

## Exegesis and Exposition of Mark 2:13-17

## Historical and Literary Context

Most scholars agree that Mark's Gospel was probably written in Rome and read in the churches there (Guelich 1989, xxix). This carries with it the assumption that Mark was written to address certain concerns in the congregations for which it was written (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 681). If Mark was written in the mid to late 60's, then the occasion which prompted its writing may have been the widespread persecution of the Christians in Rome under the hand of the emperor Nero. A great fire wiped out most of the city in 64 AD. After widespread rumors circulated that Nero had ordered the fire, history tells us that Nero blamed the fire on the Christians living in Rome. A city-wide persecution ensued, and many followers of Christ were martyred (Lane 1974, 12-14). If Mark writes during this time, then his main purpose would seem to be to strengthen his Christian brothers and sisters in the midst of this heinous persecution.

Mark writes of the person and work of Jesus Christ, who himself faced many hardships and persecutions and to whom the persecuted church in Rome can relate (15). Mark places a strong emphasis on Jesus' power and messianic ministry while particularly highlighting Jesus' obedience to God in the midst of his suffering and death (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 688). So the readers of Mark's Gospel not only find a Jesus with whom they can identify but also a Jesus to whom they can look for an example and empowerment during their troublesome time. Mark repeatedly sets Jesus' faithfulness in contrast to the constant failures of the 12 disciples, not for the purpose of discrediting or undermining the apostles, but probably in order to encourage the church that God's faithfulness prevails even in the midst of human failure.

Mark begins his gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist who prepares the way before the coming Messiah (Mark 1:1-8). Then Jesus comes to the Jordan and is baptized by John. As Jesus comes up from the water, heaven opens and the Spirit descends upon him as a voice from heaven announces that Jesus is the Son of God (9-13). After being tempted by the devil in the wilderness for forty days, Jesus appoints his first four disciples and begins his ministry in Capernaum where he casts out an evil spirit and heals many sick people (14-34). Mark provides a glimpse into Jesus' prayer life, showing how he arose well before dawn and went to a secluded place to pray (35-38). Jesus then takes his disciples and travels throughout Galilee, preaching and casting out demons (39).

Next Mark tells the story of two miraculous healings. First, a man with leprosy comes to Jesus and asks to be healed. When Jesus speaks the word, the leper is healed. Jesus instructs the man not to tell what had happened to him, but the man disobeys Jesus' command and broadcasts it publicly. As a result, vast crowds begin to seek out and follow Jesus so that his ministry is hindered (40-45). The second one occurs after Jesus returns to Capernaum. Four men come to Jesus carrying a paralytic but cannot get to him because of the crowd which fills the house where he is. So they lower the paralyzed man down from the roof. Then Jesus tells the man that his sins are forgiven, which upsets the Jewish leaders. Then Jesus offers the healing of the paralytic as proof that he is able to

forgive sins, and he commands the paralytic to rise up and walk. The man does as Jesus commands him and everyone is astonished (2:1-12).

### Grammatical and Historical Analysis

Three variant readings are noted in the United Bible Society's (UBS) fourth edition of the Greek New Testament. The first variant concerns the name Levi (*Λευί*) in verse 14. Some manuscripts read *Λευί* while several Western and Caesarean manuscripts read *Ἰάκωβον* (Jacob). *Λευί* is most likely the original reading as it is supported by both the majority and the earliest of manuscripts. The second and third variants concern verse 16, more specifically the phrase *οἱ γραμματεῖς τῶν Φαρισαίων* (the scribes of the Pharisees) or *οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ Φαρισαῖοι* (the scribes and the Pharisees) is the original and whether the text should read *ἐσθίει* (he eats), *ἐσθίει καὶ πίνει* (he eats and drinks), *ἐσθίει ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν* (your teacher eats), or one of two variations of *ἐσθίει καὶ πίνει ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν* (your teacher eats and drinks).

Concerning the second variant, the UBS text reads *οἱ γραμματεῖς τῶν Φαρισαίων*, but many later manuscripts read *οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ Φαρισαῖοι* (the earlier Alexandrian C also takes this reading), *οἱ δὲ γραμματεῖς καὶ Φαρισαῖοι*, or *οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι*. Although the manuscript evidence is relatively split, both the earlier, most reliable evidence and the agreement of both **A** and **B** weigh heavily in favor of the former reading. According to Bruce Metzger, the less common reading *οἱ γραμματεῖς τῶν Φαρισαίων* is preferable because a scribe is more likely to have changed the uncommon phrase "the scribes of the Pharisees" to the more frequently occurring "the scribes and the Pharisees" (Metzger 1971, 78). Concerning the third variation, a natural tendency of scribes is to insert *καὶ πίνει* after *ἐσθίει* (78). The shorter reading is supported by some Alexandrian and Western manuscripts as well as Matthew's parallel (Matthew 9:11). The addition of *ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν* is likely a harmonization with Matthew (78).

### The Passage: Mark 2:13-17

And he went out again toward the sea; and all the crowd was coming to him, and he began teaching them. And passing by he saw Levi the (son) of Alphaeus sitting in the tax office, and he said to him; "Follow me." And, rising up, he followed him. And it came to pass that he reclined himself in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many and they were following him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, seeing that he eats with the sinners and tax collectors, were saying to his disciples, "He eats with the tax collectors and sinners?" And hearing (this), Jesus says to them, "The strong have no need of a physician but those having illness; I have not come to call righteous but sinners."

### Thesis Statement

Jesus fulfills his mission by calling sinners to follow him which leads to a confrontation with the religious elite.

#### Outline of Mark 2:13-17

- I. Transition (2:13)
  - A. Jesus departs toward the sea
  - B. The entire crowd follows him
  - C. Jesus teaches the crowd
- II. The Calling of Levi (14)
  - A. Jesus meets Levi
    1. Levi is in the tax office
  - B. Jesus calls Levi to follow him
    1. Levi arises and follows Jesus
- III. Banquet at Levi's house (15)
  - A. Jesus reclines in the house
  - B. Tax collectors and sinners recline with Jesus
    1. For they were many
    2. And they followed him
  - C. And with Jesus' disciples
- IV. The Scribes' Challenge (16)
  - A. The scribes notice the banquet
    1. That he eats with tax collectors and sinners
  - B. They ask Jesus' disciples
    1. He eats with tax collectors?
    2. He eats with sinners?"
- V. Jesus' Pronouncement (17)
  - A. After hearing them Jesus answers
    1. Those needing a doctor
      - a. Not the healthy
      - b. But the sick
    2. Jesus came to call
      - a. Not the righteous

## b. But sinners

## Jesus' Pronouncement

... χρείαν ἔχουσιν... ἰατροῦ

οὐ

οἱ ἰσχύοντες

ἀλλ'

οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες·

... ἦλθον καλέσαι

οὐκ

δικαίους

ἀλλὰ

ἁμαρτωλούς.

## Commentary

**13** *And he went out again toward the sea.* This abrupt transition sets the stage for the call narrative of Levi and the controversy that follows (Guelich 1989, 99). The setting is *τὴν θάλασσαν* (“the lake” or “the sea”), probably a reference to the Sea of Galilee (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 728). Jesus normally withdraws to a solitary place after performing mighty displays of God’s power (Lane 1974, 100). *And all the crowd was coming to him.* This statement shows Jesus’ popularity with the people of Galilee (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 728). Jesus’ attempt to get away is foiled by the pursuing crowds (Lane 1974, 100). *And he began teaching them.* Jesus’ response to the crowds which interrupt his attempted retreat is to graciously continue his teaching ministry.

**14** *And passing by he saw Levi the (son) of Alphaeus* The name “Levi” (*Λευί*) as a disciple of Jesus appears only here and in the parallel in Luke 5:27, here with the designation *τὸν τοῦ Ἀλφαίου* (Guelich 1989, 99). The parallel in Matthew 9:9 names the tax collector whom Jesus calls “Matthew.” Some later manuscript traditions read *Ἰάκωβον τὸν τοῦ Ἀλφαίου* (“James the son of Alpheus”), but this is most likely a harmonization with Mark 3:18 (Metzger 1971, 78). Nearly all of the earliest, most reliable manuscripts call the tax collector turned disciple “Levi.” One problem cited is that “Levi” does not appear in Mark’s list of the twelve disciples in 3:16-19 (Lane 1974, 100). It does not occur in Luke’s list either (Luke 6:14-16) nor in Matthew’s (Matthew

10:2-4). However, the name “Matthew” occurs in Mark’s list as well as in the lists found in both Matthew and Luke. Therefore, since Matthew’s parallel names the tax collector “Matthew,” both are most likely two names for the same person, such as “Simon Peter” (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 728). “James the son of Alpheus” also occurs in each of the three lists of Jesus disciples found in the Synoptics. Thus, this almost certainly refers to another person, possibly the brother of Levi (728).

*Sitting in the tax office.* The “tax office” was either a toll booth along the main road (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 728) or a tax booth near the sea for collecting taxes on the catches of fishermen (Lane 1974, 102). The former is more likely since there is no mention of Jesus actually arriving at the sea. Rather, he is probably walking along while teaching the crowd following him, as was the tradition of the rabbis (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 728). “*Follow me.*” *And, rising up, he followed him.* Jesus calls Levi to discipleship, a permanent decision for a tax collector, since this work was in high demand in first century Judea (729).

**15** *He reclined himself in his house.* On its face, this statement is ambiguous as to whether “his house” refers to Jesus’ house or Levi’s (Guelich 1989, 101). However, it is most likely Levi’s house, and either Levi is throwing a banquet in honor of his new teacher (Lane 1974, 103) or it is Levi’s goodbye dinner prior to departing with Jesus on his mission (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 729). Since the two are not mutually exclusive and both are equally speculative, both are equally possible. The phrase “reclined himself” has formal implications and probably indicates a banquet (729).

*Many tax collectors and sinners.* Apparently, many of Levi’s colleagues were invited to the banquet along with a group Mark refers to as “sinners” (ἁμαρτωλοὶ). The lexical form of ἁμαρτωλοὶ is ἁμαρτωλός, a masculine adjective meaning “sinful.” Here Mark uses the nominative plural form ἁμαρτωλοὶ substantially (functioning as a noun). So here it means “sinful ones” or simply “sinners.” The term “sinners” (ἁμαρτωλοὶ) was commonly used for people who did not follow the strict standards of the Pharisees (Guelich 1989, 103). It can designate either people living immorally according to the OT law or people who held a trade that was not considered honorable by the religious elite (101-102). Tax collectors would certainly fit the second category. So the phrase “tax collectors and sinners” *τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ* seems somewhat redundant but this phrase is a common designation of a group of social outcasts despised by the Pharisees (Lane 1974, 104).

*Reclining with Jesus and his disciples.* This phrase is used of the “tax collectors and sinners” and carries the connotation of participation in the banquet meal (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 729). The call of Levi culminates in this pivotal moment in which the Messiah, or at least the famed rabbi in the eyes of the Pharisees, and his disciples meet with outcasts and sinners. Jesus’ mention of coming to calling sinners suggests that the theme of this meal was forgiveness (Lane 1974, 106).

**16** *The scribes of the Pharisees.* Some later manuscripts read “scribes and Pharisees,” but this reading is to be preferred (Metzger 1971, 78). The term here

designates certain scribes (“teachers of the law,” NIV) which were of the Pharisees (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 729). The Pharisees were a sect of first century Jews which probably descended from the *Hasidim*, those who remained zealous for the OT Law under the oppression of Antiochis IV (Lane 1974, 104).

*Seeing that he eats with the sinners and tax collectors.* This phrase prepares Mark’s readers for the question which follows (Guelich 1989, 103). According to Lane, the Pharisees ensuing criticism of Jesus is “because he failed to observe the distinction between ‘the righteous’ and ‘the sinners’ which was an essential component of their piety” (Lane 1974, 104).

*He eats with the tax collectors and sinners?* Mealtime was considered the most intimate of associations in ancient times. The scribes were offended that Jesus would be so intimately associated with such persons of ill reputation (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 729). The Pharisees were renowned for being extremely pious and would not eat in the home of the common “people of the land” (730). Jesus’ refusal to honor this long-time tradition of the religious elite which shunned the less pious was certainly offensive to the Pharisees’ scribes (Lane 1974, 104).

**17** *And hearing (this), Jesus says to them.* Jesus answers their criticism in a pronouncement with proverbial overtones. The Pharisees would have recognized the wisdom of the proverb which Jesus quotes, “The strong have no need of a physician but those having illness” (Lane 1974, 104). He no doubt catches their attention by quoting this well-known proverb and probably draws on the contrast between the well and the sick both to qualify and to strengthen the impact of his ensuing pronouncement.

*I have not come to call righteous but sinners.* Following the Jesus’ quotation of the aforementioned proverb, Mark brings us to the culmination of his pronouncement narrative. Building on the proverb with which he gains the ears of his accusers, Jesus here either condemns the scribes’ labeling of themselves as “the righteous” or affirms that their righteousness is true (Lane 1974, 105). Given Jesus frequent condemnation of the Pharisees and their skewed interpretation of God’s law, the former is probably more accurate (105). Jesus mission is to call Israel to salvation (cf. Matthew 15:24). The self-righteous do not recognize their need for God’s salvation, and so cannot respond to Jesus’ call (Wessel and Strauss 2010, 730). Jesus’ condemnation of the “scribes of the Pharisees” is probably two-fold. First, he speaks against their self-righteousness attitudes. Second, his pronouncement challenges them to recognize their need for the salvation which he brings. It is as if Jesus is saying to them, “Since you are already so righteous, then you will not be needing this salvation I have brought” (cf. Acts 13:46). Jesus affirms his mission to call sinners to God’s salvation. The irony of this pronouncement is that the self-righteous, pious Pharisees will miss out on God’s salvation, which is for all, if they do not come to recognize their need for it, while Jesus comes bringing forgiveness to even the vilest of sinners.

Theological Implications

Mark's main theological point is that Jesus came to save sinners. Throughout his gospel Mark presents Jesus as a teacher (2:13), provider (8:6-9), defender (14:6-9), and redeemer (24) of social outcasts, commoners, and sinners. That his message is salvation from sin is evident from the beginning of his ministry. After his temptation in the wilderness and Herod's subsequent arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus begins preaching repentance in Galilee (1:15). His words when calling his first disciples, lowly fishermen, are, "I will make you fishers of men" (17), indicating that Jesus has a mission which involves catching and acquiring people.

That Jesus came to provide forgiveness of sins for the people to whom he preached is evident in his healing of the paralytic (2:3-12). Prior to healing the man, Jesus assures him, "Your sins are forgiven" (5). The theological implication of this pronouncement is huge. Jesus claims to forgive the man's sins, something that supposedly only God can do. When the scribes reason in their hearts that Jesus is blaspheming, he reads their thoughts and answers them before they have a chance to object verbally (8). Then he offers the healing of the paralytic as proof that he is able to forgive sins, and he cures the man of his paralysis (9-12). The narrative of the healing of the paralytic directly proceeds the call of Levi and the pronouncement narrative at Levi's house in which Jesus says that his mission is to call sinners (17).

Immediately following the call of Levi and the ensuing pronouncement, Jesus defends his disciples from the criticism of the Pharisees (2:18-3:6). Their complaint is that his disciples do not fast and that they pick grain to eat on the Sabbath. Jesus' defense of his disciples against their attacks culminates in the pronouncement, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath" (28). Another enormous claim! Jesus claims to be Lord over God's commandments, including the Sabbath rest which was instituted by God at the creation (Genesis 2:3). The he again backs up his claim by healing a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-5).

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus engages in repeated confrontations with the religious establishment. As was the case at Levi's house, the religious elite are usually the aggressors (3:2; 7:5; 10:2; 11:28; 12:14-15, 18-19; 14:55-56; cf, 2:16). Jesus answers their accusations with teaching which is usually followed by some miraculous sign (i.e. a healing) or a prediction about the future. Repeatedly, Mark tells of Jesus' compassion for the crowds of people that follow him (1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22).

Finally, Mark presents Jesus as the Son of God (God in human flesh) who takes away the sins of the world by being handed over to his aggressors (14:43-46), crucified by the Romans (15:15, 24), and rising from the dead the third day (16:6). Neither Theology Proper nor Christ's atoning death is a major theme in Mark, but they are both mentioned in passing. Amidst Mark's narratives which tell of Jesus having compassion on many and healing them is the story of the healing of a demon possessed man in which Mark quotes Jesus as saying that "the Lord" has had compassion on the man and healed him (5:19). In other places Mark attributes both the compassion and the healing to Jesus, which suggests that Mark is written from a high Christological perspective. Finally, when Jesus predicts his death at the last supper, he tells his disciples that his blood will be shed

for many (14:24). This is certainly a mention of Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross which is the culmination of his mission to "call sinners" (2:17).

### Contextualization

The mission of the church today is the same as Jesus' mission in Mark's Gospel. Jesus came to call sinners into God's kingdom. The best way for the church to pursue Christ-like accomplishment of its Christ-like mission is to adopt a Christ-like methodology. Four aspects of Christ's missional methodology can be seen in his active approach to saving sinners as described in Mark 2:13-17.

First is his compassionate attitude. When the pursuing crowd interrupt Jesus' attempt to take a break from his ministry, the Lord responds with compassion toward their hunger and need to hear his teaching. Mark simply tells us that he continues teaching them. Several times in Mark's Gospel it is said that Jesus was compassionate. Here we see his compassion in the way he responds to the people who interrupt his lakeside get away (2:13).

Second is his calling affection. Although Jesus is so well-known that vast crowds follow him, he still invites others to follow him as well (2:14). He even invites some to be in his inner circle of close friends. In Mark's list of the twelve disciples in 3:14-19, the first reason Mark gives as to why Jesus calls them is "that they might be with him" (3:14). Jesus does not allow business to crowd people out of his life. He affectionately makes space in his life for others, and he invites them to "be with him" so that he might share his life with them.

The third aspect is his caring attention. Immediately after Jesus calls Levi to "be with him," Jesus can be found at his house with many of Levi's colleagues and other commoners (2:15). Jesus, the famed rabbi who calls people to be his disciples and they drop everything just to "be with him," visits the houses of social outcasts and those who are considered moral failures beyond the scope of God's mercy. He not only visits them, he engages in what was then the most intimate fellowship—sharing a meal. Although he is surrounded by sinners, they do not move his morality. Rather they seek to be moved by him, and he graciously takes the opportunity. He offers them forgiveness in a most intimate setting, showing first how much he cares for them as he calls them to share in the life he offers.

The fourth aspect of Jesus' missional methodology is the consistent affirmation of his mission. For Jesus, most of his problems came from the religious leaders of his nation who were obviously threatened by this his religious movement, and rightfully so. The Synagogue of Jesus, which reached out to the common people whom the establishment shunned and ignored, rapidly grew so large that it could not be contained under one roof. Instead, they held their meetings on mountain sides and on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus, the celebrity teacher, takes the time and effort to share an intimate meal with the lowly, those of dishonorable trades and considered impious sinners with whom the religious elite refuse to associate, the Pharisees take notice. Lacking the courage to



directly confront this Rabbi Jesus, they question his disciples, probably attempting to put a damper on his popularity. “He eats with tax collectors and sinners?” they exclaim, but Jesus, hearing their complaint, confronts them directly. He does not lose his temper at their scheming or at their disregard for the people of humble status. Indeed, he would have been justified in doing so. No, Jesus merely looks at them and publicly affirms his mission to seek and save sinners (2:16-17; cf. Luke 19:10).

The Bible says that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). That persecution can manifest itself in a variety of ways. What Christians can be certain of is that we will experience some form of resistance from the kingdom of darkness. Jesus was no exception, but he remained focused on his mission. He knew well what he came into this world to accomplish, and he insured that everyone else knew it as well. He never failed to show compassion and love for the little people. Rather, he lavished his attention on the outcasts for whom society could care less and on the sinners who needed him the most. He never left a life untouched. And he did not hesitate to state his mission to anyone. May we follow his example and do likewise.

### Exposition

In many church congregations, the members are often reluctant to share their faith and to proclaim the gospel message to others. They probably fear being on the bunt end of the stigma often attached to Christianity in postmodern, secular America. For most of them, either they or their children (or both) grew up hearing that God and the Bible belong in their personal lives, that religion is a private matter for religious people, and that such topics have no place in the public sector. This sentiment is still a live issue today. This type of Christian desperately needs a paradigm shift from this kind of conditioning, and they definitely need to start taking the Great Commission seriously. Seeing Jesus faithfully carrying out his mission while confronting opposition might be exactly what they need to inspire them to take his gospel to those who need it the most.

### Sample Sermon Title: Calling All Sinners

Introduction: Jesus’ attempted lakeside retreat was disrupted by the multitude of people who wanted to hear him teach and see what he was all about. What would your reaction have been if your vacation plans were interrupted in this way? How would you respond when the people who interrupted you just looked at you and said, “So, what are you all about anyway? We want to hear what you have to say about yourself.” Perhaps you have had a family vacation or a special getaway planned and have experienced delays, or your plans really did not go as smoothly as you wished. How did you react? Let’s look at how Jesus reacted to this very famous interruption, in Mark chapter 2, starting at verse 13.

### Main Points:

1. Jesus teaches crowds
2. Jesus calls sinners
3. Jesus destroys opposition

Conclusion: Jesus did not work our typical 9-5 or 8-4 schedule. He was always available and willing to teach and to present the gospel message, which is what he came into this world to bring. In John 20:21 Jesus says, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” You and I have the same calling on our lives as Jesus had on his, and we have received this calling directly from Jesus himself.

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