



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
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When Jesus Comes Calling
Mark 2:13-17

They were watching Him now.

The Pharisees had heard about Jesus, this new teacher from Nazareth.

Maybe they first caught sight of Him when He came to be baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Though they didn't understand it fully, maybe they saw something in His face that told them this was an incredibly significant experience for Him.

What really got their attention were the miracles He was doing. Word was getting around. He had cast out demons and healed many who were sick with various diseases. They could hardly believe their ears when they heard He had healed a leper—after all, people saw that as something only *God* could do.

Could He be—nah, that would be too good to be true. They'd been looking for the Messiah for so long! Surely He wouldn't come as a carpenter's son, would He? And from Nazareth? Of course not! He was supposed to be from Bethlehem! And surely He wouldn't be calling simple fishermen to be His disciples! Wouldn't He choose the brightest and best from the religious elite?

From suspicion to shock

They had become even more suspicious of Him when four men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus. When they couldn't get to Jesus because of the crowd, they took the man up on the roof, opened an area of the roof large enough to let the man down, and lowered him right in front of Jesus. Jesus saw their great faith, and said to the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."¹

This really offended some of the Pharisees' scribes (the so-called experts in and teachers of the law), who thought in their hearts that Jesus was blaspheming, since *only God* can forgive sins.

Jesus perceived what they were thinking and said, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take up your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" And the man did (Mark 2:1-12)!

Now all this was already disturbing and offensive enough in the Pharisees' eyes. But from their perspective, Jesus was about to add insult to injury!

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this sermon are from the *New International Version*.

Jesus came calling

Jesus went out again by the Sea of Galilee. As He walked along, He came upon Levi (Matthew's Gospel identifies this man as Matthew, who would become one of the twelve apostles). Guess where he was—sitting in the tax collector's booth.

Now any self-respecting Jew, especially a religious one, wouldn't give Levi the time of day. You see, he was a tax collector! He was a sellout to the imperial Roman authorities, collecting their taxes from his own people.

And what was more, if Levi was anything like most of the other tax collectors, he collected enough above what was owed to make a very comfortable living for himself—you might say he was working on a commission basis.

But Jesus not only stopped to speak to him, He said, "Follow Me!" And Levi did! He got up and left his toll booth on one of the busiest international routes in Palestine, and followed Jesus (Mark 2:13-14)!

The Pharisees' scribes must have been thinking, "Well, it can't get much worse than this!" But it did—Levi invited Jesus to his house for a feast, and invited all his friends as well.

Now who do you think they were?

In ancient Palestine, when someone gave a feast, most anybody could come and observe, but only the invited guests could gather around the table and share in the meal. For these occasions, they'd gather around a low table, lying on their left side, propped up on their left elbow, using their right hand to take their bread and dip it in the food and eat, or to take their cups and drink.

To share in this kind of table fellowship with someone was a powerful sign of *friendship* and *acceptance*. The Pharisees were accustomed to being the ones around the table, with the tax collectors and sinners standing around looking on.

Now the sinners were the irreligious or non-religious folk. They were not necessarily terribly immoral, though some were. For the Pharisees, the main thing that made these people sinners was that they didn't keep the law *as the Pharisees interpreted it*.

The Pharisees believed God had revealed in the Law the way to *achieve* salvation. They had no problem believing that God loved sinners, or that He was concerned about them, or that He wanted to save them. But they also believed that sinners would never be saved *until* they changed and began to observe the law, as the Pharisees understood it—the means God had given to *achieve* a right relationship with Him.

So the Pharisees believed they should keep themselves pure by being separated from the sinners and tax collectors, having nothing to do with them.

But here were Jesus and His disciples *eating* with them! He wasn't ignoring them till they changed, He was meeting them where they were, offering His help and grace to them! He was accepting them just as they were, so He could make them what God wanted them to be!

The scribes of the Pharisees who were there watching couldn't take it any longer! Before, they had questioned what Jesus was doing in their hearts. This time, they became bolder, and questioned His disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (Mark 2:16).

Now I don't know about you, but I have to confess that I can sort of identify with the Pharisees here! I mean, here they were, devoting themselves to the study of God's law, trying their best to keep it so they'd be acceptable to God.

Jesus comes along, and He's marching to a different drum beat. Yes, He's calling people to repent and believe, to have a real change of mind and heart, but He's accepting these people who have done *nothing* to try to achieve rightness before God! And He's even *eating* with them!

Is that what we expect? We want people to change before we have much to do with them, don't we? I've always heard, "You're known by the company you keep." There's a lot of truth in that, and it's wise counsel, especially for young people. And I'm always concerned about the evil influence that immoral and irreligious people can have on family and friends.

But there Jesus is, at the table, eating with these tax collectors and sinners that Levi has invited to this meal in honor of Jesus.

Jesus overheard the scribes when they asked His disciples this question. His answer was simple, yet profound. It was similar to an answer that some philosophers in the ancient world would give if they were questioned about living in certain cities or teaching certain people.² It was an answer the Pharisees had no response for, one that speaks on a level that's deeper than words alone can express.

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (ESV). *By His words and His actions, Jesus showed that He came to call sinners.*

In a world and a time before preventive care, and when physicians went to the sick rather than the sick coming to them, Jesus says that *like a physician coming to help the sick, He comes to call sinners to Himself.*

Not to tell them to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Not to clean themselves up.

Not to achieve or earn anything.

Simply to come to Him.

To trust Him.

To experience a change of mind and heart.

To follow Him.

And so I have to ask myself, what does that mean for me? And I remember that when Jesus came calling me one day so long ago, it was because I was a sinner—I was sin-sick and in need of the Great Physician! Even though I was just a child, I needed Jesus.

Then I look around me and see that *we all need Him*, that we're all sinners, that we all continually fall short of God's intention for us (Romans 3:23). Some are worse than others, but we've all been infected by sin and need the salvation and healing that Jesus brings.

So when He comes calling, the right response is to repent of our sins and follow Him, just as Levi did.

But we can't stop there. Others need Him too! We need to introduce them to Jesus as well, so they can experience His grace and the marvelous change He brings when He comes calling!

² Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 25-26.

When Jesus comes calling . . .

I heard about him years ago, from another preacher.³ Just call him John. John was never a religious man. And his occupation didn't help that any. He owned a tavern.

The folks in the church in John's town were concerned about him. They prayed for him, and witnessed to him. But they always told him, "Now John, you know that if you're going to be saved and join the church, you're going to have to get rid of your tavern."

But this was his livelihood. He really didn't know how to do much else, and besides, it had been good to him and his family financially. He had done quite well. But deep down, he knew he was a sinner, and he knew he needed the Lord.

Person after person came to him. "John, you'll have to sell your tavern to become a Christian." Over the years, several ministers told him the same thing.

Finally, a visiting minister was in town preaching at the church. The pastor asked him to visit John with him. As they talked, the minister began to witness to him. John said, "I want to ask you something, Preacher. Do I have to sell my tavern to become a Christian? Have I got to get rid of it?"

The minister said, "No, John! Jesus comes to us where we are, just as we are, and saves us by His grace! We can't earn it. He doesn't say, 'Clean yourself up, and then you can come to Me.' You could sell your tavern and still be lost! To be saved, you just have to turn to Jesus."

And that afternoon, he did. Jesus had come calling, and John followed Him, just as Levi did so long ago, and as countless others have through the centuries. John prayed to receive Jesus Christ as His Lord and Savior, and before long, he was baptized and became a member of the church.

And do you know what he did then? Do you know what John did after Jesus came calling and he followed Him?

He sold His tavern!

†MEG

³ Rev. Henry Mahan of Ashland, KY.