

Choose Your Friends Wisely

Growing up I somehow picked up the message that good religious people only hang out with the right kinds of people. The Wesleyan Church is a holiness denomination and at that time—at least in my church, to be *holy* meant to be “set apart.” Now, that is true. The word holy does mean to set something or someone apart to be dedicated to God. The Bible tells us that we’re all called to be dedicated to God’s service.

But the part we got wrong was that we believed that meant we needed to separate ourselves from anyone who we deemed to be unholy—you know, sinners—lest they rub off on us. The only exception to this was when you were witnessing to them. Apparently, witnessing created an invisible force-field that their sin wouldn’t be able to penetrate us or corrupt us. Also, if someone were to see you with them, you could just say, “I’m sharing the gospel with them,” and they would either leave you alone or see if you needed some backup. Don’t spend too much time there and keep the force-field up.

That might be a bit of an exaggeration, but the attitude behind it was real. We believed Christians needed to be careful who we spent time with, lest we become corrupted. What’s interesting is that it never occurred to us that this is the exact opposite of what Jesus did. Turn with me to Mark, chapter 2 (p. 685) and let’s take a look.

Now, this is a series about evangelism, because the mission of every church is to “make disciples of all nations,” and the first part of making disciples is calling people to begin to follow Jesus. So, we’re looking at snapshots of Jesus or the disciples sharing the gospel. And we want to learn to be more effective sharing the good news of Jesus because we believe that it has the power to transform people’s lives.

Last week Sam Snyder from Cross Culture Church said we need to realize that we don’t go into any situation where the Holy Spirit isn’t already there and working. So, we have to believe the Holy Spirit is active and learn to tune ourselves into the Spirit by being attentive and obeying the promptings of the Spirit.

That brings us to today. Let’s read together Mark 2:13-17. We’ll read through it first, then we’ll walk through it piece by piece, **“¹³Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴As 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.**

¹⁵While 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. ¹⁶When 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?”

¹⁷On 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.” OK, it’s a pretty simple story, but let’s walk through it quickly to see what’s happening. Then we’ll draw out some points of application.

In verse 13, a large crowd was following Jesus. According to the gospels, this was typical. When I read this, the first question that comes to mind is, “Why?” Why did Jesus always have a crowd around him? I don’t get a crowd, so why did Jesus get a crowd? (I guess I do get a crowd on Sundays, but you never follow me around and hang on my every word the rest of the day. Some of you aren’t even listening now!)

There was something compelling about Jesus that attracted large crowds. It might be that in the two stories before this Jesus healed a man who was paralyzed and a man with leprosy. I have a feeling that if I healed people who are paralyzed, I might start to draw a crowd. But I actually think there’s more to it than that. And the reason I think that is because of the *type* of crowd that was drawn to Jesus. We’ll get to that in a minute.

For now, let’s continue. Verse 14, **“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.”**

So, even though there was a huge crowd following Jesus, for some reason, he saw one guy, Levi, sitting at a tax collector’s booth and said, “Follow me.”

Let me point out two things. First, Mark mentions Levi's *occupation*. Levi was a *tax collector*. But we know that being a tax collector wasn't exactly the same as fisherman, accountant, or sandwich artist. It would have been more like saying, "As he walked along, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus sitting at his Ponzi scheme booth. That was the reputation of tax collectors among the Jews.

Tax collectors contracted with the Roman Government to collect the taxes in a region. They bid how much money they could get from the people—the more they could collect, the more likely they were to get the bid. As long as they collected that amount, the Romans didn't care how much they collected for themselves, nor did they care what tactics they used. So, you can imagine the types of people this profession attracted.

There were many outsiders in that day. If you had a disease or disability, you were an outsider because you were considered cursed by God. If you were extremely poor, you could be an outsider. But Levi was the worst kind of outsider. Some people are unpopular just because they don't add much to a group. They're not funny or outgoing. They don't pay for dinner—maybe they're kind of awkward or needy so the friendship is draining.

But it wasn't just *inconvenient* to be friends with a tax collector. It affected your reputation. It would be like walking down the street with this guy [Kanye MAGA hat] or this woman [Chelsea Handler] Being seen with them makes people associate you with them. Levi was a tax collector, which associated him with Herod, who was like the

President Trump of his day. So, when Jesus started hanging out with Levi “who wore the make the Roman Empire Great Again” hat, Jesus would be lumped in with him.

Of course, you might say, *“Well, people might think Levi changed his ways and Jesus would be a hero because he got one more tax collector off the streets.”* One problem. Verse 15, **“¹⁵While 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.”** So, verse 15 blows that theory when Jesus follows Levi to his house to have dinner with many “tax collectors and sinners.”

Now, when Mark uses the phrase “tax collectors and sinners,” this is a euphemism for “people with bad reputations.” They were people who had been labeled off limits by the good, respectable crowd. And here was Jesus having dinner with them.

Remember I said that growing up we were very aware of the people we associated with? Well, in Jesus’ day it was like that only a hundred times worse. Galilee in Jesus’ day was kind of like a middle school lunch room. You gotta watch out who you’re eating with because your reputation is at stake. Eat at the wrong table and you get labeled. But here’s the amazing thing...Jesus didn’t seem to care.

No. That’s not right. Jesus DID care about his reputation. You see, Jesus had options. He had a choice of who he could associate with. He could have been known as the “rabbi to the stars!” He could have rubbed shoulders with the high priests. Imagine

how much better he could get his message out if he hung out with the key influencers? He could have walked in any circle he wanted and he CHOSE the “tax collectors and sinners.” You realize how significant that is, don’t you?

The board been talking about discipleship and one of the questions we have to ask is, “what’s the goal of discipleship?” In other words, when we train people to become like Jesus, what does that look like? The Fruit of the Spirit make the list—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. but I’ve never seen “friend of sinners” on the list. And yet that was one of the most remarkable things about Jesus and one of the characteristics of Jesus that’s easiest to emulate. So, why do we overlook this? Well, we might be like the people introduced in verse 16.

“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?” This is the point of conflict in the story that reveals the decision every church has to make—will we be like the religious leaders in this story or will we be like Jesus in our attitude toward sinners?

If the church is the Body of Christ, we should be taking our cues from Jesus. And here Jesus shattered the notion that we are corrupted by associating with “sinners.” Our actions, not our reputation, corrupts. Jesus was so locked in on his mission that it didn’t matter what the Pharisees were thinking, he knew what his business was. So, when they

asked the question, this was his answer, **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

If the church is the body of Christ we’re called to continue the work of Jesus. That’s the purpose of the Church. Sometimes we lose focus. Sometimes we can be deceived into thinking that Christianity is a religion for the respectable. Sometimes we act as though the church is a queue for heaven where we sit around and complain about the state of the world. Sometimes we act as though the church just a place where we can be told nice things so we can feel good about ourselves. Sometimes we *don’t know what* the purpose of the Church is, so we try to make it as comfortable as we can so we can all be happy.

But the Church has a mission to make disciples of all nations. And we can’t forget that. But in order to accomplish the work Jesus called us to, we have pay attention to how Jesus did it. So, the question is, what can we learn about fulfilling our mission from Jesus’ encounter with Levi? //

First, we learn that *Jesus calls people to leave everything to follow him*. We have a tendency to buy into this cultural view of Jesus as a hippie love guru. He’s all about peace and love, man. It’s all good.

And certainly, Jesus is about peace and love, but he was also quite demanding in his calling. In Luke 14, he says, **“Anyone who does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (27)** When the rich man came and asked Jesus what he must do

to be saved, Jesus told him to sell everything he had and give it to the poor and then go follow him.

But it's easy to lose sight of what it takes to follow Jesus. We live comfortable lives with a lot of things to distract us. And I'm afraid many of us in the church have taken Jesus' call too lightly. We're far too easily pleased to live like everyone else only with a veneer of Christianity. We pursue the world then wonder why we feel disconnected from God. But Jesus says if we want to be his disciple, we have to prioritize him over everything else, but Scripture also tells us that whatever we leave behind will amount to nothing compared to what we gain in Christ.

That was the choice Levi had to make. He might have been an outcast in society, but he made a pretty good living and obviously had friends. So, things were pretty good for him. And yet, he found something about Jesus so compelling that it didn't seem like a tough decision for Levi.

But it's a tough decision for most of us and I suspect that's why evangelism is so hard for most of us. We don't really know the goodness of Jesus because we're lulled into believing Jesus is ambivalent about whether or not we *actually* follow him. But for Levi, Jesus was so compelling, he wants all his friends to follow him, too. The question is, "What do you need to leave behind to really follow Jesus?" //

Here's the second thing we learn. *No one is beyond the reach of Christ.* We tend to be very quick to make judgments. It's so automatic, most of us don't even realize we're doing it, but I suspect there are some people you know where deep inside you think, "They would never turn and follow Jesus. They would never be interested. I could never see them standing up here and giving their testimony." If there are people like that in your life, then I'd like you to reconsider the power of God. Here's one example.

[Ed Douglass testimony]

Jesus can transform anyone. Do you believe that? So, here's what it boils down to. I suspect most of us really do believe that Christ can transform lives. And some of us believe it because, like Ed, we've experienced it. We know how we used to be or what we would be without Christ, but sometimes we forget. But if we're honest with ourselves we can admit with the Apostle Paul that it's only "by the grace of God I am what I am." (1 Cor 15:10) If Christ can transform Ed and you and me, he can transform anyone! //

The final point I want to draw out from this passage is this...*We choose our reputation, so choose wisely.* Here, I want to talk straight about the Church and I want to challenge us all on something. Because this point is personal, but I also believe it begs every church to answer a critical question. What *should* a church's reputation be?

It's a question we need to know the answer to, but we probably don't ask that question enough. But it's a key question because the reputation of the church will

determine the kind of people who come to it. So, some churches put out a vibe of being cool and young and who goes to churches like that? Cool, young people. Cool young people need Jesus, too. Some churches have a reputation for social activism and community engagement. Again, that's good stuff. Some churches have the feel of everyone having it together—they know their Bible and they got things cleaned up.

But if the church is the body of Christ, what *should* our reputation be? According to this story, if we're like Christ the reputation of every church should be that *this is a church for sinners*. Of all the organizations in the world, the church *is the place sinners and outcasts are invited to come and be transformed by Jesus*. Is that our reputation? That's a critical question because again, we choose our reputation.

Why is it that Jesus not only had large crowds following him, but *many tax collectors and sinners following him*? Because he *chose* that reputation and people like to be with people who are like them. They feel at home.

I have a friend who's the pastor of a large church. That church has a ministry at the local strip-club. It started with an older lady who would go to the parking lot of the local strip club and pray for girls. Eventually it turned into a Bible study with many of the strippers. And through that ministry, over the course of 5 years, about two dozen women gave their life to Christ and left the business.

That's a super-cool ministry my friend was proud of. But then he said something that stuck with me because I think it would be true of a lot of churches, including ours. He said he was thrilled that so many women gave their lives to Christ, but he said not a single one of those women attend his church and he's heart-broken by that. Not because he's super into numbers, but because it says something about the church.

I know another church that has a thriving recovery ministry with many people who are coming out of incredibly rough backgrounds—and their kids run around during service. But dozens of them every year give their lives to Christ and are baptized. Praise God for that church! It's a messy, exhilarating place to be. Angels throwing parties left and right because of that church. And yet I know a few families who left that church because they didn't like. I'm not sure it was hard decision for the pastor to say, "OK, see you later!" Why? Because you choose your reputation.

Do you want to know my great desire for this church? It's that we could become known as a church for sinners. And people with sins and hurts who are desperate to be transformed know that they'll find what they're looking for. I think we're a good church. I think we are full of people who are caring, accepting, and sincere. I believe we're a church full of people who want what I want—am I right? We're not there yet. We're close, but we're not there. But here's the great thing...we can choose our reputation.

How? Well, we'll have to unpack this more another time, but let me mention a few things. Here's how we get a reputation for being a church for sinners.

First, we show that we believe no one is beyond the reach of Christ by inviting them into community. Cool people and people who have it all together can come if they want, but we're not called to be cool, we're called to be faithful.

We must refuse to be a church that sends struggling people into hiding. How do we do that? We don't pretend to have it all together when we don't. We're willing to share our own struggles whether they're past or present—kind of like Ed did today—not to wallow in it, but to be able to say—“I'm not really that great, but I have a God who is.”

Third, we refuse to adopt the attitude of “us” helping “them.” People can be really well-meaning and still be off-putting by an attitude of superiority. So always remember who you were or would be without Christ and don't separate yourself.

We can do it by being a church where it's OK for people to voice their questions.

We do by not being shocked by people's sin. Jesus wasn't shocked or appalled by Levi—he went and ate with him. People do some crazy and terrible things, but God can transform them anyway. The only thing that should shock us is our own apathy.

We do by not worry about what other people will think if someone in our congregation doesn't look right, act right or smell right. We only care what God thinks.

We do by refusing to be cynical or discouraged, but we fix our eyes on Jesus who is in the process of changing us and can change anyone!

So, what do you say? What kind of church do you want be? I know what I want. So, what's your part in that quest? How will you help shape our reputation?