



A FEAST OF CONTROVERSY

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Mark 2:13-17

Seventh Message

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In our text this morning we come to the second of five controversies from the opening chapters (2:1-3:6) of the gospel of Mark. I have entitled this incident, set out in 2:13-17, "A Feast of Controversy." Let us read the text together:

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the multitude kept coming to Him, and He was teaching them. And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose and followed Him.

And it came about that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax-gatherers and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers, they began saying to His disciples, "With tax-gatherers and sinners he eats?" And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (NASB).

Isaiah prophesied (25:6-10) concerning a banquet which would be held in the Messianic Age, a lavish feast of aged wine and rich foods, with no expense spared, for all peoples. It would be a day of comfort in Jerusalem, a time of unprecedented salvation and victory for the righteous. At the setting of the table, Isaiah cries out,

"Open the gates, that the righteous nation may enter..."

The way of the righteous is smooth;

O Upright One, make the path of the righteous level" (Isa 26:2, 7)

Imagine you are a Jew living in the first century. Your ancestors have endured the terrible captivity of Babylon and you are now awaiting your final deliverance by King Messiah. To prepare for this great event you set yourself apart from the wicked and purify your appetites in anticipation of this banquet. You have even taken the words of Isaiah upon your lips.

"We have waited for You eagerly;

Your name, even Your memory, is the desire of our souls.

At night my soul longs for You,

Indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently" (Isa 26:8b-9a).

Now a carpenter arrives from Nazareth claiming to

be the expected Son of Man, God's unique representative on earth, the one who would initiate that great eschatological banquet. But you discover that he eats, not with the righteous in Jerusalem, but with tax collectors in Galilee! Imagine what the tabloids would make of that:

*Itinerant preacher from Galilee,
praised by thousands for miracles,
now caught on camera, eating with the mob!*

It is this kind of controversy that provoked the religious elite from Jerusalem to discredit Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Our text has the same literary structure as the story of the paralytic. Jesus welcomes someone from outside the sacred circle of Israel into the most intimate bonds of fellowship; his action provokes an intense but veiled controversy with Israel's religious leaders; and then, on hearing of their challenge, Jesus brings the controversy out into the light of day and ends it with a word. In the end, Jesus radically redefines Israel, and no one is able to object. Jesus knows who he is. He won't be deterred by any man or institution. This is what made him so controversial and attractive.

I. The call to Levi by the sea (2:13-14)

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the multitude were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose and followed Him.

A. On the way, by the sea

Jesus "went out" again by the sea, the place where he called Simon and Andrew, who unhesitatingly left their nets to follow him. Here we find Jesus, again focused on that which he came to do, teaching the multitudes. Typically, rabbis taught their disciples as they walked along the way. But no rabbi had this large a following. Jesus possesses such magnetism he attracts the entire crowd that overflowed from Peter's house the evening before. Now, by the seashore, they all are in tow, mesmerized by his teaching. They approach a toll crossing, and there is a toll (tax) collector seated inside. Such a large crowd would wake up any customs official. Today would present an opportunity for great financial gain.

B. Politics and the toll-collector

To appreciate the power of this story, we need to understand something of the political background of the

Roman Empire. Judea, which lay to the south, was a Roman province that was ruled by a procurator. Galilee in the north was a client kingdom, a buffer state set up to protect her provinces. The Roman Empire had an extremely oppressive tax structure. Taxes were imposed not only in the imperial provinces but also in so-called "client" kingdoms.

Every aspect of economic life was taxed. Besides levying income taxes, Rome imposed an intricate system of customs on goods in transit between its various provinces. Emil Schürer writes:

The customs were not collected by civil servants, but by lessees, the so-called *publicani*, who leased the customs of a particular district for a fixed annual sum. Whatever the revenue yielded in excess of that sum was their gain...so there was plenty of scope for the arbitrariness and rapacity of the tax-collectors. The exploitation of such opportunities and the not infrequent overcharges made by these officials caused them, as a class, to be loathed by the people. As the poet Herodas had stated it: "every door shudders before the tax-collectors."¹

The tax collectors symbolized foreign domination. They were the hated collaborators of the empire. The rabbis classed them as robbers, since they sold their services to the foreign oppressor, becoming wealthy at their own countrymen's expense. Michael Green notes that "Capernaum was a border town that lay on the great road called the 'Way of the Sea,' that led from Syria to Egypt. As you passed through one territory to the next you would pass a customs booth, and there you would have to pay taxes on goods you were transporting."²

C. The man Levi

Sitting in this booth that day was Levi. Michael Green comments on the irony of a man named Levi living such a life. "He was a living contradiction of his ancestral name. Levi was the Old Testament tribe who were dedicated to serve in the sanctuary. They were to have no possessions; the Lord alone was to be their inheritance. By faith they were to live off the offerings of their countrymen; they were to have no business distractions" (Deut 10:8-9).

But this Levi had forsaken faith for raw materialism. His business had cut him off from the temple; he had not worshipped in years. Here then is a twisted business man, fulfilling the Lord's words in the prophet Malachi regarding corrupt priests who "corrupted the covenant of Levi...So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people" (Mal 2:8-9). But Malachi went on to say that a day was coming when the Lord would suddenly come to his temple and purify the sons of Levi with fire and refine them like gold; then Judah would offer an offering of righteousness (Mal 3:1-4).³

That day that Malachi had spoken of has now arrived! Jesus comes right up to Levi in the toll booth.

Levi asks him, "Do you have anything to declare?" Jesus looks back into his eyes with penetrating force and irresistible love, and says, "Follow me." It is a call "so forceful that Levi...will forsake his occupation right in the middle of pursuing it."⁴ It took not a moment's consideration. "Levi paid his biggest tax of his life that day, and gets the biggest kickback of his life."⁵

On that day by the seashore, Jesus became not only Levi's master but his friend. Levi has no hesitation in inviting him to his house for dinner.

II. A Feast of Controversy (2:15-17)

A. A Messianic feast? (2:15)

And it came about that He was reclining in his house, and many toll-gatherers and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him.

Levi throws a party for Jesus and invites all his own friends, who were either tax collectors or other notorious characters. In the comfort of Levi's home they recline and eat together, a symbol of the sacred bonds of fellowship. Here is a house filled with outcasts, people who because of their occupations could not give witness in Israel. They were not allowed to be judges and were barred from the synagogues, yet Jesus feels so comfortable with them, he reclines with them and eats.

Michael Green comments how backward the church is. What we call "outreach" is really "in-drag." In order to minister to outsiders, we drag people into a place where they don't feel the slightest bit comfortable. The best outreach is to insert Christians into the natural settings where the world gathers and befriend people there.

And notice that as Jesus eats, a transformation occurs. The table, which had been the habitual stage for extortion, greed and bad jokes, is transformed into a holy banquet of messianic followers. Jesus' magnetic power draws people who ordinarily would have little or nothing to do with religion.⁶ And so "many" of them! The word is repeated for emphasis. Think what this dinner cost the treasuries of Rome. Empty toll booths everywhere! People crossing en masse, at no charge! What is so amazing about this is that when Isaiah wrote about the rich banquet feast that would come with the arrival of Messiah, it was the righteous who would be invited (26:2, 7). The feast has arrived, but the guest list had all the wrong people. Thus did this banquet in Levi's house become a feast of controversy.

B. Life provoking controversy (2:16)

And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers, they began saying to His disciples, "Why is He eating and drinking with tax-gatherers and sinners?"

The Pharisees, who prided themselves on separation from sinners, have a visceral reaction to this most un-

sual dinner party. They regarded tax collectors as social lepers, so they remained safely outside the party. In the controversy over the paralytic they didn't have the courage to speak a word. Now they speak, but lack the courage to address Jesus directly, and so condemn him in the presence of his disciples. In a highly disparaging tone they voice their incredulity at the sight of the two classes brought together. Notice their exclamation, "With tax-gatherers and sinners he eats?" Jesus' action has left them so repulsed they cannot even bring themselves to utter his name.

C. Bringing controversy to light (2:17)

And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

But Jesus overhears what they are saying. Not waiting for the disciples to relay the information to him, he takes the initiative and brings the controversy out into the light. He answers the Pharisees' question with a well known proverb, "It is not the healthy (lit. *strong*) who need a physician, but those who are sick." Then he forcefully applies that wisdom to their question, saying, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." "Jesus' statement ends the argument almost before it begins. There is no see-sawing. With one verbal blow he knocks out his critics. His word is final, its truth self-evident. He can call sinners. He does call them. Nobody can stop him from doing so, or even make him look bad when he does, ritual laws notwithstanding."⁷

This text leaves us with good news, a rebuke, and a challenge.

III. Will You Join the Party?

A. Good news for modern Levis

What good news this is for modern-day Levis! Likewise for people who were specially named and set apart by their parents, only to blow it; for those who forsook faith for materialism; for those who became successful, but with each rung up the corporate ladder fell into more and more compromise until they lost every vestige of their own identity, save the jaded memory of a name that kept echoing in their ears, reminding them of their heritage. What good news this text is for those cast away (in the name of decency) by the shame they brought upon their families! Was there someone sitting at your Thanksgiving feast who brought shame to your family name? If that someone was you, know that Jesus does not wait to dress you up and drag you into church.

To you, O Levi, the good news is that Jesus steps right into your world. While you sit in your toll booth, fixed at your terminal, he comes to you. He calls you and invites you, not to the fringe of some religious movement but to the very center of his holy kingdom. And the transformation does not come about by dressing you up for church. It comes in the deepest sanctuary of your personal world. He comes to the very center of

your world and dines with all your friends, loving them right where they are.

And, as he did with Levi, he will change your name. Levi, the one who stole from Yahweh, would go on to become Matthew, the gift of Yahweh. He is the same man who so faithfully wrote down the story that we know as *The Gospel According to Matthew*. The fruit of his labors is immeasurable, far outweighing the shame of his former life. So you, O Levi, will become his gift. It is noteworthy that Mark strategically places Jesus' call of Levi immediately after the accounts of the cleansing of the leper and the healing of the paralytic. The transformation of a tax collector to a disciple is nothing short of a miracle. It is the reality of which those miracles were but signs.

Our text resounds with good news, but it also leaves us with a rebuke.

B. A rebuke to the religious

When Jesus first went to the synagogue as a revolutionary, he made a startling impact. Then he went to Peter's home and made that place the new synagogue, with all Israel gathering there. In today's story he goes outside, down by the seashore, and turns Levi's house into the new synagogue. How controversial can he be! The miracle of this story is that Jesus' holiness transformed the home of Levi into a messianic feast. At the center was Jesus, with Levi, and around them tax collectors and sinners who were even then learning to become disciples. But *outside* remained those who refused to enter into God's saving work. They prided themselves on being separate, and insisted on keeping their noses clean.

The text forces us to ask this question of ourselves: To what degree are we Pharisees? Do we pride ourselves in our ability to remain separate? Do we construct thick walls to protect ourselves from the world? Do we put pressure on other believers to attend holy meetings to the exclusion of non-Christian relationships? Do we look with suspicion on Christians who form significant friendships in the world? Are we proud that "we keep our nose clean, but look down on others who get their hands dirty?"⁸

To the degree that we act like Pharisees we are thwarting God's saving work. For this, Jesus would give us no mild rebuke. His actions radically redefine God's people, and his proverb redefines who is in and who is out. If religion merely means that we are separate, and that's all it means, then we are out! The church is not the place where we separate from all that is unclean to remain holy; it is the place where we expose our sickness to become holy. The church is not a monastery; it is an emergency room. The only people allowed in are the sick, and the doctor, and there is only one Doctor. Of course, the irony in this scenario is that everyone is sick! Controversial? Yes, and more than controversial. This story is a huge threat to people who pride themselves on religion and moral ethics.

So this text has both good news and a rebuke for believers.

And third, we are left with a challenge.

C. A challenge to disciples

This is the first time in his gospel that Mark uses the term “disciples” to describes Jesus’ followers. It is used twice (vv 15-16), first, in the context of what they were doing, and second, as a challenge to who they were. This is very significant. A disciple is one who is a learner and follower of Jesus. A modern-day equivalent would be an apprentice. We start to take on the yoke of discipleship not when we attend our first Bible study, or attend a myriad of religious meetings, but when we start imitating Jesus in his invitation to the world; when we take a risk, venturing forth into the dirty world of sinners, entering their natural circles of fellowship, looking them in the eye with love, and calling them to a relationship with Jesus.

I think today of Gus Marwiah, ministering to his own refugees in Ghana; of those who labor in Juvenile Hall; of a businessman who repeatedly refuses mantels of church leadership that he might remain focused in the world to share Christ with other businessmen; of counselors who offer hope to women with unplanned pregnancies; of a brother who ventured next door and found a group of handicapped men, and, rather than inviting them here, entered their home to lead a Bible study.

The person who has had the greatest influence in this area in my life is my wife. She has always insisted that we go into our children’s world. For years she has been a servant to many, and the result of her service is that we are invited to go places and engage in new friendships which we otherwise would never have experienced. Being shy, I would often feel reluctant to go with her, but I always followed along. One night we were invited to a dinner party through a friendship she had established. While I have had occasion to share Christ in private, one on one conversations at parties, on this evening the hostess learned that I had just returned from the most exciting missions trip of my life, and she called

on me to share with everyone where I had been and why I had gone there. As I spoke, it struck me that the stage I was standing on took six years of my wife’s faithful service to build.

As we approach the Christmas season you probably have more invitations than you can possibly attend to. I would say to you, be selective, and pray that at one of the places you go you will find a Levi, lonely, lost, and waiting.

The first steps are difficult, but once you taste the sweetness, there is no turning back. Your eyes once blurred, myopic, become forever fixed, focused, free; your vision is thrust out beyond the horizon; and your shy separateness that bound your feeble feet is cast to the wind, replaced by wings to take you anywhere.

Where is that place, O Lord?

Where does that lost, lonely Levi reside, awaiting our invitation?

Take us there, O Lord!

Amen.

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1. Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. - A.D. 135)* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973) 1:372-376.

2. Special thanks to Michael Green for this background material on the Roman tax structures, from his lecture series on *The Gospel of Mark*, Regent College, 1989.

3. I am indebted to Michael Green for his thoughts on “The man Levi,” and his observations of the OT background of Malachi and Deuteronomy.

4. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 123.

5. Green.

6. Gundry, 124.

7. Gundry, 126.

8. Green.