

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Mark		Pastor/Teacher
Text	Mark 2:1-17		Mason Depew
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CHRIST CAME TO CALL SINNERS

1. Verses 1-12 | The Son of Man Forgives Sins

- a. Continuing from the healings in the previous chapter, we can see that they are still clearly designed to validate Jesus's actual main mission. You cannot see just by looking at a man whether his sins have been forgiven or not, but you can see whether a paralytic is suddenly able to get up and walk, just like with the cases of fever and leprosy in Mark 1. Also like the previous chapter, we see the crowds around Jesus are so huge they are impossible to manage, which is why this paralytic's friends have to lower him down through a hole they make in the roof.
- b. What is different in Mark 2 is the sudden appearance of the Pharisees and their scribes as critics of Jesus. Up until now, as we have seen, Jesus has been concerned about gaining too much support too quickly, but now he is facing actual opposition from members of the community. And yet, as is so often the case, God uses his enemies' actions for his own glory without them even realizing what they are doing. The Pharisees' criticism here gives Christ the perfect opportunity to prove he has come to forgive sins.
- c. What does this say about who Jesus is? Are the scribes right that only God can forgive sins?
 - i. They are partially correct in their doctrine of God. It is true that the Old Testament makes it very clear that God alone can forgive sins. The whole sacrificial and ceremonial system of Leviticus shows that God needs to forgive all the people's many sins if they are to survive, and that this is costly in terms of sacrifices.
 - ii. At the same time, however, they are dead wrong in their assumptions about who Jesus is. They approach him with pre-defined notions of who he could be, and even when it is clear he does not fit neatly into any category they have, they refuse to humble themselves and learn. Simply in the fact that Jesus knows their criticisms before they express them (verse 8), he shows himself to have divine power. But then he confirms this beyond all doubt when he heals the man's paralysis, proving he had also forgiven his sins. This is very similar to the situation at his trial, where Jesus allows his accusers to speak the truth about him and then says some variation of "You said it yourself."¹ He allows his enemies to basically make his case themselves and then reject the obvious and true conclusion, exposing their wicked unbelief.
 - iii. Christ's reference to himself as "the Son of Man" is also extremely telling here. This is a reference to Daniel's vision of the four beasts and the inheritance of the Kingdom of God in Daniel 7. It is indisputably a messianic prophecy, since the "Son of Man" receives a kingdom encompassing all nations, peoples, and languages from God, seated on his throne.² This inheritance, of course, implies that the Son of Man is also the Son of God.

¹ For example, Matthew 26:64 and John 18:37.

² "And to him was given dominion

2. Verses 13-17 | Jesus Came for Sinners

- a. Note that Levi here is likely another name for Matthew, the author of the first Gospel. Mark never mentions Levi again after this point, and lists Matthew in his list of the disciples. Perhaps “Matthew” was a new name given to him by Christ after he called him, since it means “gift of the Lord.” In any case, the strongest piece of evidence is simply that Matthew 9:9 puts his name in Levi’s place in a nearly identical story.
- b. Given the quick pace that Mark’s Gospel has, why does he bother to note that Jesus called Levi, a tax collector, to be his disciple?
 - i. First, this is another strong sign that Jesus did not come to establish the kind of kingdom that the people were expecting. He even calls Levi while he is still sitting at the tax booth, making it as public a statement as it could be!³ Jews who became tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the enemy occupiers. The Roman tax collection system made it easy for tax collectors to pay themselves by extorting vast sums of money from taxpayers, but Jewish tax collectors were likely not in a position to do this.⁴ So it was not because they became extremely wealthy off the backs of their countrymen, but simply because they were participating in the Roman system, so to speak, that other Jews hated them. Of course, just because they didn’t usually have the opportunity to extort tax-payers doesn’t mean ordinary people didn’t suspect them of doing it, so that reputation may still have played some part. Regardless of the exact combination of reasons, it is clear that Jews would have expected the Messiah to round up tax collectors as criminals rather than welcome them as followers.
 - ii. Second, in a time and culture where hospitality was so important, it is shocking that Jesus would want to share the table of such disreputable people,⁵ as he does just after calling Levi. This is no doubt a large part of what first offends the Pharisees. To their minds, Jesus should be seeking their approval if he wants to be a religious leader, but instead he is almost entirely ignoring them and polluting himself with this unclean company. You can tell they are still just beginning to have problems with Jesus from the fact that they don’t dare ask him directly, but his disciples instead.⁶
- c. It is not just new believers who need to recognize that they are sinners. As John Owen said, “There is nothing more dreadful than for a man to be able to digest his convictions; to have sin look him in the face, and speak perhaps some words of terror to him, and to be able, by any charms of diversions or delays, to put it off, without coming to a full trial

and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.” - Daniel 7:14

³ “He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 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.” - Mark 2:13-14

⁴ “The contemptuous references to [“tax collectors”] is due more to their equivocal position between their fellow-Jews and the Romans and nationalistic feeling than to any general estimate of them as dishonest.” - Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, pg 168.

⁵ “Eating together created a special bond or fellowship through the eating of the broken bread over which the host had spoken the blessing (Grundmann, 82). Therefore, guests were selected very carefully.” - Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, pg 103.

⁶ “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?’” - Mark 2:16

as to state and condition in reference to that. This the saints do: they gather up their sins, lay them in the balance of the law, see and consider their weight and desert.”⁷

- d. There are many professing Christians who come to Reformed churches complaining about how their previous churches only gave them the Law. Some of these have spotted real problems in churches that confuse the Law and the Gospel (making them not legalists), while others have hardened their hearts against even the legitimate teaching of God’s Law (making them actual antinomians). How do you tell these two kinds of people apart? Their willingness to confess sin is an absolutely key difference. True Christians will see their sin for what it is and know they need to confess and repent of it. Antinomians resent the very idea that their sin is serious and that they should really try to change. They still have consciences, undoubtedly, so they feel guilt, but they push it down and try to dissolve it by making all kinds of excuses. This is what Owen meant by a man who is “able to digest his convictions.”
- i. These days, antinomianism often takes the form of blaming factors outside of yourself for your sins. In the early part of the twentieth century, people following Freud’s ideas about psychoanalysis often blamed their parents for their bad behavior. Now people have a range of options to choose from, including their genetics, some particular mental illness, or just society (“the system”) writ large. The idea is yes I know my actions were a problem, but that is not who I really am, because my father left when I was young, or because I am depressed, or the economy is terrible, or something else. If you get deep into these habits of thinking, you will never feel the need to examine your heart at all.
 - ii. Ironically, this makes modern people far more deterministic than Reformed theology, because our tradition has always consistently said that even though God ordains all things and none of us are absolutely free, we are still free enough to be culpable. As long as you are making choices that you want to make, you are fully responsible for your thoughts, words, and actions.⁸
 - iii. Think of how different David’s attitude towards his sin is in Psalm 51. He does not try to play for sympathy, blame his other wives for failing to satisfy him, or anything ridiculous like that. He says in no uncertain terms that he has sinned because he is a sinner and he *has always been one*, from the moment he was conceived.⁹ This sin absolutely *does* represent who David is, and that is the whole problem. This is why he then calls upon the Lord to give him the most radical solution possible: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”¹⁰ David did not digest his conviction, but saw it for what it was and vomited it back up in confession. Like vomiting, confession is extremely unpleasant, but necessary to expel the poison of guilt and shame in your soul.
- e. This is also one of the most glaringly obvious problems with legalism. Once you spot it, you will never be able to “unsee” it. Legalists make a show of keeping God’s Law that

⁷ *Communion with God*, pg 296-297.

⁸ “Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, **he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.** God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure. The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, **neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.**” - Westminster Confession of Faith, V.2-4

⁹ “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” - Psalm 51:5

¹⁰ Psalm 51:10

seems impressive on the surface, but the more deeply you know the Law, the more clearly you can see how no one lives up to it. You will notice that people who love to point out other people's sins very often make excuses for things they do.¹¹ This is particularly true in the area of speech. People will say that wasn't lying, it was technically true (even though it was clearly misleading)! Or that wasn't gossip, or that wasn't crude joking. As usual, an excellent test is the Golden Rule: would you appreciate it if people talked to you or about you behind your back in this way? If not, it is sin, but a legalist will have a very hard time admitting this because his salvation depends on his righteousness! Admitting he has a habit of sinning in a particular way, therefore, will threaten his belief that he is acceptable to God.

- i. This kind of self-righteousness seems especially common among many self-described Christian nationalists online. Many of them belong to legalistic distortions of Christianity, such as Roman Catholicism or the Federal Vision, and yet they sling the crudest of insults at their opponents. Why doesn't this trouble their consciences and make them fear damnation? Apparently they have never read, or at least rationalized away, the commandments in passages like Ephesians 5:3-4,¹² because they actually valorize their crude speech as necessary to win the culture war. So on the one hand, they will severely condemn the evil of others, particularly those that are prominent in our culture, while making excuses for their own evil, or even calling it good.¹³
 - ii. Genuine Christians should have no problem admitting that we sin often with our tongues.¹⁴ We also ought to admit that we constantly sin with our thoughts, such as when we covet.¹⁵ Admitting these sins should be easy for us, because we remember that Jesus Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Denying that you are a sinner means you have actually put Christ behind you! Minimizing your sin means, at the very least, distancing yourself from him! In this way, legalists and antinomians are both more similar to each other than they realize, like the two ends of a horseshoe.
- f. Jesus spends so much time with "tax collectors and sinners" because these are people who know who they are and what they deserve. He does not have to convince them that they need a Savior. While others imagine the Messiah has come to satisfy their political or health-related needs, these people are at least much closer to grasping Jesus's true mission. You can imagine their shock that such an amazing prophet and teacher would spend time with them over the scribes and the Pharisees!

¹¹ "It is evident from Christ's reply that the scribes erred in two ways: they did not take into account the office of Christ; and, **while they spared their own vices, they proudly despised all others.** This deserves our particular attention, for it is a disease which has been **always very general.** Hypocrites, being satisfied and intoxicated with a foolish confidence in their own righteousness, do not consider the purpose for which Christ was sent into the world, and do not acknowledge the depth of evils in which the human race is plunged, or the dreadful wrath and curse of God which lies on all, or the accumulated load of vices which weighs them down." - John Calvin, commentary on Mark 2:17

¹² "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving."

¹³ "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" - Isaiah 5:20

¹⁴ "For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body." - James 3:2

¹⁵ "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead." - Romans 7:7-8

3. Conclusion: Confess Your Sins and Answer His Call

- a. Do you see yourself as more like the Pharisees or the Tax Collectors in these accounts? It is no accident that Jesus chooses representatives from these two groups in his famous parable contrasting the unjustified versus the justified sinner.¹⁶ We are all sinners. Together we have become corrupt, and none of us do good or seek after God by nature.¹⁷ The only thing that will set you apart from the rest of fallen humanity, then, is whether you are willing to confess your sins and cry out to God for mercy in his Son, Jesus Christ. This was at the very center of the mission for which the Father sent his only-begotten Son to be born a true man. Every other part of his remarkable ministry, from the healings to his teaching, to casting out demons, were all signs to point at this core issue: God can only be reconciled to sinners and lift his curse if their sins are atoned for.

¹⁶ Luke 18:9-14

¹⁷ Psalm 14