

## Another Disciple - Mark 2:13-17

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You may have noticed that there are two settings for our story today. Mark mentions Levi sitting in a "tax office" and He mentions Jesus dining at Levi's house. We have already considered what houses were like in Jesus' day. If you missed that sermon, I refer you to Al Schone, our audio/visual person. The sermon title was "Healing the Sick". Al may be able to give you a cassette tape or you can access the manuscript on our website, [lovinghope.com](http://lovinghope.com). Today we will consider the setting of Levi's tax office. The tax office was like a toll booth. It was a place where someone sat and collected taxes as people went by. I remember driving down Interstate 77 through West Virginia. We kept coming to more and more toll booths. Finally, I asked the person collecting tolls how many more there were. He said, "If you look real hard, you can almost see the next one right over there." Then he laughed and said, "Actually, this is the last one!" "I was starting to wonder," I replied. In Bible times the Roman Empire utilized what is called tax farming. It's a rather involved process, but basically the government "farmed" out the process of collecting taxes to private individuals. Tax collectors would bid how much they would give to the government and Rome would hire the highest bidder. The catch was that the money had to be paid to the government up front, which meant only wealthy people could qualify. If the tax collector brought in more than he had bid, he got to keep the excess, and he also collected interest from the government on the money he had paid out. As a result, many of these wealthy tax collectors became even wealthier. Often they were the "banks" of their society, lending out money at high interest rates. The Jews despised Rome's taxation. It was a reminder that they had lost their freedom. They believed Palestine was their land given to them by God. Any Jew who became a tax collector for Rome was immediately excommunicated from the synagogue. They were seen as betrayers and traitors. They were hated almost as much as lepers. What Jew wanted to pay tax to Rome, much less agree to collect Roman taxes from their own people? You can see why being a tax collector was so unpopular. Such was Levi's experience.

Now that we understand a little of the setting for our story today, let's consider a summary:

*Jesus continued teaching by the Sea of Galilee, not far from Capernaum. As He passed by Levi's tax office, Jesus invited Levi to follow Him. Levi accepted the invitation. Later Jesus and His disciples along with many tax collectors were eating at Levi's house. The scribes and Pharisees were offended that Jesus would keep company with these tax collectors. Jesus explained to them that He had come for people who were sinners, not for those who were righteous.*

What did Jesus experience in our story today? First, He experienced continued popularity. Mark says that "all the multitude" came to Him. Jesus took this opportunity to teach. In our last story Mark says Jesus was sharing God's message with the people in Simon's house. In our story today Mark says He "taught" the multitude. The difference being inferred here may be the difference between a small group discussion and an evangelist preaching to a large crowd. Second, Jesus experienced an addition to His group of followers. I believe when Jesus invited Levi to join His group of disciples, he was upsetting the equilibrium in the group a little bit. Up to this point Jesus has had four disciples who have left everything for Him. Jesus has many followers, but the disciples were those in the inner circle. These four disciples are Simon, Andrew, James, and John. They are all fishermen. In fact, they were all business partners. Simon and Andrew are brothers. James and John are brothers. So, it has been an intimate little group so far. In our story today Jesus calls a fifth person to leave everything and follow Him. Levi responds to the call. He brings a different atmosphere to the group. He is not a fisherman. Neither is he an associate or family member to the other four disciples. Certainly Levi brings some unique talents and abilities. His heart has responded to the Holy Spirit. These were the reasons Jesus chose Levi. He saw great potential in him. But, being that tax collectors were not very well liked, I believe his addition to the group created some friction with the other disciples.

Third, Jesus experienced recognition in our story. Luke records this same story in his account. In Luke 5:29 Luke mentions that "Levi gave Him (Jesus) a great feast". In other words, this was like a banquet where Jesus was the guest of honor. Levi was recognizing Him as the One who had noticed him when everyone else ignored him and as the One who had chosen him when everyone else had rejected him. But not only Levi gave

Jesus recognition. Mark says in chapter 2 verse 15 that many other tax collectors were there who also followed Him. So, Jesus is surrounded by people who have responded to His ministry. And at this banquet He receives recognition. Fourth, Jesus experienced in our story an effort to alienate. This effort was carried out by the scribes and Pharisees according to Mark 2:16. They were not happy that Jesus was socializing with these tax collectors and other people they labeled as "sinners". Their goal is to use this as an opportunity to destroy Jesus' popularity. They know that addressing Jesus with their concern will not do them any good, so they speak to His disciples - Simon, Andrew, James and John. They consider these guys to be uneducated and an easy prey for their trap. "How is it that He (Jesus) eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?" they ask. They try to overwhelm the disciples with their cynical question. They appeal to their prejudices. And as a result they hope to alienate the disciples from Jesus. Ultimately they would love to alienate the crowds from Jesus as well. If word got out that Jesus hung out with tax collectors and sinners, people who were hated by the crowds, their attitude toward Him could quickly and drastically change for the worse. So, Jesus experiences an effort to alienate.

Fifth and last of all, Jesus experienced jealousy. You may have never thought of Jesus being jealous. But do you remember the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment? (Exodus 20:3-6) "Thou shall not make unto thee any graven images...You shall not bow down to them nor serve them." And at the end God states, "For I, the LORD your God am a jealous God..." I believe our story is an illustration of this. Jesus answers the scribes and Pharisees before His disciples can. He steps in to prevent the planned alienation. I believe He got a little hot at this point. He acts quickly and deliberately. He clearly states that His actions are in harmony with His mission. "Does it not make sense that a physician would be where the people are sick? If you're so righteous, what are you doing here? You don't belong here. These people do." Mark doesn't record even a response from the scribes and Pharisees.

Now that we have considered what Jesus experience in our story today, what does Levi experience? By way of clarification, Levi is also referred to as Matthew in the Bible. In fact, he is thought to have been the author of the book of Matthew in the Bible. This same story is recorded by Matthew in chapter 9 of his book. In his account of this story he refers to himself as Matthew. This may have been his preferred name and/or his last name. First of all, Levi (or Matthew) experiences a call. It is a life-changing call. As a tax collector he probably was used to being ignored. So it must have come as a surprise when Jesus stopped at his tax office with a friendly gesture. How much more must he have been astounded when Jesus chose him. "Follow Me." What a call was this! Job security didn't hold him back. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for. I believe Levi had heard Jesus teach before. I believe he had witnessed some of Jesus' ministry prior to this call. His heart had been stirred and he wanted more time with this Rabbi. But he was stuck. Every rabbi he had ever met hated him. Jesus' call, though, solved all his problems. He immediately answered the call. Mark says "he arose and followed Him."

Second, Levi experienced being a host. Mark says that Jesus, His disciples, and many tax collectors and "sinners" were present that day at Levi's house. By inviting Jesus and his friends to his house for a meal, Levi gave Jesus a platform. It was an opportunity for Jesus to be heard. Today people might call this "friendship evangelism". Levi set the stage for his friends to meet Jesus, in order that they too might follow Him. Third, Levi experienced uninvited guests. Mark records that these uninvited guests were the scribes and Pharisees. These were people that Levi looked up to. They were his religious leaders. But they were also the ones who had ostracized him when he became a tax collector. Their influence led his fellow Jews to excommunicate him and view him with hatred. Now they had come to his house, not to give their blessing but to create a scene and essentially kill the party. They came uninvited and must have made Levi cringe when he saw them.

Fourth, Levi experienced protection. Levi must have breathed a sigh of relief when Jesus confronted the scribes and Pharisees. His words must have made Levi feel like someone important was standing up for him and his friends. Not only does Jesus announce that He is not ashamed of them, but that they are why He has come. The Messiah has come for people such as Levi.

Now that we have considered what Jesus and Levi experienced in our story today, let's consider how Jesus is revealed as our example. How does He in this story reveal what a healthy and dangerous Christian looks like?

First, I believe He is our example in that He was not enslaved to religious prejudice. The religion of Levi's day had enslaved the Jews in prejudice. This prejudice was felt by Levi. His fellow Jews were unable to look at Levi as a brother. They had labeled him as a traitor. Their hearts were filled with hatred and disgust for tax collectors like him. I'm sure they had good reasons for it, too. They believed the Roman's rule over them was a terrible wrong. They believed God had given them this land, and anyone who stood in the way of this was their enemy. People like Levi had disowned their fellow Jews and taken sides with the enemy. They took money and goods from them and gave it to the Romans, while making a profit themselves out of the whole deal. But Jesus looked past all these "good reasons" for the Jews prejudice against tax collectors, and noticed the individual. He noticed Levi in the tax office that day. He took the time to stop and talk to him. He saw what was on the inside of Levi, and responded to the desires in his heart. He noticed that inside Levi was responding to the work of the Holy Spirit. And so He invited Levi in to His inner circle of disciples. I believe a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who is not enslaved to religious prejudice. It is a sad reality that our religious beliefs can often be used to create prejudice in our hearts toward certain people. But prejudice blinds us. It prevents us from seeing the person as a child of God, who has been purchased with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. And as a result we often miss out on an opportunity to be a blessing. We fail to do what Jesus would do. We don't see who they are on the inside. Many of them are crying out for help. But because of prejudice we can't hear their cries. Jesus gives us our example. He shows us how a healthy and dangerous Christian lives. He shows us that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who is not enslaved to religious prejudice. It is someone who sees past a person's bad choices and is able to be used by God to be a blessing to them.

Second, I believe this story reveals Jesus as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian in that He mingled with sinners. The religion of Jesus' day said that the gathering at Levi's house was off limits. It was a place filled with questionable characters. It was a meal with a questionable menu. The food was unclean. It had not been prepared by hands that had been cleansed according to the religious traditions. The scribes and Pharisees had trained people to stay away from such places. But Jesus was free from these restrictions. He followed His Father wherever He directed Him. He went wherever people were responding to the Holy Spirit. Sure, there were people there with big problems. But Jesus was a bigger solution. I am glad Jesus mingled with sinners because that was the only way He could come to this earth. Everyone on earth is a sinner. But beyond that our story mentions "sinners" in a more narrow usage. "Sinners" were people who were guilty of especially objectionable sins. They were the scum of the earth in the eyes of the religious leaders in Jesus' day. Jesus declares in our story today that these people are why He has come.

I believe we learn from this story that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone whose mission is to reach out to those who have failed miserably. It's someone who spends their life mingling with sinners. They don't just hang out with people who are like them. Our human nature responds to others who are like us. That's why there are so many clubs and communities. We want to hang out with those who think like we do, who make us feel good about ourselves. But a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who is driven to follow in the steps of their Lord, and no one is too low for them to come along side. Jesus came for sinners, not for the righteous. Those who have messed up the worst are the ones who need our help the most. Our mission as Christians is to introduce people to Jesus. He is a mighty, all-encompassing Savior. He is a perfect fit for people with big problems. A healthy and dangerous Christian facilitates these two coming together. And in order to do this they mingle with sinners, as Jesus did in our story today.

I imagine that Levi must have felt stuck. I believe his heart responded to Jesus' teaching, but he felt he was too far gone to go back. He had burned bridges. He had made bad choices. He had aligned himself with Rome, the enemy of God's people. And as a result everybody in the church hated him. It seemed that even God had forsaken him. But Jesus' call was his solution. In a moment Levi was free from his predicament. The great chasm between where he was and where he wanted to be was crossed. Because of Jesus' call, Levi became part of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples.

Today, do you find yourself stuck? Is there a great chasm between who you are and who you want to be? Are you living in two worlds and hope they never cross? When you're alone or at work, you live in one world. When you're at church or around other Christians, you live in another world. You want to be free from this

awful struggle and mess. Today, Jesus has stopped. He has noticed your predicament. And He says, "Follow Me." This is your solution. His call is bridging the chasm between who you are and who you want to be. Arise and follow Him!