Mark’s Gospel Lesson 6 (2022)

**JESUS’ CALLING OF LEVI AND EATING WITH SINNERS**

Mark 2:13-17

Key Vere: 2:17

“On 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.’”

 In the previous passage, 2:1-12, Jesus pronounced the forgiveness of the paralyzed man’s sins. And to the Jewish religious leaders who accused him of being blasphemous, Jesus started using the messianic title Son of Man for himself, saying, “But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” (2:10) He then validated his claim his authority to forgive sins by healing the paralyzed man, saying, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” (2:11)

Today’s passage records the second conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. It includes two events, Jesus’ calling Levi, a notorious tax collector in the town, as his disciple (13-14) and feasting with the religious and social outcasts at Levi’s house (15-17). The Jewish religious leaders criticized that Jesus’ close association with those they considered sinful was a severe violation of the law of God. To them, Jesus again declared, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” Today’s event depicts a sharp contrast between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders in understanding who the righteous and sinners are and their dealings with them.

Look at verse 13. “Once again Jesus went outside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.” After healing the paralyzed man in the house of Simon Peter, Jesus withdrew himself from the crowd to a lonely place by the lake. It seems that even though Jesus’ daily schedule was uptight, he still made time for himself and walked along the shore to have a quiet time of reflection and refreshment. I believe that Jesus knew how to manage stress. Yet, the crowd again came and gathered around him, and Jesus began to teach them. Sometimes, Jesus preached to them, and other times he taught them. What’s the difference between teaching and preaching? It's hard to articulate the difference. But **preaching is primarily geared toward life change, while teaching primarily aims to transfer knowledge and wisdom.**

Mark didn’t specify the content of his teaching. But we can guess that Jesus shared valuable resources and pieces of knowledge concerning the kingdom of God.

Life in this world is difficult for everyone, full of stress and troubles. Even though the people of Israel were God’s chosen people who had enough religious traditions and heritage, they didn’t experience God’s kingdom in their lives. They didn’t feel satisfied. Many were sick physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. They had no other choice than to live an unhealthy life. *“Unhealthy (diagnostic medical terms),” “Sinful (religious words),” or “Unlawful (legal terms).”*

Look at verse 14. “As he walked alone, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ Jesus said to him, and Levi got up and followed him.” We are not informed much about Levi, except that he was the son of Alphaeus and a tax collector. According to Matthew’s account, Levi had another name, “Matthew,” which means “the gift of the Lord.” (Mt. 9:9) But Luke also called him “Levi.” It seems that Levi, which means “united,” was his original name, a beautiful name.

However, what characterized Levi was his occupation as a tax collector. Working as a tax collector in those days was not prestigious. The Roman government didn’t collect taxes directly from the Jews, who were very rebellious and against paying taxes. So, they hired Jewish males to collect taxes more effectively. Even though tax collectors were to have high education, they were lower class officials in the system’s hierarchy. Generally, the top ones in the system took advantage, getting high salaries and bonuses, while lower-ranking tax officials could not survive financially by just fulfilling their quota. So they had to deceive and overtax their own people, often mercilessly. Jews hated Romans, and they hated the tax collectors even more. The disgrace extended to their family members. They were not even allowed to the synagogues.

So why would anyone want to be a tax collector? I am sure Levi hated his tax-collecting job. Yet, he didn’t seem to have much choice if he wanted to survive. When people criticized him and condemned him, he was hurt and hardened his heart. Levi was probably a victim of a dog-eat-dog world where people are forced to take advantage of others and harm each other to survive and succeed. Yet, he felt deeply convicted by his own mistakes and felt hopeless in his helpless situation.

Apparently, he heard about Jesus, his healing ministry, and preaching, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” At first, he said, *“The time has come? Not for me! It’s too late.”* Probably, his office was not far from the seashore where Jesus came near to preach. But he couldn’t dare to come. He thought God had abandoned him because of his terrible mistakes and wrongdoings. He was sitting in his tax collector’s booth, feeling lost and alone (pic#1). *“Who would understand this guy and rescue him?”*

 The fact of the matter is that Levi was not alone. Jesus knew all about Levi, including how Levi felt about himself, his past failures and mistakes, and his future. Most of all, Jesus knew Levi was longing for a new world of meaning, fulfillment, and hope. When Jesus saw Levi sitting at his booth, he didn’t tell him to repent. Instead, he told him, **“Levi, follow me!”** It sounded excellent but blunt. What did he mean by that?

Well, when Jesus said to Levi to follow him, it meant far more than Levi could have ever imagined. Jesus forgave Levi’s sins, all of his mistakes, and wrongdoings. And he also invited him to be one of his disciples, a kingdom worker, along with Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, to whom Jesus also said, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” (1:17) Levi didn’t even ask for all these. But that’s what Jesus meant when he called Levi to follow him. What a marvelous grace! Levi didn’t hesitate. He got up and began to follow Jesus. Since then, following Jesus had become Levi's life's new and ultimate goal. Of course, it would not have been easy for him to follow Christ. He would have to suffer many things. However, his life of following Christ would not end in despair and sorrow but would have access to the kingdom of heaven, with joy, peace, everlasting love, and hope now and forever. *“I will follow him, follow him wherever he may go. And near him, I always will be. For nothing can keep me away. He is my destiny.” (I Will Follow Him- Sister Act1)*

Look at verse 15. “While 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.” When Levi accepted God’s grace of forgiveness and new purpose in life, he was overjoyed. Wanting to express his gratitude to Jesus and share the joy with others, he hosted a dinner party at his house. Many of his tax collector friends and associates came to join the dinner social outcasts, people with bad reputations. Since they were not allowed to go to the synagogues, it was a perfect opportunity for them to hear Jesus’ words at Levi’s house. I am not sure how comfortable other disciples, like Peter, Andrew, James, and John, felt about this party. They must have felt uneasy participating with these social groups of people. They thought that John the Baptist, who endorsed Jesus, would have never associated with these people. Yet, Jesus was different. He welcomed them just as they were. He reclined at the table, ate, and drank with them. Wow! I am not sure if they had a sermon before the meal. But one sure thing is there were no walls of hostility or separation between Jesus and Levi’s friends. They had a good time together with Jesus.

Mark comments in verse 15, stating, “for there were many who followed him.” It does not mean that they all became Jesus’ disciples, like Levi. But it indicates that Jesus’ non-judgmental presence and open embrace moved the hearts of these people who had been looked down upon by religious people. They opened their hearts to Jesus, sensing that Jesus respected them as the same human beings as other religious people. As a result, many of them became interested in knowing who Jesus was and what he taught.

Look at 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?’” I don’t think they were invited to join the party. According to their strict regulations, just going into the home of a sinner was considered unclean. So, they wouldn’t even accept their invitation anyway. They were standing outside the house, watching and monitoring Jesus and what was happening there. And when they saw Jesus mingled with immoral and sinful people, eating and drinking with them, they could tolerate it. It was an unacceptable thing for any righteous person to do. In their eyes, Jesus went too far. Didn’t he declare the forgiveness of sins? Maybe, they expected that Jesus would condemn those tax collectors and religious outcasts by saying, “*You, sinners, repent! Otherwise, all of you will go to hell!”* Yet, Jesus seemed to tolerate these sinful people. They just couldn’t understand Jesus.

In this event, the teachers of the law, who were also Pharisees, were religious conservatives of the time, while the Sadducees were liberals. Not all Pharisees were the teachers of the law, but most of the teachers of the law were Pharisees. Pharisees were the Separatists who strictly followed the law of Moses and other religious regulations and traditions of the elder. They were so extreme that they condemned anyone who didn’t follow their religious beliefs and practices. But Jesus disagreed with them. He mingled with tax collectors and other religious outcasts. Jewish theologians and conservative Jews who saw Jesus mingled with these bad guys became frustrated. Yet, they couldn’t challenge Jesus directly but only complained to his disciples, saying, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

How did Jesus respond to their complaint? Read verse 17. “On 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.’” The phrase “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” was perhaps a well-known proverbial hypothesis that describes a self-evident truth. Jesus was saying to them, "*If you think you are not sick, you don’t need a doctor. These people are sick patients who need a doctor!”* I am glad to see that Jesus used the words “health” and “sick.” When we call someone a sinner, it’s a strong and condemning statement. Although Jesus didn’t deny that Levi and his tax collector friends were sinners, he instead used the words “the sick,” more of diagnostic and medical terminology. Jesus also identified himself as a spiritual doctor who cares for and heals sick people.

Good doctors are compassionate toward their patients because they know how much they agonize and suffer in their pain. They would empathize with them and do their best to care for and cure them. In Jesus’ eyes, sinners are not to be criticized or judged in the first place. They need to be empathized with and healed. That’s why Jesus mingled with tax collectors and other religious outcasts.

But when Jesus said, “it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick,” he was also aiming it at the self-righteous religious leaders who didn’t think they were sick patients who needed a doctor. If ill patients don’t think they are sick, that could be even more serious. They don’t think they need healing not because they are healthy but because they are unaware of their sicknesses or afraid or ashamed to admit it. Spiritual/mental awareness is the primary step toward God’s healing and transformation.

The human soul consists of consciousness and unconsciousness. Many scholars say that what controls our actions is not our consciousness but our unconsciousness. Therefore, when we study the Bible or meditate on the word of God, we need to be open and honest and dig deep so that we may be aware of what is hidden in our subconsciousness and experience God’s power of transformation in our lives through the Holy Spirit. It reminds us of what Hebrews 4:12 states, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the hearts.” This verse teaches the transforming power of God’s worlds. What counts is not how religious we are but how we become the new creation in Christ Jesus. The core of our spirituality is transformation. Transformation is impossible without awareness of our spiritual sickness.

Let me close my sermon. In today’s passage, we see the sharp contrast between Jesus and Jewish religious leaders in their understanding of who the righteous and sinners are and their dealings with them. While the Jewish religious leaders despised and condemned them, Jesus welcomed them just as they were. He called Levi, a notorious tax collector, to be one of his disciples and a kingdom worker. He said to the self-righteous Jewish religious leaders, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” Through his declaration, Jesus indirectly identified himself as the Messiah and the Son of God, announcing the coming kingdom of heaven in the lives of those who believe in him.

These days, we are aware of the growing danger of the world with natural disasters, global warming, an increase in violence and wars, etc. Local and international crises challenge and shake our livelihood more than ever. As a result, many people get sick physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. So many problems ahead of us. But one of the most important things that we should pray and struggle with is the healing of spiritually sick people. Jesus, our Lord, came to heal the sick. No one is righteous, not even one. We are all sick and suffering in pain. It’s just a matter of the degree of sickness and pain. 1 Peter 2:24 states concerning the Messiah, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness: ‘by his wounds, you have been.’” We cannot fix or heal sick people. Healing comes from God. Therefore, we should not be judgmental of any of the spiritually ill people but treat them with love and respect, so they may also be open to Jesus and the good news of the kingdom of God. Someone said, *“Be kind. Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.”*

One of the core spiritual disciplines of Christian disciples is to bring our unconscious things into our consciousness through deep meditation of God’s words. Physical healing has a limitation, but the healing of our inner self is real and has no limit. It stays with us forever. We are outwardly wasting away, but inwardly we are being renewed day by day in Christ Jesus. May we not just remain religiously correct but make a conscious effort to go deep into ourselves and become the new creation in Christ Jesus. Let us remember what Jesus said, “It’s not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.” Let’s not be away from Jesus, our spiritual doctor.