Studies in  

The Gospel of Mark: People Responding to Jesus  

Lesson Four  

Levi: Outsiders Welcome  

Focal Text  
Mark 2:13-17  

Background  
Mark 2:13-17  

Main Idea  
Jesus openly accepted Levi and other people like him even though the religious leaders considered them outsiders and unacceptable.  

Question to Explore  
Does the gospel really mean we should accept those people?  

Quick Read  
We are called to love everyone God loves.  

Commentary  
One critic of contemporary Christianity called missions “reaching people we wouldn’t want in the pew beside us.” Such class divisions are not new to the Christian faith.  

In the first century there were Jews and Gentiles, each despising the other for centuries. There were slaves and free, with as many as ten million slaves in the Roman Empire. Women were the possessions of men; children had no social status at all. At the bottom rung of the social ladder were the tax collectors.
Rome had learned over the centuries that the best way to tax its subjects was to employ someone from the subjugated society for this purpose. Such a person would know his neighbors’ incomes and possessions. As long as he was given a percentage of what he took from them, he could be counted on to remain loyal to the Empire. Such turncoats were available in every culture, including first-century Judaism.

So it was that Jesus of Nazareth chose a despised traitor to join his band of apostles. If Levi—identified as Matthew in Matthew 9:9-13—could be his disciple and servant, so can everyone you know. His story proves that no one is beyond the reach of God’s grace. Nor should they be beyond ours.

**Love everyone God loves (2:13-15)**

Since Jesus’ call of Simon, Andrew, James, and John in Mark 1:16-20, our Lord has been busy. He taught in the Capernaum synagogue, driving out a demon (Mark 1:21-28). He then healed Peter’s mother-in-law, as well as sick people from across the community (1:29-34). After a solitary time with his Father the next morning, he led his disciples in a ministry tour of Galilee (1:35-39), including the cleansing of a leper (1:40-45).

Opposition to Jesus soon emerged. Our text occurs in the midst of five controversy stories, each involving a question about his ministry:

- After healing a paralytic and forgiving his sins, “some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ‘Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’” (2:7).
- After calling Levi to be his disciple, the Pharisees asked Jesus’ followers, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” (2:16).
- In the midst of a fast by John’s disciples and the Pharisees, “some people came and asked Jesus, ‘How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?’” (2:18).
- After his disciples picked grain on the Sabbath, “the Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?’” (2:24).
- After meeting a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath, “Jesus asked them, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?’” (3:4).

As you can see, our text tells the story of Jesus’ second “controversy” in this phase of his ministry.

*An unlikely disciple*

Our text begins: “Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them” (2:13). The “lake” was the Sea of Galilee, where a large
“crowd” (ochlos, or horde, mass, group of common people) came to him and he began to “teach” (edidasken, or instruct) them.

The setting was Capernaum, identified as Jesus “own town” (Matthew 9:1). This was the most significant town in the region, for it housed a detachment of Roman soldiers under a centurion as well as other administrative officials (see Matt. 8:5-13). It was situated on the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea), one of the greatest roads in the ancient world. Stretching from Egypt to Damascus, it passed through Capernaum. The Road to the East also led from Galilee through Capernaum to the frontier. Traders from across the world came along these international routes to their town; the vital and cosmopolitan significance of the town explains why Jesus chose it for his ministry base.

It was here that Jesus enlisted his most notorious disciple, in the most public way he called any of his followers: “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” (Mark 2:14). As Jesus “walked along” (paragon, meaning as he passed by) he saw Levi at the “tax collector’s booth” (telonion, or revenue office) and called him to “follow me” (akolouthei, meaning come after me, be my disciple). Matthew and Luke also tell the story of this remarkable encounter:

- “As Jesus went on from there [after healing the paralytic], he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him” (Matt. 9:9).
- “After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. ‘Follow me,’ Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him”” (Luke 5:27-28).

Here we learn that this disciple had two names: Levi (the priestly tribe) and the more-familiar “Matthew” (meaning gift of God). Both names were highly ironic. He was “sitting at his tax booth” (Luke 5:27), most likely along the main road where he could stop and tax the people as they came by. Jesus could have waited to talk privately with him, but he chose to enlist him in full view of everyone passing by.

When Levi responded, he “got up, left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:28). As with the disciples we have discussed in previous lessons, he answered Jesus’ call immediately. In so doing he lost his career, a position that would have been filled immediately by Rome. He lost the Roman guard that had protected him from the angry citizens he victimized. He lost his wealth, for tax collecting was a very lucrative business. And he joined a band of men whose money he had likely stolen in his former profession. Levi was as courageous as any man who followed Jesus.
An unlikely missionary
And as evangelistic: “While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him” (Mark 2:15). Jesus was “having dinner” (katakeisthai, or reclining, eating a meal) at Levi’s house, a gathering Luke calls a “great banquet” (Luke 5:29).

Jesus and Levi were joined by many tax collectors and “sinners” (hamartoloi, or irreligious). The term described anyone who did not conform to the legalism of the religious authorities. But it was also used in reference to particularly onerous offenders—criminals, prostitutes, and the like, to whom the term likely refers in this verse. It is hard to imagine a group less acceptable to polite society.

These “tax collectors and ‘sinners’” were as important to Jesus as to Levi: note that “there were many who followed him.” They had already been welcomed by our Lord as his own. Now, thanks to Levi’s generosity, they were invited to a special gathering with him.

This was Levi’s first missionary act, but not his last. According to early tradition, he became the author of the Gospel of Matthew, recording some of the greatest teaching narratives in Scripture. Eusebius tells us that Levi preached the gospel to his fellow Jews and also to other peoples (Ecclesiastical History, 3.24.6).1

And Levi was plausibly the evangelist who brought his brother to Christ. Note that Mark calls him “Levi son of Alphaeus.” He also lists among Jesus’ apostles one “James son of Alphaeus” (Mark 3:18); see Matt. 10:3; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). In Matthew’s Gospel he is listed immediately after Matthew among the apostles. He is called “James son of Alphaeus” to distinguish him from James son of Zebedee, but the Gospel writers could have described him by his vocation or in another way. The fact that they chose to identify him as a “son of Alphaeus,” the same description given to Levi, may indicate that they wanted us to connect the two.

“James son of Alphaeus” is coupled directly with Simon the Zealot in Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13. Matthew 10:3 and Mark 3:18 link him with Thaddeus, then Simon the Zealot, followed by Judas Iscariot. There is good reason to believe that all three were Zealots, ultranationalists seeking to overthrow the Roman Empire and liberate Israel. If James son of Alphaeus was among them, he would have been bitterly opposed to the vocation of Levi, the hated tax collector for Rome.

As a result, it is likely that the two had been estranged from each other for many years. But in the chapter following his conversion, Matthew listed James son of Alphaeus among Jesus’ disciples. No writer tells us how James came to be a follower of our Lord; I
like to think that Matthew did for him what Andrew did for Peter—he brought his brother to Christ (John 1:41-42).

Whether Levi was related to James son of Alphaeus by birth, he was related to him by the new birth. His ministry continues this week as you and your class study his story and seek to emulate his faith.

When last did it cost you something significant to follow Jesus? When last did you pay a price to share his love with someone your culture rejects?

**Choose relationship over religion (2:16-17)**

Tragically, the leaders of Jesus’ culture were not as gracious as this despised tax collector: “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”? ’” (Mark 2:16). Given the style of homes in their day, with large, open doors and windows, it would have been easy for anyone to know who was attending the meal. If Matthew was as wealthy in relation to his society as Zacchaeus was to his (Luke 19:8), he would perhaps have owned a very large home with an outside courtyard leading to the banquet room inside.

Capernaum was large enough to be home not just to Roman soldiers, successful fishermen, and despised tax-collectors, but it was also home to “teachers of the law” (grammateis, meaning experts in the law, biblical scholars) who were “Pharisees” (meaning separated ones). Let’s remember who they were and why they were so opposed to Jesus’ unconditional ministry.

The Pharisees began their service as a group of laymen opposed to the Hellenization of the Jews after the Greek conquest of Persia in 332 B.C. They worked to protect their orthodox beliefs and practices in the face of encroaching paganism, and they sought to be a purifying influence on their culture. Think of them as the Puritans of their day.

To protect the laws written in Scripture, the Pharisees developed the oral law, a kind of hedge build around biblical teachings. This oral tradition included interpretations, applications, and amplifications of what is found in the written Scriptures. For instance, they developed thirty-nine categories of Sabbath laws, all intended to help the Jews keep the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8-11). They determined the distance one could walk on the Sabbath without performing work, what kind of clothes could be worn on the Sabbath, and so on.

The Pharisees were so strict in keeping these laws that few could follow their teachings (there were never more than 6,000 Pharisees in all of Israel). However, their zeal was
much admired by the people. Given the corruption in the high priest’s family and the complicity of the Sadducees with Rome, the Pharisees were viewed as the holiest people in the land.

Jesus consistently rejected their oral traditions, one reason for their opposition to his teachings and ministry. They were eventually complicit in Jesus’ arrest and execution. It is no surprise that they would criticize Jesus for eating with notorious sinners.

Note that these critics “asked his disciples” about his behavior rather than confronting Jesus directly. It may be that they knew their question to be improper and were ashamed to ask it of him. Conversely, they might have wanted as many as possible to hear their criticism. If the disciples were with the rest of the group at this time, it is likely that the “tax collectors and ‘sinners’” heard this question asked about them. Whatever the specifics of this dialogue, its motive was most caustic.

Jesus was quick to respond: “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’” (Mark 2:17). Note that “Jesus said to them,” speaking directly to his critics. He would later teach us to do the same: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you” (Matt. 18:15).

According to our Lord, it is not the “healthy” (ischyontes, or strong, capable, in good health) “who need” (chreian echousin, meaning who have need of, who lack) a doctor, but the “sick” (kakos eschontes, or those who are ill). As a result, the Great Physician did not come to “call” (kalesai, or summon, invite) the “righteous” (dikaious, or the upright, just) but sinners. His statement employed a Semitic idiom that could be rendered, I have not come to call the righteous, but especially to call sinners.

Jesus was not indicating that the Pharisees were among the “righteous,” but that such people were not the focus of his ministry. Rather, Jesus had come to care for “sinners,” wherever they were and whatever they had done. Jesus made a similar statement after reaching out to Zacchaeus, another infamous tax-collector: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Our Lord made his unconditional love for sinners apparent across his teaching and ministry. He told parables about the lost coin, lost sheep, and lost son (Luke 15), all designed to show himself and his Father reaching out to fallen humanity. He touched lepers, cared for Gentiles, and welcomed prostitutes to his faith community. He began what he called us to continue—a Kingdom advance that would “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19).
To join Jesus in this work, we must value relationship over religion. We must never assume that our religious activities guarantee a right relationship with our Lord. If the Pharisees could fall victim to such legalism, so can we.

It’s been said that the best way to know whether you’re a servant is to see how you respond when people treat you like one. In a similar vein, the best way to know whether your love for God is sincere is to measure your love for those God loves.

**Conclusion**
The people of your community are likely to view you and your class in the same way the people of first-century Capernaum viewed the Pharisees—religious, moral, pious. Be careful that you do not view the Levis of your community as the Pharisees viewed him. No one you know is beyond the reach of God’s love. Now we are called to serve those for whom our Lord died. If they’re good enough for him, they’re good enough for us.

Remember that Jesus was the only baby who chose the circumstances of his birth, and that he chose a feed trough in a cow stall, attended by peasant parents and grimy field hands. It is no surprise that the Christ of Christmas would choose a tax collector to be his disciple, or that he would choose you and me to teach his story this week.

Who will reach out to a Levi in your community next week because you shared the story of Levi this Sunday?
Mark 2:13–17. Levi: Outsiders Welcome

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