

“Jesus, Friend of Sinners”

Mark 2:13-17

¹³ He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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?” ¹⁷ 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.” (ESV)

Yesterday was one of those days where Judy and I both had pretty long days. I taught the Discovery Class all day and Judy did a brunch. By the time it came around for dinner, we thought, “We just need to order a pizza.” So we did. Then the family thought, “We should watch a movie.” I think Judy first said, “How about *The Diary of Ann Frank*?” BOOM! That got shot down very quickly. Then Flannery said, “How about *the Sound of Music*?” BOOM! We’ve seen that a thousand times. After going back and forth a little bit, I said, “I’m going to pick a movie.” I got up and started walking toward where our DVDs are when someone shouted out, “No action movies!” BOOM! Yeah, what other kind are there? I was standing there looking and a thought came to me, “I know.” I pulled the movie out of the box and I brought it back. The kids hadn’t even seen it. They asked, “What are we going to watch?” I said, “One of the greatest romance movies of all time: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.” “Like, come on, Dad.” “You’ve got to trust me on this one.” Have you ever seen *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? Remember the Father? His cure for everything was Windex. “Hey, put some Windex on it.” Right? If you’ve not seen *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, it is very funny. Basically it’s about this big fat Greek family with all of their issues and all of their characteristics that come with that. The goal in life for the father, Gus, is to have his daughter marry a Greek boy because if she married anything other than Greek she would be slumming (I guess). So the whole movie is about that, and so, of course, she falls in love with a white guy. He’s not just a white boy, he is about as white as you get. Ian Miller is his name. A lot of the humor is based around the father dealing with Ian Miller. At some point the father just gets very frustrated. He’s lying in bed with his wife and he says to her, “Let me tell you something. There are only two kinds of people in the world.” She rolls her eyes. (It reminded me much of my wife!) She rolls her eyes and said, “What are they?” He said, “Greeks and everyone else.” That movie is hilarious, at least to me it is. As I was thinking about it, Gus in the movie, while he’s incredibly funny, he is also an incredible Pharisee. What is a Pharisee but someone who thinks they know what’s going on, that they have the right information and everyone else is wrong? They’re self-righteous. Gus is a Pharisee.

As we look at the text today, basically Jesus’ conflict with this group of people called the Pharisees is ramping up. Remember, He came on the scene preaching the Gospel and then healing people and sending the lepers to see the Pharisees. Little by little the Pharisees are starting to get frustrated with Him because Jesus, Who is a good rabbi supposedly, is hanging out with sinners. So they come to despise Jesus. Now, here’s a thought for you. My struggle isn’t necessarily being a Pharisee or legalist, but my struggle is Pharisees. In other words I think I’m better than Pharisees because I’m not a legalist like them. What does that make me? It makes me a Pharisee. Even in the movie, one of Gus’ talents is to say, “You give me any word and I’ll tell you how it comes from the Greek language.” Somehow at the wedding he’s giving a speech about his daughter’s marriage and somehow he makes the case that the word “Miller” is actually from a Greek word having to do with apple, and their Greek name comes from the Greek word that has to do with oranges. He says, “With apples and oranges here, I guess the good thing is that at the end of the day we’re all fruits.” So he finds some common ground in the fact that they’re fruit, on one hand. On the other hand is there anyone that both the apples and the oranges would despise? We tend to think you’re either an apple or an orange, you’re either a Pharisee or not. But is there someone that both of them would despise? The answer is, “Yes.”

We’re going to look at three things in the text today. We’re going to look at grace again. Grace does three things in this text. Grace initiates, grace incarnates, and grace infuriates. I got them all to rhyme today. Grace initiates, grace incarnates, and grace infuriates. Is there anyone that could be despicable to both the religious and the irreligious? The answer is, “Yes.” You find it in the text today.

The first point – Grace initiates. Let me read it to you.

¹³ He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. ¹⁴ 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. (ESV)

Grace just doesn’t initiate. Grace initiates with the very worst of sinners. Levi (he’s also called Matthew) is sitting at his tax booth. If there’s anyone who’s despised in the Ancient Near East it would have been Levi, and he would have been despised by both the religious people and the irreligious people. Why? Because Matthew would have been a Jew who would have probably paid for the privilege of collecting tolls from his own people. In other words, since he worked for the Romans all the Jewish

people, especially the religious people, would have seen him as a sell-out. The Romans came in here and oppressed us and they're keeping us down and here you are working for them. The Romans would have only told Matthew, "All you have to give us is (hypothetically) a hundred bucks a month and anything above that you get to keep." So almost inevitably all the toll collectors and tax collectors were dishonest and immoral. They would stick it to their own people. They would be seen as betrayers by their own people. In fact, the religious Jews would have so despised them and their whole family that they would actually have been excommunicated from the synagogue. So even if Matthew had an inkling, "You know, I think I'd like to go to church this Sunday. I think I'd like to reform my ways, he would not have been allowed to go. So that's one group that would have despised Matthew. The other group that would have despised Matthew, interestingly enough, would have been the fishermen that Jesus already called. Matthew is a toll collector near the Sea of Galilee, and if you put two and two together, Matthew was probably the guy who had to collect the tolls on the fish that came through that port. So, Simon, Andrew, James, and John, probably all knew Matthew, and who likes the guy who constantly has his hand out when you're coming with your catch? Does anyone enjoy paying taxes? These four guys would have despised Matthew as well because he was constantly sticking it to them. So the Pharisees and the religious would have despised Levi, and even the fishermen probably would have despised Levi. So what does that make Levi? That makes Levi the perfect target for grace. That makes him the kind of person that Jesus would seek out. That's exactly what Jesus does.

If the Pharisees were upset because Jesus chose to have people like Peter and James and John follow Him, would they not have been more frustrated by the fact that He chose someone like Levi? Did you hear what Jesus said to Levi? I'm going to turn this around. Instead of considering what He said to Levi, let me talk to you for a minute about what He did not say to Levi. He didn't walk up to Levi and say, "You know what? You make me sick! Look at you, you're a sell-out to your own people, you're despicable, you hang around prostitutes and other tax collectors. Here's what we're going to do. I'm the Messiah, I'm going to save everyone but (remember whenever you say "but" you have to get rid of everything that comes before it). But, here's what I want you to do. First thing I want you to do is stop being a tax collector. That's a bad thing. When you stop being a tax collector then maybe they'll let you back in the synagogue. And when you go back to the synagogue and you start cleaning up your life a little bit—maybe start a twelve-step program—once you do all these things, then come and see me and we'll see if you have what it takes to follow me." Is that what Jesus says? Absolutely not! What does Jesus say to the very worst of sinners? He walks up to Levi, who probably had heard Him or at very least had heard rumors from people coming through his toll, and says, "Follow me." That's it. Follow me. Imagine if you're Levi, you've got to be there thinking, "No one in Galilee will talk to me, in fact everyone in Galilee hates me, and here's this guy who can heal the blind and make the lame to leap and make lepers clean, who has just come up to me and said 'Follow me.'" What would you do? What would you do?

Grace always initiates, and the call of Jesus is unqualified. When we were planting a church in the city, people would all the time would come up to me and say, "OK, I've got a question for you. Can I be gay and be a Christian? Can I live with my girlfriend and be a Christian? Can I do any of these kinds of things and be a Christian?" I say back to them, "Your question is out of order." They'd say, "Oh, so I can't even ask questions here?" I'd say, "No, no, no, no, no. Your question is literally out of order." "So what do you mean?" "Your question is out of order because Jesus always asks the first question. When Jesus asks His question, depending on how you answered His question, then you ask the question, but you ask Him, not me." They'd say, "What do you mean?" I'd say, "The question Jesus asks you is, 'Will you follow me?'" Will you follow me, yes or no? If you say no, your question is irrelevant, isn't it? If you say, "Yes, I will follow you," then ask Jesus what you should do, not me. I have an opinion, but the call of Jesus is unqualified. He doesn't say, "You need to be this or need to be that. Jesus says, "Will you follow me?" and he says it to the worst of sinners. The irony is that it's the worst of sinners who sit around thinking, "I'm good for nothing." The beauty of the Gospel is that the worse you feel, the more sinful you feel, the more sinful you know you are, that means the more Jesus has His eye on you and He comes after you. I've used a quote from Martin Luther before. Martin Luther in his commentary on Galatians said, "When the devil comes to me and my own conscience comes to me and says, 'Martin, you are the worst sinner who ever lived. You're the biggest adulterer, the biggest liar, the biggest cheater, the biggest everything. You're the worst.'" Martin Luther says, "I look the devil in the eye and say, 'Thank you.' Thank you for preaching the Gospel to me. Because you see, Jesus didn't come for the righteous, he came for the unrighteous. Every time you remind me of that you remind me that I am the one Jesus came to pursue because grace always initiates."

But grace does more than initiate. Grace incarnates. What do I mean by that? Look at the next couple of verses. He calls Matthew and then,

¹⁵ *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.*

Mark has skipped some time here, apparently. Levi rises up to follow Jesus and at some point Jesus must have said, "I have an idea. Why don't we have a big party at your house and I'll be the host?" When the language in this text says, "they reclined with Jesus," it means that Jesus was the host of this party. It wasn't Levi. They used Levi's house, but Jesus was the one who would

have been the host. He would have been “the guy who everyone knew” giving the party. Who does Jesus tell Levi to invite? “Levi, invite all your friends.” Levi would have said, “But all my friends are tax collectors and prostitutes and things.” Jesus would have said, “Exactly. Invite them to a great feast at your house and I’m going to host it.” You know Jesus can host it. Anyone who can turn water into wine can throw a party, right? In fact, the language here hints that (I know this is going to offend some of you, but you need to hear it, you can be infuriated on point three) adult beverages were probably even served at this party. It’s just that that would have been what kind of feast it was. I was just thinking, “Why would Jesus have a feast with these people?” Tonight we’re going to look at the purpose of this feast, of why he would eat with people and how that affects the rest of our life.

But, Jesus incarnates it. What do I mean by incarnate? He actually goes to and hangs out with the worst of sinners because Jesus is not afraid that He’s going to catch something from them. The Pharisees in the Ancient Near East, much like the Pharisees that are in our church and the Pharisees that are in every church, thought that somehow if they come into the same space as an immoral person that that’s going to rub off on them, and they going to catch some of their immorality. God might catch me and say, “Tommy, look, you’ve been hanging out with someone who’s a sinner.” The word “sinner” here really is a technical term that would have been used by the religious in Jesus’ day, and what it means is that it’s a technical term for either one of two things or both. One thing it would have been is someone who is not religious like me. The Pharisees had their law and they had their tradition and they had very stringent rules about how life ought to be lived, and anyone who didn’t live life in the way they thought life ought to be lived would have been called a sinner. Of course, the other people that would have been called “sinners” with a derisive tone would be people who would have been just seen as immoral, people who would had been divorced, maybe. Or people who were adulterous or prostitutes, or people who were alcoholics, people who were sinful. They would call them “sinners.” They were completely afraid that if they interacted with them that somehow they would contract their sinfulness. Jesus isn’t afraid of that because Jesus brings grace and Jesus has all the righteousness of God. Now, here’s the beauty of the Gospel. For those who trust Jesus, not only does He take away your sin, but Jesus gives you every bit of His righteousness and credits it to your account. So, you know what that means when you hang out with sinners? You can’t catch it. Just because you hang out with someone who is immoral, someone who’s lascivious, that doesn’t mean you’re going to catch it. In fact what it means is that there is a bigger chance that they’re going to be changed than you are. The world will be changed when the church begins to live grace incarnationally like Jesus did. Too often we’re afraid that if people come in and they’re sinners, then somehow we’re going to catch it, or somehow they’re morally offensive to us. If that’s how we feel, that makes us Pharisees. The glory of the Gospel is that all of us see ourselves as sinners, if you’re a Christian at least, and you know that Jesus has saved you and there is nothing He can’t heal. When you begin to have a vision for interacting with people who actually need the Gospel it changes not only them, but it changes you as well. You’d be amazed at what happens.

I’m sure I’ve told you this story before - the story of Harold Powell. My parents divorced when I was about five and my mother remarried an alcoholic construction worker. When I was a kid things like electricity and food were luxuries. That’s just a fact. I don’t say that by way of bragging or being humble. It’s just a fact. During my whole childhood there was a pastor from a very large charismatic church (most Presbyterians would probably be uncomfortable there, I imagine) who constantly visited our house. In retrospect I’m sure there was someone in his church who knew of our family and they told him. He would always just show up with groceries, or he would show up with toys around Christmas time. I can remember him telling my mom about Jesus and her saying, “We don’t believe any of that. We don’t have time for that.” Now, here’s a guy who’s a pastor of a huge church and he continually sought out this family that, even if they became Christians and went to his church, wouldn’t have been tithers. We wouldn’t have done anything. When I was fifteen years old, we were called to his bedside because he had cancer and he was on his deathbed, and for some reason he called for my family. We all went to his bedside and he grabbed our hands, but couldn’t speak. As we went to leave him, his wife pulled us aside and I couldn’t tell if she was angry or she was awe struck. She said, “There’s something about Harold’s love for your family that is unreasonable. His love for your family is unreasonable.” Harold got it because when you look at the grace of Jesus, it’s unreasonable. You don’t deserve it and there’s nothing you can do to earn it, but in fact it’s unreasonable. I’m going to be honest with you. I’m Presbyterian; I’m reformed in my theology. I believe God chose me before the foundation of the world, and yet I’m firmly convinced the reason I’m here today is because some charismatic pastor spent a good bit of his life praying for me and visiting me. And even now he is in heaven dancing about that. Who would have “think it,” that you could take a kid like that and someday he would become a pastor on the other side of the country. That’s because someone showed grace and let grace flow through them.

You’re either inspired and awed by grace or you are infuriated by grace because what grace says is, “You don’t have what it takes.” Let’s look at the last part here: grace infuriates.

¹⁶ *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?”* ¹⁷ *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.”* (ESV)

Just as a side note, one of the ways to know if you're a Pharisee is if you talk to other people instead of the person you have a problem with. Right? The scribes have a problem with Jesus but they never go straight to Jesus until almost the very end, and ask, "Why do you do this?" Instead they sort of sneak around and ask other people, "Why, why, why?" The beauty of Jesus (He can always hear them, I guess), is that He addresses them. But the question you need to ask is, "Why are they asking this question?" "You guys supposedly know the Bible. Supposedly you've memorized the Bible. How have you memorized the Bible and you haven't understood what God's plan is? Why would you even be asking such a silly question?" The answer is because they didn't care so much about a relationship with God, or they didn't really understand grace. What they thought was that if you're good, good things happen to you and if you're bad, bad things happen to you. If you're good and obedient and you obey the law and you vote Republican or you vote Democrat then you are in good shape. If you don't do those things then not only God despises you, but we despise you, too. That's why they would ask that question. Somehow they thought they had it nailed and they didn't. How does Jesus respond to them? He responds to them first by quoting a proverb that they would have understood. He says, "The sick have no need of a physician." That would have been a commonly known proverb, but what they wouldn't have counted on was where he was going with it. He said, "The well have no need for a physician, but the sick. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners." Unless you see yourself as a sinner, go knock yourself out. If you think you're righteous, have a good time.

The problem with the Pharisees is that they didn't understand what I like to call the Moreau principle. If you've ever read the book *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, it's one of my favorites. H. G. Wells wrote it in 1896. There have been several movies. I have not seen a good movie translation of it. But in the book there's this guy named Dr. Moreau and he's moved to this island where no one can find him, and he engages in what they called back then "vivisection." What's vivisection? Dr. Moreau takes things like sheep and pigs and he does surgery on them. His goal is to transform a pig ultimately into a human being by way of surgery. So, at some point the island is just full of people who are creatures that are somewhere between pigs and almost-human. In fact, as a pecking order (if you've read the book), you're higher up on the pecking order depending on how many fingers you have. Of course (it's typical of that genre), there was a shipwreck on the island and the protagonist whose name is Prendick. He shows up on the island and starts to wig-out because there's all these pig creatures running around. He's afraid and he's running from Dr. Moreau at one point and just as Moreau is about to catch them, they come upon what looks like a church service. In this church service the whole congregation is nothing but these pig creatures, or creatures who are half way between pig and human. Prendick is awe struck and he asks Moreau, "How do you control them?" Moreau says, "Watch this." One of the creatures stands up almost like Moses and he begins to recite the law to the creatures. He says, "Thou shalt not eat the flesh of other creatures. Are we not men?" The congregation would reply back, "That is the law." "Thou shalt not run on all fours. Are we not men?" Congregation, "That is the law." "Thou shalt not suck drink with your mouth. That is the law, are we not men?" "That is the law." And on, and on it goes. Prendick is actually awe struck listening to these pig creatures recite the law. He looks at Moreau and says, "It's amazing." And Moreau basically says, "Not really." He asked, "Why?" He said, "Because the flesh always creeps back."

In other words, all the chanting of the law and all of the sayings, "You just got to be good. You just got to be good. You just got to be good." It doesn't work because, at the end of the day, you're still a pig. You could say it all you want, but at the end of the day, who are you really? What Jesus is saying to the Pharisees here is, "I came for the pigs." That's true. You can act like you're not a pig. You can act like you're not a sinner and you can recite the law and you can clean yourself up, but, at the end of the day, a pig is still a pig. How do you receive the grace of Jesus? You walk up to him and say, "I'm a pig. I'm a sinner." If you do that Jesus graciously receives you. In fact Jesus pursues you but not unless you see yourself that way. Do you? Do you know that you need Jesus more than anything, or do you somehow think you're good enough? I'll leave you with that.