first time in his life he began to lay up treasures in heaven.

Commentators have suggested that the only thing Levi took with him was his pen for this man would later be the Spirit's instrument to write the gospel that bears his name, *Matthew*.

When it came to associations, Jesus reached out to unlikely people. That's reality #1.

B. He spent time in unexpected places (15-16). Here's an example, verse 15—"While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house." Whoa! Where did Jesus go? To the house of a tax collector, to Levi's house. That in itself raised a few eyebrows. This added fuel to the fire.

Verse 15 again—"Many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him." It's one thing to see Jesus interacting with one tax collector. Now He's rubbing shoulders with a whole bunch of them.

What are they doing at Levi's house? Luke's account indicates that Matthew gave a big reception for Jesus at his house and invited his former work associates and others (Luke 5:29).

There wasn't a good man on the list, only tax collectors and sinners. And don't miss the word *many*. The place was packed with what we might call the "low life" of society.

Why did they come? It's one thing to get an invitation but why would this kind of crowd come to be with a Jewish rabbi? The final words of verse 15 give a clue. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that Levi's business associates and others came to this meal, but Mark alone mentions that these folks were also, like Levi, *following Him*. They, too, were fed up with their sinful life. They, too, longed to be different. They, too, believed that Jesus was the answer.

You say, "I don't get it. What would motivate these men and women to leave good paying jobs and follow Jesus?" The same thing that inspired Levi. There's something more important than the economy.

It's amazing to think about the kind of people Jesus included on His team. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were men who worked with their hands, fishermen. Levi was a crafty tax collector, a man who sided with the Romans. Simon the Zealot was probably part of a group that sought to eliminate men like Levi, for they hated the Romans and especially hated Jews who sold their souls to the Romans.

That's what you found in the early church. You worshiped next to folks who once were your enemies, who used to rip you off, who belonged to different political parties. They had differences! But they also had something in common that far surpassed their differences. They all had *Jesus*, and that was enough.

Do we believe that? Is Jesus enough to reconcile sinners, not only to God but also to each other?

Unfortunately, not everybody believes that. Look at verse 16—"When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

Jesus' associations didn't go unnoticed. The religious elite, particularly the Pharisees, didn't like what they saw. The first century historian Josephus said, "The Pharisees [are] a body of Jews with the reputation of excelling the rest of their nation in the observance of religion, and as exact exponents of the laws."

It's interesting that the Pharisees took their criticism, not to Jesus, but to *His disciples*. "Hey, Peter, what's your Rabbi doing at that scoundrel Levi's house, eating with that low-life?"

It wouldn't be the last occasion Jesus spent time in unexpected places, either. The theme verse of Mark is Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." And the *many* He came to ransom included sinners from two very different backgrounds...

1. *He went after down-and-outers*. Prostitutes, tax collectors, "sinners." But also...

2. *He went after up-and-outers*. The religious sinners, including the ones criticizing Him in this account. It was to the up-and-outers Jesus turned His attention next. Verse 17—"On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

That brings us to the third reality concerning Jesus' associations. Unlikely people. Unexpected places. And...

C. He operated by an uncomplicated perspective (17). Here's the perspective, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

As a pastor I've visited a lot of hospitals over the years. I've seen a lot of people in hospitals over the years. I'd like to share an observation. It's profound. As a general rule healthy people don't go to hospitals!

Jesus knew two things we tend to forget. It's very uncomplicated...

1. *You can't help people who don't think they need it*. "It's not the healthy who need a doctor...I have not come to call the righteous."

2. *You can help sinners*. "The sick need a doctor...I have come to call *sinners*."

To put it another way, Jesus came to rescue sinners, not commend the self-righteous. He called people to salvation, not self-reformation. In order to benefit one must admit their *need*.

A. M. Hunter observes, "It would be true to say that this word of Jesus strikes the keynote of the Gospel. The new thing in Christianity is not the doctrine that God saves sinners. No Jew would have denied that. It is the assertion 'that God loves and saves them *as sinners*.' This is the authentic and glorious doctrine of true Christianity in any age."

Please keep in mind that Jesus never excused sin. No Pharisee used any stronger language to condemn sin than did Jesus.

But when a person became a follower of Jesus he ceased to be what he had been, a person who lived his own way in violation of God's law. Luke's parallel adds the words (in Luke 5:32), "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners *to repentance*." Jesus meets sinners right where they are—but He doesn't leave them there! We sing "Just As I Am," and it's wonderful, for Jesus invites us to come just as we are. But as we come we must admit we are sick and needing to change.

Love the sinner, hate the sin. The Pharisees missed that balance. Jesus modeled it perfectly. That's why we are here today.

My friend, Jesus operated by an uncomplicated perspective and so must we. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." What a physician Jesus is! He sees our needs. He makes a perfect diagnosis and then provides the cure. Why, He even pays the bill!

I love the little poem that missionary C. T. Studd used to quote:

*Some want to live within the sound*

*Of Church or Chapel bell;*

*I want to run a rescue shop*

*Within a yard of hell.*

It's great to know Jesus is a friend to sinners. We're seeing that it's also controversial. The friction continues in Mark's next episode. When it came to Jesus' relationship with sinners His associations were controversial. Furthermore...

## II. Jesus' actions were controversial (18-22).

In the previous controversy the critics asked Jesus' disciples a question about Jesus. In the present controversy they asked Jesus a question about His disciples. One particular action stirred the pot according to Mark, *fasting*.

A. His disciples didn't fast (18). "Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people [Matthew's account indicates that it was the disciples of John that came to Jesus with this question, in Matt 9:14] came and asked Jesus, 'How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?'"

Here's the problem. The John's disciples fasted. The Pharisees fasted. Jesus' disciples didn't fast, at least that's what the critics said to Jesus. Why not? they wanted to know. And the unspoken question, What don't You do a better job of teaching them, Jesus?

We must affirm at the outset that fasting is a good thing. In the Old Testament the Lord instructed His people to fast. When? Once a year on the Day of Atonement. We see fasting used on other occasions as well in the Old Testament (see Zech 5:5-7; Jonah 3:7; Isaiah 58:3ff).

But unfortunately, what God commanded for one day and allowed on other days, people eventually expanded into a meaningless religious ritual. By Jesus' day zealous Jews turned fasting into a mandatory twice a week tradition, fasting every Monday and Thursday.

Significantly, Jesus paid little attention to their fast days, not to mention the rest of the human traditions they imposed on God's commands. Indeed, at times He ignored such commands intentionally to the consternation of the Pharisees.

So His disciples didn't fast, the "fasters" pointed out, waiting for a reply.

B. He explained why (19-22). Jesus used three illustrations to defend His disciples' actions (and His leadership).

1. *You don't fast when it's time to celebrate (19-20)*. Verses 19-20 "Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.'"

Barclay gives some helpful background: "After a Jewish wedding the couple did not go away for a honeymoon; they stayed at home. For a week or so open house was kept and there was continual feasting and rejoicing. In a hard wrought life the wedding week was the happiest week in a man's life. To that week of

happiness were invited the closest friends of the bride and bridegroom; they were called by the name *children of the bridechamber*. . . There was actually a rabbinic ruling which said, 'All in attendance on the bridegroom are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy.'

Jesus likened His disciples to the children of the bridechamber. How could they fast? Fasting is a sign of mourning. You don't mourn at weddings. It's not appropriate, not while He, the Bridegroom, is here.

J. D. Jones calls it "the principle of appropriateness," explaining, "It was ridiculous, He said, to expect the sons of the bride-chamber to fast in a wedding week. The outward must always be the expression of the inward, and there is absolutely no merit in the outward form unless the inward feeling is congruous with it."

Take this to heart. Our act of worship means nothing to God unless it comes from a *heart* of worship.

Consider the parent who quizzes the child, "Did you say your prayers?" Are prayers to be merely words we say? No. Indeed, words said to God are pointless (and can be condemning) unless they proceed from a praying soul.

God hates outward form that isn't matched by inward feeling.

Even a casual reading of the gospels reveals a stark contrast between Jesus and the stiff Pharisees and somewhat ascetic followers of John the Baptist. Jesus went to parties, played with children, and ate meals in the homes of ordinary people.

You don't fast when it's time to celebrate. When the Son of God comes into your life, it's time to celebrate.

By the way, don't miss the hint in verse 20 of Jesus' coming death, resurrection, and return to heaven. The Bridegroom was going to leave. Then there would be fasting for in that time of absence there would be seasons of sorrow and struggle. That's not to say joy is gone, for it's not (He didn't leave us as orphans but sent the Spirit; the fruit of the Spirit is *joy*). Joy is the norm, but we still miss the Bridegroom and long for His return.

Jesus gave a second illustration to defend His actions in verse 21...

2. *You don't sew new cloth into an old garment (21)*. "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse."

If you take a new piece of cloth and try to patch up an old piece of clothing, you'll have problems. When washed the stitches will rip out and you'll have wasted the new cloth and ruined the old clothing.

What's Jesus' point? He's certainly not saying that the old economy (in the Old Testament) is bad, for God Himself had given it and Jesus elsewhere said He had come, not to destroy it but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17).

Nor is Jesus saying that new is always better than old (indeed, to change metaphors, before we start moving fences we should find out why they were put there in the first place).

Jesus' point is that old forms are insufficient for the newness He was inaugurating. It's not that the old forms were necessarily bad, just insufficient. A third illustration...

3. *You don't pour new wine into old skins (22)*. "And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."

They didn't have bottles in that day. Wine was kept in goatskins. New skins would be soft and pliable and

allow for expansion due to the fermentation process. Old skins, however, became brittle after stretching many times. Thus, to place new wine in an old skin would not only break the skin but also cause the loss of new wine as it sprayed all over the floor.

So there are three things you don't do. You don't fast at a wedding. You don't sew new cloth into an old garment. And you don't pour new wine into old skins. After the three illustrations Jesus stopped and let the unspoken implication sink in...

*4. You don't make the Messiah fit into a man-made, religious system.* Again, you can't confine the newness of Jesus to old forms. A new spirit must find new forms of expression.

Jesus came to introduce the new, not patch up the old. Quite frankly, the religious leaders were impressed by Jesus and would have welcomed Him had He agreed to mix some of His "new" ideas into their "old" system. But that was impossible. Their system couldn't contain the reality He offered. It couldn't hold it. It would rip apart like a garment. It would burst open like wineskins.

Wiersbe offers a helpful illustration. If you take an acorn and plant it, it grows into something new, an oak tree. The tree is linked to the past for sure, but it's actually something very new. The acorn is destroyed by being fulfilled.

Jesus didn't come to patch up an old system. He came to fulfill the Law of God by keeping it perfectly and then by dying to pay the required penalty for lawbreakers. By His death on the cross He cancelled the written code and opened up a new and living way.

To put it simply, religion can't save anyone. Only a relationship with Christ can do that.

Response: Ponder three questions...

*1. What do sinners think of you?* They came to Levi's house. They wanted to be with Jesus. Do they come to you? Is the door of your life open to them?

*2. What do **you** think of you?* With this question I have in mind the religious leaders. They saw themselves as *healthy* rather than sick, as righteous rather than as sinful. How do you see yourself?

I like what John Newton said. "When I get to heaven I expect three surprises. First, I'll see people there I didn't expect to see. Two, I'll not see other people there that I expected to see. And three, I'll be amazed that I am there."

What do you think of *you*? But the real question is the last. It's not what others think, or even what you think, but...

*3. What does Jesus think of you?* Do you belong to Him? Hear Him: "Follow me."