

## The Mission of the Gospel

*Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom*

Mark 2:13-17

March 5, 2017

Randy Lovelace

We continue this morning in the Gospel of Mark. We are this morning in Mark 2:13-17. This is a continued drama of tension that is slowly or quickly building throughout the Gospel of Mark. Last week Pastor Mayfield brought to us the healing of the paralytic who has dropped down through the roof, but instead of healing him first, Jesus forgives him—thereby inferring that indeed, he is God, because only God can forgive. This caused quite a controversy among those who were the religious leaders of Israel.

The drama continues in this passage as we see Jesus continuing in a very unpredictable journey. And it's important in that it gives us a framework to understand the entirety of Jesus's ministry. And it is a way in which each and every one of us are to enter into and to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a specific work in this man's, Levi's, life. But it is to serve as an invitation to us all to join the mission of the gospel. But it also means that we have to understand what the mission actually is. Mark 2:13-17.

<sup>13</sup> He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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?" <sup>17</sup> 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."

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Will you pray with me. We now humble ourselves before you and before this story recorded for us in the Gospel of Mark. Lord, help us to see what you are doing, not just in the past, but in this very room this day, that we might understand what the mission of the gospel is and what it means for us to receive it, and then to join it. Help us, we pray. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

In this passage, you'll see in your outline, it has some very distinct parts. It's easy to follow. You see very clearly there is a **Calling**, there is a **Fellowship**, there is a **Protest** and there is an **Announcement**. **Calling**, a **Fellowship**, a **Protest**, and **Announcement**. Again, continuing in this very quiet theme of what will you do with Jesus, How do you respond. There are very clear responses in this passage. So together let's dig down.

You see the **Calling** there first. As Jesus was teaching he clearly had a large crowd that was following him. And he decided, as he was going along the way he saw this one as he passed by and his name is Levi, son of Alphaeus. Now Levi is interesting because it would have come—the name—directly from what is known as the Levitical order of Israel. The Levitical order is the priestly order of the Old Testament. So is not an insignificant name. Levi also will become known as Matthew, as the writer of [what] we know as the Gospel of Matthew. It tells us here that he was sitting at a tax booth and Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Now here it is an imperative. It is a command that demands a response. Levi—Matthew—quickly responds, because the passage tells us that he did. It says he rose and he followed him.

What we notice in this calling is that which Jesus is continuing to do. He does it right after we just saw the healing of the paralytic. And it's this. The calling that Jesus gives here is unpredictable. Not that Jesus calls—that's not what's unpredictable. The fact that who he calls is the unpredictable. Because we need to be aware of what he was doing in calling Levi. That is, he tells us here that he was a tax collector. That's the unpredictability of it all. And we need to dig down a little bit deeper, and here I want to draw on direct historical background for what kind of tax collector Levi was. Now in this area of Galilee, or Judea, what we understand is that this would not have been a place where there would have been a poll tax, because Judea was not yet under the heavy hand of Roman rule, though it was clearly under Roman influence. What that meant was is that the kind of taxes which were levied in Galilee in this part of Judea was what we would consider to be transport tax. So if you were bringing goods through this area there were these particular booths that you would have to go by, and you would have to pay a tax. What this means is, because this was not under direct Roman rule, but rather Roman influence, what that meant was, is that Rome would have had a middleman. So Antipas would have levied very interesting and very helpful taxes for him by way of transport tax, but he would have a middleman. And that middleman would have employed others. Now what's particularly interesting is that Levi was a Jew. So here we have a Jew working for a middleman who then gave the money to the Roman government. A Jew who was a tax collector was seen as a traitor. In fact, worse than a sinner—the lowest of the low, because they were taxing their own people and giving it to the powers that be.

The reason this is important is Jesus would call people who were seen as outcasts, traitors to their very people; he would call them to serve as his disciples. And how ironic, if you're familiar at all with the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel of Matthew is particularly thinking as an audience, the Jews. What it demonstrates is that Jesus, though his calling a particular people is unpredictable, it is for a reason. He doesn't fit inside of our boxes. And those he calls to himself in discipleship to follow him are often the last people we would expect. This is important for us over and over to be reminded, that even those who seem to be the furthest away from the kingdom of Christ are oftentimes those who are just on the fence. We do just as the Pharisees would have done, just as the Jews of that day would have done. We would have looked upon them and said, Are you kidding me?!? These are folks who are enemies of ours! And here Jesus says, Hmm, I have a different plan. We need to keep that in mind moving forward.

It is not only a calling that is unpredictable, it is also a sign. Because it is a sign of what calling actually looks like. The word 'church' comes from the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means the called out ones. To be called out means you are being called from. You are leaving something and going somewhere else. You were following someone and you begin to follow someone

else. Here Jesus is calling out, and when he says, “Follow me,” this is what it means to follow Jesus. This is what discipleship is. We leave one way of life, of adherence to one kind of..., a certain set of priorities, a certain set of beliefs, of being beholden to certain kinds of relationships—and leaving those and turning to follow Jesus, [even] if it means giving up that which we used to call precious, that which we used to call important, that which we used to call a means of income, even. It means leaving. Being called out from and being called to.

And it tells us here, “And he rose and followed him.” He gave up his income. He gave up all kinds of relationships. Not only was on a fall out with the Jewish nation, the Jewish people, but what about his other network of tax collectors? Well, we learn he actually calls them, too, which is interesting. He's being called out; well, he's going to call out others, as well. But it's a demonstration that being called to Christ doesn't mean we call Jesus in as an accessory, as I've said before, to our already well-lived lives. We don't fit Jesus in. He doesn't become the book cover to our lives. He doesn't become the paint on the exterior of our houses. He doesn't just become a verbal profession. He becomes the center of who we are and what we are and how we do it and even what we do. He becomes Lord. And to give up and to follow him means asking the serious question: Who really is our Lord? Levi demonstrates with the calling of Jesus is a sign of what it means to follow him. It means giving up. But it means also giving over ourselves to Christ.

But we see here that it moves from calling to verse 15 where he says, “As he reclined at table in his house,” meaning Levi's house, “many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.” Hmm. I am so grateful for this testimony of God's word, because it demonstrates the kind of Savior and Redeemer and Messiah that Jesus is. Jesus makes a habit of calling on and investing in those who are clearly from the wrong side of the tracks. Jesus makes a habit of calling those and investing in those who are clearly from the wrong side of the tracks. Those who have been rejected—and here even those who have been rejected by their own people, by their own religion. Jesus still makes a habit of hanging out with people who clearly recognize that they need something. They are willing to admit their need. They are willing to submit and demonstrate that they are in need of fellowship, relationship, something more than what they are presently experiencing. That no matter what they have, they recognize that they're willing to lay it aside, knowing that this is one who does not judge me, one who loves me, one who is willing to be seen with me. Because table fellowship that Levi puts on here. . . It's clear that though it's in his house, he's not the host. Jesus is the host. And what it tells us is that he's also willing to call others and say you need to meet this guy.

And what table **Fellowship** meant in that day is, to have table fellowship meant that you were willing to be identified with, in relationship with, in some form of intimacy with—yet we recognize it doesn't mean that Jesus was falling into the participation of whatever their sins might have been, but rather he wasn't afraid of saying as Messiah, as Savior, as the Son of the living God, who forgives—no one, no one is too long for his reach. That even though the society and the culture may say we write them off, Jesus doesn't write people off. He's willing to have fellowship. The implications of this relationship, the implications of this kind of identification in participation is an enormous road sign for us as the people of God if you profess faith in Christ. This is precisely what the gospel of Jesus Christ looks like. Because what you see is, Jesus, in calling people to himself that are the most unpredictable to be called, demonstrates that the

Kingdom of God is always one of expanse, not one of protection. Jesus is not about protecting a culture, he's not about protecting a nation, he's not about protecting a socio-economic class. He's about expanding the kingdom of God's grace to welcome all who are willing to acknowledge that they are sinners and in need of grace. And all are welcome. This is what unity looks like. And Jesus goes against Israel, he goes against the religious leaders. He's not concerned about the cultural implications. He's willing to do what? Willing to lay himself down to welcome in.

What a beautiful, beautiful thing for the church of Jesus Christ in 2017. All are welcome to come and hear of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. That God's love is for everyone, but God's love will not leave us the same. He calls us into fellowship with him, he calls us into intimacy with him, but the call is universal and without preferential treatment. It is the kind of fellowship that can only be established by the God of eternity, by the God of love, by the God of grace and mercy. Are you one who feels rejected? Are you one who feels that you are not welcome? God's Grace tells us very differently. All are welcome for his grace is sufficient.

But they didn't like it. There was **Protest**. You see here in verse 16: "And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw he was eating with tax collectors and sinners, said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" I'm also grateful for this question, because it brings out a very honest thing from the inside out to the surface. The question is, given their religious, given their cultural background, their question makes complete sense. Who wouldn't ask this?! This is a bit like asking an enemy of the state to be welcomed into this room. An enemy of the United States, an enemy of our culture, one who would prey upon our culture is being welcomed in. And it makes enough sense. . . That their religious reasons make enough sense for it to be a suitable veneer. It seems to be the right question to ask. It is, in other words, a way of saying why does Jesus. . . Why is he so drawn to those who seem so bent on hurting us?

What it demonstrates for us underneath, though it has a cultural and religious veneer, it actually demonstrates something that's underneath all sin. And it is the power of pride. And pride is bi-directional. On each end of pride we hear those who have a false humility in believing that God's arm is not long enough. He can't do enough to save me; I'm not worthy. So it has a sense in which it seems to have an air of humility, but in fact it's actually pumped up on pride. It's saying God is not great enough. Jesus's arm and grace is not full enough to reach me. But on the other end of the spectrum—which is clearly in view here with regard to the scribes of the Pharisees—is that how can God's arm be so long? And so they sit in judgment; they sit in arrogant pride. Both are prideful responses, even though they look very different. But the beauty is this: that Jesus uses their question as an opportunity, their protest as an opportunity to demonstrate that grace, when it is at work, undoes all of our pride. God's arm is ~~never ever~~ [always] long enough and it is never too short. That regardless of socio-economic status, race, class, whatever your ethnicity might be, whatever your religious background might be, it doesn't matter. Jesus simply says come to me. My grace is sufficient to make you new. This is what Jesus is about. And he uses the protest, he uses the question as a springboard to make this announcement.

But before I go there I want to give you this. When you think about where you might be or where you may not be on the spectrum of pride, I must say pride is often operating as the

default operating system in our hearts in various ways. It is the chief sin, which is often the fertile ground for all other sins. And we must be careful, because it lurks; we are easily susceptible. And this passage. . . If you were thinking of someone that you would find hard to believe that the Lord would reach them, if you thought of anybody—note—and you've had trouble with that, I hope this passage offends your sensibilities as it does mine. For a few years ago someone who had hurt me greatly—I had a hard time believing, I had a hard time forgiving. It took nearly thirty years for me to get to the point where I could forgive this person, though they were not asking me. And it wasn't until a sunny, warm afternoon while on my bike, out of the middle of nowhere like a lightning strike in my heart and my mind. . . I happened to be listening to a song that had nothing to do with the gospel, but it gave an image of a person who was lost, who was calling out for God. Yet they didn't understand the language because they wore a cross around their neck. And in that moment came this person to my mind and I began to wrestle with this question: Is this person too far off to be forgiven?

So I give you this thought from [C.S.] Lewis. He talks both about our economic status but also about our moral status when he says this: “One of the dangers of having a lot of money is that you might be quite satisfied with the kinds of happiness money can give and so fail to realize your need for God. If everything seems to come simply by signing checks, you may forget that you are at that very moment totally dependent on God. Now quite plainly, natural gifts carry with them a similar danger. If you have sound nerves and intelligence and health and popularity and a good upbringing you are likely to be quite satisfied with your character as it is. Why drag God into it? A certain level of good conduct comes fairly easy to you. You are not one of those wretched creatures who are always being tripped up by sex or nervousness or anxiety or anger. Everyone says you are a nice chap, and between ourselves, you quite agree with them. You are quite likely to believe that all of this niceness is your own doing, and you may easily not feel the need for any better kind of goodness. Often people who have all these natural kinds of goodness cannot be brought to recognize their need for Christ at all, until one day the natural goodness lets them down. Their self-satisfaction is shattered. In other words, it is hard for those who are rich in this to sense their need of being able to enter the Kingdom of God.”

These Pharisees, these scribes of the Pharisees, are no different than us. For many of us good health, good nature, education comes relatively easy. We are a rather beautiful lot. And it's so easy, so easy not to depend on Christ, but to pridefully depend upon ourselves and expect others to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. *Why can't they get the gospel?!?* as if it was something natural to us. Where are we on the spectrum of pride? Have we laid it down? Have we laid it down at Jesus' feet? That is the question.

But Jesus uses this protest to make his **Announcement**. And his announcement is an indictment, but also an indicator. That indictment is clearly on those who are sitting in arrogant judgment. “And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician...’” He took a quote right out of the culture that would have been known to them. Took it right out and he says, OK, that's one I'll get you with. So he had their attention. And he says, “...but those who are sick.” Well, of course. And then he says, “I came not to call the righteous...” So he peeks into their world, into their hearts, and he says you think you're righteous. I haven't come for you. I've come for those who are sinners. He's not suggesting that these scribes aren't sinners. That's not the point. And it's not a matter of that Levi was a tax collector. It doesn't matter, because Jesus doesn't only call people from the wrong side of the

tracks. The issue is this. Those whom he calls are those who recognize, regardless of their background or whoever they are, recognize that they have a need. And Christ's call and his grace pierces through all of the veneer and goes straight to the heart. The wealthy and the poor, the black and the white, the American and the refugee, the legal immigrant and the illegal immigrant, the Republican and the Democrat, the liberal and the conservative. This is Jesus's call, his announcement I have come to call you from the heart. The question is not who you are or where you're from, but are you willing to lay down your pride and acknowledge your need of forgiveness, acknowledge your need of a Savior. This is what Jesus is announcing.

As one of my favorite writers has said, God does not patch us up, putting bandages on those ruptured virtues we possess, either from personality or from intelligence. No, God gives us a new passageway to his spring, out of which living waters flow into us, through which we have union with Christ. And so I say, in the name that is above all names, the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings, Jesus Christ, I say to you: Have you come? Would you come and lay down your pride? Lay it down at Jesus' feet and in him finally and once and for all be joyously complete. Naked we come to him for dress. We bring nothing to the table. He brings all the grace, all the forgiveness, all the righteousness, all the love. And he calls us in. What is your answer? And if your answer is yes, who else can you invite to the party? Who else can you invite to Jesus? If you are not a believer this morning you are most welcome. We are glad that you are here. But he invites you to lay your pride down and receive him. Let's pray.

Lord, we need you this very hour. We acknowledge our pride, whether it is a false humility or an arrogance. Regardless of the veneer that is over our pride we confess it, that we so often become self-sufficient or we despair that your grace is enough. We are all desperately broken because of sin and in need of grace, and your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, welcomes us in. Lord, may we, by your Holy Spirit, respond as Levi did to follow you, to be renewed in that work, as well, this morning, even for those of us who have followed you for a long time. Lord, we never stop wrestling with pride. So we come again this morning and we lay it down at your feet. Have mercy upon us sinners. Have mercy upon us, O Lord. We are sinners. Forgive us and make us your own. In Jesus' name. Amen.