

THE UNEXPECTED SERVANT
Mark 2:13-22

This morning I want to share with you an unforgettable story that embodies the heart of the passage we're in today. Maria and her teenage daughter, Christina, lived in a small village in Brazil, in a small house in a poor neighborhood. Like all the other houses, it had a red tiled roof and hard dirt floor. For furnishings, all they had was a pallet on either side of the room for beds, a wash basin, and a wood-burning stove. Maria's husband had passed away when Christina was an infant and never remarried, so finances for them were especially tight. And when Christina was finally old enough to get a job, her independent and curious spirit longed to get out of that house and to experience life in the big city. It was what she dreamed of and what she often spoke of. And one day, Maria woke up to find her daughter's bed empty and her daughter nowhere to be found. But Maria knew exactly where she went. Against her warnings of how harsh the big city streets of Rio de Janeiro could be, she went anyway.

Knowing what Christina would eventually end up doing, when hunger meets pride, she decided to go to the city. On her way to the bus stop, she stopped in to a drugstore photobooth and spent all she could on some small, black and white pictures of herself. And when she reached the city she began to go around and put up these pictures, fastening them on bulletin boards, bathroom mirrors, and phone booths in the different bars, hotels, and nightclubs – anywhere street walkers had a reputation. It wasn't long before Maria ran out of pictures and money and had to return back to her village.

A few weeks later, young Christina was descending a flight of stairs in a hotel lobby. Her face was tired, her laughter was broken, and her eyes no longer danced, but spoke of fear and pain. Her dream had become a nightmare. At this point, a thousand times over she had longed to trade countless beds for her secure pallet at home. But as she reached the bottom of the stairs, she happened to notice a familiar face on a lobby mirror. Her throat tightened up and her eyes began to well up with tears as she walked across the room to remove the small photo of her mom and written on the back of the photo was a compelling invitation, "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." And she did.ⁱ

That story really brings to light the heart of the passage we are in today – and the heart of God Himself. Jesus came to save sinners, saying, "Whatever you've done, whatever you've become, it doesn't matter. Just come home." With the Pharisees and the sect of the Pharisees known as the scribes having places ridiculous and unbelievably heavy burdens on men and women, many people had walked away from anything to do with religion, or what they thought was biblical Judaism, but living without God, they found themselves hurting there too. And that's where Jesus often stepped in, saying, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). And He did a lot of things in His pursuit of sinners that the Pharisees simply were not expecting the Messiah to do.

Last time we were in the book of Mark, Jesus was ministering to people in a crowded house but now Mark leads us out to the seashore in the open air, starting in Mark 2:13.

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

And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. When the

scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?” 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.”

John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.”

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

Last week we began to sense some of the tension and the friction rising between Jesus and the head religious honchos of the day such as the scribes of the Pharisees. These men had come from all over the land and even as far as Jerusalem up to the territory of Galilee just to observe and critique Jesus’s ministry. They were like an investigating committee that was waiting to see if He was going to side with them or against them, and if against them, they would try to find anything they could to nail Him on it, literally. Like a lot of people, these religious leaders were waiting for Messiah to come. The trouble was that when He did come, He wasn’t who they expected. He was far too scandalous in His pursuit of sinners. **And today we’re going to look at a few unexpected, scandalous practices of Jesus that really upset the religious leaders.** The first practice is that He unexpectedly called a tax-collector as His disciple in verses 13-14.

I. **JESUS UNEXPECTEDLY CALLS A TAX-COLLECTOR AS HIS DISCIPLE. (VV. 13-14)**

This was something that really set off these Pharisees. **Jesus calling a tax-collector to follow Him** is a big deal because to the Pharisees, being a **tax-collector, or a publican** we could call them, was forbidden by Jewish law. If you were a rabbi and a tax collector tried to follow you, you did everything to could to get rid of him, not call him to follow you! These guys were ostracized from the Jewish community. They worked for Rome, and Jews hated Rome for oppressing them, and especially through taxation. They were known for being crooks, extortionists, or “professional robbers” because even though they weren’t paid well, they were allowed to collect more taxes than they were required and pocket the leftovers. For a Pharisee to lie to a publican and get away with it, it was actually considered a righteous act because if you could get something past a publican, you were getting past a thief and thus, saving it. You weren’t supposed to even to try and reach them or teach them the Law. To say they weren’t liked is an understatement.

But there’s a couple more elements to this account that **made it even more distasteful** to them. Out of the **two types of publicans** that Jesus chose, He chose the worst type. Apparently you had **general income tax-collectors** and **toll-collectors**. The lesser of the two evils was the general income tax-collecting official. The greater evil was the toll-collectors, and all the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke point out that **Levi was sitting at a place of toll**. This toll booth was likely located near the lake on the main travel corridor in the area, taxing goods coming in and out of Herod Antipas’s territory (Antipas on the west side of the Jordan River and Philip on the east).

The final mark of distaste though was that this toll-collector was looked at as not only betraying his people, but betraying Judaism. The name Levi reminds us of the Levites, the tribe designated to serve God as priests, and as teachers of the Law, and to take care of the various logistics required

tabernacle or temple service. Levi was anything but that. He didn't live up to his name and was in the Pharisees' eyes on the same level as a harlot – someone you just don't go near – but not for Jesus. And we need to take that home.

❖ **Jesus often calls the unexpected.**

He saves people and calls people into ministry that we would never expect – maybe even the last people we would ever imagine. He can transform people in a heartbeat by His Spirit and begin a whole new work in their lives like He just did in Levi, who is now called Matthew by the way, which means “the gift of God” – and that's exactly what he became: a gift of God to the whole world who wrote the book of Matthew (Mt. 9:9). Someone that the Pharisees wrote off and had nothing to do with it, Jesus called into ministry. You and I can think of several others in ministry today that we would've never imagined. He still calls the unexpected to follow Him.

In verses 15-17, we also see another despised practice of the Messiah by the Pharisees:

II. JESUS UNEXPECTEDLY EATS AND DRINKS WITH SINNERS. (VV. 15-17)

When it says, “He was reclining at the table in his house,” we are talking about Matthew's house, where Matthew it seems is hosting a farewell dinner for his friends and probably using it as an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus. And in contrast to the Pharisees who were separatists and who probably had forgotten how to smile or enjoy just hanging out and having a relaxing time, it's refreshing to see Jesus hanging out with them and having a good time. But just His dining with a bunch of sinners became **another breach in the Pharisee's rulebook** that Swindoll said left them “squirming in their tunics.” Because in their minds, they were thinking, “If this man was the Messiah, He wouldn't do this. He's supposed to be *more righteous* than we are.”

They ask His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?” And Jesus's responds, “**It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.**” For the moment Jesus facetiously accepts the Pharisee's self-righteousness to make a point: If the Pharisees knew these people were spiritually sick, and considered themselves the spiritual doctors, then *why in the world weren't they trying to reach them?* Sick people need doctors. In other words, **Jesus understood this most basic principle that if you're going to reach the world, you've got to have meaningful contact with the world. You can be in the world and reaching people, without being like it – but you can't reach people who need Jesus if you're not around them at all!** You can't heal the sick if you're religious rule book condemns you from having contact with them in the first place. And **one of the best places to reach people is by having dinner with them.** At work, they're too busy. Many are scared to go to church. But at dinner, **some of the best spiritual conversations take place.**

❖ *So why aren't we eating with more tax-collectors and sinners in attempts to reach them?*

If you want to reach people, you have to be around them – talk to them – spend time with them. I remember years ago being upset about a popular business that came to town owned by an apostate religion and I voiced my complaint about it to an older gentleman and his response really changed my outlook. I didn't want our community supporting this false religion but the old wise guy said, “Well, we can't reach em if we're not around em.”

❖ **We can't reach the spiritually sick if we're not around them.**

But what we tend to do? Sometimes we're not much different than the Pharisee. One man actually accused too many Christians of acting like rabbits – we hop from one rabbit hole to the next – from one Christian gathering to another – and we never make any meaningful contact with the world. We can get stuck only in Christian circles.

But these tax-collectors and sinners are the people Jesus came to save. He can't do much about these Pharisees who don't even see their sin and their need for a Savior. But these tax-collectors and sinners at least know they're sinners and that's the first part of the gospel – It's those who know they are sinners, who see their need for a Savior. And I love that Jesus didn't write people off just because they looked different or just because they belonged to a certain crowd. He knew there were many people in this crowd that deep down were just using things like alcohol to cover their pains and using parties to try to fulfill the God-given desire for fellowship. Jesus knew their hearts – all of their aches and all of their pains from the legalism and the life of license – Jesus came to bring healing to them.

The passage reminds me of an old Servant prophecy from Isaiah 42. Remember, the idea of Christ as Servant doesn't begin with Mark – it begins with OT prophecy. It says, "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him... A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish." When I think of a bruised reed, I think of a cattail. Some cattails are tall and green and still have their sharp edges... but many have been bruised and all it takes is a little wind to blow them over. Then a dimly burning wick carries a similar picture. There's not much left of it and just a little wind is all it takes to put it out. Well, many people, like those who were at this party were a lot like a bruised reed and barely burning wick spiritually, due in part no doubt to the Pharisees, and Jesus came gently, as a Servant, to remove the bruise and get them burning bright again.

So the first "no, no" Jesus broke was calling a tax-collector. The second was hanging out with tax-collectors and sinners. The third one is that **He didn't fast** – and fasting issue becomes the springboard for Him to explain to these guys that it's not just a few of their rules He's rejecting – He's rejecting their entire Pharisaical system that went beyond biblical Judaism (OT Law) – as demonstrated by the illustration of the garment and the wineskins.

III. **UNEXPECTEDLY TO THE PHARISEES, JESUS DOESN'T COMPLY WITH PHARISAISM BUT COMPLETELY REJECTS IT. (VV. 18-22)**

And I've got to take some time to explain what I mean by that word Pharisaism now. Three weeks ago, if you remember, we looked at the difference between what Jesus taught and what the scribes of the Pharisees were teaching, both in method and in content. "He was teaching as one with authority and not as the scribes (Mk. 1:22). They were really repetitive and preached manmade rules but Jesus preached the Word of God. Like the Reformation, *Jesus was sola Scriptura*, and they weren't, because over the past 4 centuries BC, the religious leaders had come up with all sorts of extra-biblical religious jargon that went beyond what was written in the Word. They had conjured up all sorts of ridiculous rules and traditions and regulations to burden people with. And to go further, *they had placed all of it on the same plane as Scripture* – as having equal validity as Scripture – just like some churches today. But this made it no longer Biblical Judaism – it was Rabbinic, Pharisaical Judaism – which was a whole other animal.

In addition to the Law, they had what is commonly referred to as "a fence" of rabbinic laws in place that they designed to keep people from breaking the Mosaic Law. And this has come up often enough that I've decided to give this fence a name – **The 613 Fence – basically, the Mishnah**. For all 613 commands in the Law, the **Sopherim (scribes)** had come up with additional laws that formed a fence to keep them from breaking each law. A law for a law. A fence to keep from crossing the next fence. Arnold Fruchtenbaum explained the **pilpulistic logic** that used this way:

Given a specific statement or commandment, how many new regulations could be logically derived from that original statement or commandment? ”ⁱⁱⁱ So for every command, they would put in place other man-made commands beyond what written to keep from breaking the original command.

I’ll give you an example: **In the Law of Moses, God forbid the seething or boiling any meat of a baby goat (kid) in its mother’s milk** (Ex. 23:19). It sounds really strange but this was one of the religious practices of the Canaanites. They would take a firstborn baby goat and boil its meat in the mother’s milk as an offering to Baal, a false god. Well, by the time the Pharisees came around, no one was really doing that anymore and the original intent of the command had been forgotten, but that didn’t stop these gusy. They said, “How can we make sure we never, never, never, ever, ever, ever, boil a kid in its mother’s milk?”ⁱⁱⁱ And so according to their pilpulistic logic they brainstormed and decided that **you could no longer eat meat and drink milk at the same time. And after eating meat, you had to wait four hours before eating any dairy** because it’s possible that the meat you ate is from the young of the animal that produced the milk you are drinking and it would then seethe (boil) in your stomach. It’s pretty outrageous, right?

But going even further, they said, **you also have to have one set of dishes for meat products and one set of dishes for dairy products**. Because what if at noon you decide to eat a piece of cheese on a plate and after you eat, you clean the plate but somehow miss a tiny speck of cheese, thus your plate is not perfectly clean, and then later that evening when you go to eat some meat on that same plate with the tiny speck of cheese, which could have been made with the milk of the mother of the meat you’re eating, it could be mixed in your stomach and you break the law. So, now two sets of dishes were required. And if someone accidentally uses the wrong dish for the wrong product, it was to be destroyed or given to a Gentile. It had nothing to do with idol worship anymore. It was just ridiculous burdens to put on people.

After the scribes’ work, another school of rabbis arose called the **Tannaim**, who decided there was **still too many holes in this fence** and continued adding to it until A.D. 220. Their work compiled with the scribes is called the **Mishnah**. Then a third school, called the **Amoraim**, and they thought there was still too many holes in the fence so they added more and came up with what is called the **Gemara**. It’s like they just kept seeing holes in the fence and trying to fill them. And when those two books, the Gemara and the Mishnah were combined, they became the **Talmud**.

But it’s this sort of thing **Jesus was dealing with – specifically, the Mishnah**. Whenever you see words from Jesus or Paul talking about rules and teachings of men or tradition of the elders, you should instantly think of the **Mishnah (Fence)** – because **that’s what He was up against and what He refused to cave in too**. In Mark 7:6 Jesus said, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, **teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.**’ Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to **the tradition of men**. He was also saying to them, “You are experts at **setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.**”

These guys really missed the spirit of the Law. The spirit of the Law had Israel’s good in mind. If they would’ve followed it, it would have made them a blessed and prosperous people who lived wisely. But instead, the true intent of the Law had been lost to their manmade regulations and Jesus wanted to free people from it.

I could be wrong but I'm betting Matthew was one of those who had been burned by the religious system and then went to the other extreme of being a tax-collector. But through the hope-filled teaching and company of Jesus Christ, He saw something different, and believed in Him. As Jesus Christ was walking by that day I personally wonder if Matthew was thinking, "I really wish Jesus would call me to be His disciple but no teacher wants a stain like me following them." But Jesus wasn't like the other teachers. He knew Matthew's heart had changed and He called him to follow Him that day. And it's worth celebrating. Jesus likens it to a marriage ceremony.

They ask him why He's not **fasting**, which meant that this feast was probably on a Monday or Thursday – that's when the Pharisees did their frequent fasting. The Pharisee from Luke 18:12, if you remember, bragged to God in his prayers that he fasted twice a week. This was probably one of those days and *they're upset about it because if anything, the Messiah would fast just as much or more, right?* That's what was going through their minds... But Jesus says why should they fast when they should be rejoicing? He came to bring joy – to bring good news. A tax-collector has just repented and found life and that's something to celebrate! But in their critical hearts, they can't rejoice with them. Down the road "when the bridegroom is taken away from them" – probably **referencing His death** – fasting will be more appropriate then, but not now. God, Immanuel, is with man now and men are being saved – fasting doesn't have a place.

And Jesus takes this moment about fasting to go a step further. **He's tired of their constant nit-picking of His ministry** so He makes it clear through two illustrations that He's not just rejecting their fasting regulations – He didn't come to patch up more holes in their fence – He came to bring something totally new! A New Covenant! He says, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results." New clothes often shrink after you wash them so if you sew a new, unshrunk cloth on old cloth that's already shrunk, it'll tear and ruin both.

It's a similar idea with the wineskins. "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins." They used to store wine in leather-skin pouches but the skins could only handle fresh wine once. Because of the fermentation and the old skin losing its elasticity, an old wine skin filled with new wine would burst. The point is really what we talked about much of the year last year in Galatians – Law and Grace don't mix. If you mix either system, you ruin both systems. Jesus didn't come to patch up the old system or the fence that they thought had too many holes in it still – He came to bring a New Covenant of grace where everyone who admits they're a sinner and receives Him as their Savior, will not perish, but have everlasting life. Jesus came to restore the teaching of the true heart of God, that "No matter what they've done or what they've become, they can still come home." And for those who do, He's not into just to making better versions of the old us, but making us new creations by His Spirit.

In a world where a lot of people have been burned by religion and are living unfulfilled in sin, this passage challenges us to reach out and show them this incredible, scandalous grace. The question I leave us with is this: ***"Why aren't we eating with tax-collectors and sinners?"***

ⁱ Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986, 2004), 130-132.

ⁱⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah from a Messianic Jewish Perspective, Vol. 2* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2017), 201.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.