

## The Illusion of Self-Righteousness

*v13 – He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. v14 – 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. v15 – And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with him. v16 – 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?” v17 – And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “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)*

### Context

Such was Jesus' impact that the crowds followed him everywhere he went. Whenever and wherever they gathered he was intent on teaching them (Mk 1:21, 2:2; 13). Included within this crowd were both the common folk and also the various leading groups within Jewish society would also be present. Mark seems determined to present how Jesus, one at a time, interacted with these types of groups. He presents the temple priests first (Mk 1:44), then the scribes (Mk 2:6) and, in this passage, we are introduced to a group called the Pharisees (Mk 2:16).

### From Sinner to Saint

2,000 years ago the tax collecting industry ran a tad differently than it does today. Back then, the tax collector was a person who worked for King Herod, who would not have been in power if it wasn't for the oppressing Romans. So a tax collector was seen to have betrayed their own people to line their own pockets. Even worse than that, tax collectors mostly extorted more tax than was required. They would skim off the top. This meant they would take more than they ought, which in turn would provide an income for their lavish lifestyles. It has been said of the tax collector that 'he sat near the lake at a table. Around him were piles of money, and account books, and fish, but few friends'.

To be 'head hunted' is to be scouted by a company who have identified that your skills could offer a significant value to their organisation. On first impression, Jesus seems to be the worst head hunter in history. He seems to have walked straight past the line for the most qualified and surprisingly handpicked those who appear to be the most unqualified. This couldn't be truer than in the case of Levi, the tax collector. Jesus chooses the least expected. This was seen when he called his first disciples who were fishermen (Mk 1:16-20). You see if he can choose a tax collector, then he can choose anyone, that's the point. After hearing those words of Jesus, "follow me", Levi did just that. In Luke's account of the story, it states 'he left everything' (Lk 5:28). This is radical discipleship. We must remember that Levi didn't stay a tax collector. Levi would become Saint Matthew, the writer of the first book in the New Testament, which is known all over the world. For him, following Christ meant following him into a different life altogether, into a new identity, leaving the old identity behind. This is conversion, is it not? Amazingly, Jesus sees in Levi what no-one else did – likewise with us.

### The Recliner

If it didn't seem strange enough for Jesus to call a tax collector to become one of his followers, he then takes it one step further and joins Levi for a feast at his house in the company of many of his 'undesirable' friends. In this passage we see that Jesus' attitude towards these 'sinners' is revealed in

his posture. He reclined. When I read that word I instantly think of those comfy seats that entice you to sit in them as you walk around outlets like Costco or Ikea. You know the ones, that when you see them your body becomes instantly exhausted. The recliner becomes a lifeline, knowing that as soon as you sit in that chair you will immediately be in a state of relaxation. This was the posture of Jesus around sinners. However, what is also incredible, not only is he comfortable around them, but they are also comfortable around him. They reclined with him also. You would think, in the company of Jesus, these 'sinners' would be on edge. No, they were completely relaxed in his presence. You see these were the type of people Jesus wanted to be around. In fact, these were the type of people Jesus came for.

### **The Feast**

On the other hand, this feast, unsettled the Pharisees. For them to please God meant that you had to keep yourself as pure as possible. In order to do this you had to limit the company you kept, especially in the case of 'sinners'. The Pharisees held prominent and privileged positions in Jewish society and therefore regarded themselves, in general, as a level above the rest of society. Sinners, they thought, were people God didn't care about. So when they ask the disciples "why does he eat with sinners and tax collectors", what they are essentially saying is "why isn't he eating with us?" They are in shock.

### **The Feast**

When the Pharisees use this word 'sinners' in short what they are saying is that you do not possess the approval or the favour of God. That is what it means to be righteous, to be in right standing with God. The tragedy of the Pharisees is that they thought they had the approval of God. They trusted in themselves that they were righteous based on how well they practised the law (Lk 18:9-12). They presumed they were healthy not sick. Therefore, Jesus provokes this presumption with just one statement that reveals how the Pharisees had misunderstood not only his mission but also the entire mission of God (Mk 2:17). You see Jesus has come on a mission as a specialist physician to treat the sick not as a performer to entertain the 'healthy'. He is counter cultural, he calls, not the righteous as you would expect, but sinners to follow him. The irony is that the Pharisees thought they were righteous, when in fact they were self-righteous. The sad thing is that this self-righteousness had blinded them so much that they were unable to acknowledge that they also needed a unique type physician to cure them of this sickness.

### **Reflection**

So what areas for reflection does this passage offer us? Well many. However I aim to focus in on just one. This focus is an actually warning as to how the error of the Pharisees is sadly an error that still persists in the Church today. Instead of becoming more Christ-like, the Church is in danger of becoming more Pharisee-like. Why? Because we continue, as the Pharisees did, to believe in this illusion of self-righteousness.

#### *The Problem – The Illusion Of Self-Righteousness*

Let me be clear, self-righteousness is actually unrighteousness in disguise. As humans we seem to have this continual bent to always be trying to achieve our own righteousness. We want to be our own saviours. We want to establish a righteousness of our own, so that we can have be puffed up and proud. The problem however, as C.H. Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, states is that "the man who clings to his own righteousness is like a man who grasps a milestone to prevent him from sinking in the flood". It is foolish! Why is it this way though? Surely it seems admirable to attempt to be right before God. The problem, however, is that no matter how hard we try it can never be achieved. The issue is not so much with the quality of our good deeds; the issue is sin. Scripture is clear, 'we are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds,

they are nothing but filthy rags' (Isa 64:6). Even when we give him our very best, it isn't good enough. Why? Because our 'good deeds' are tainted with sin. Even our best stuff stinks. This was true for the Pharisee, the tax collector and even us today. The Apostle Paul reiterates this issue in the New Testament – quoting from the Psalms “none is righteous, no, not one, no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Rom 3:10-12). Strong words, strong diagnosis.

### *The Remedy*

Okay, wow! So where do we go from here Paul? He continues from his diagnosis to the cure. Instead of trying to earn our own righteous, there is a righteousness that has been revealed and provided for by God – it is the righteousness found in his Son, Jesus. Jesus never sinned (1 Pet 2:22) and because of his life and resurrection he is in complete right standing with God right now! Wow, if only we had that righteousness. Well here is the good news. You see the Pharisee and many people today believe the lie that righteousness is to be achieved. However the Bible is clear, righteousness is to be received. For those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ, he gives his righteousness freely as a gift (Rom 3:21-22, 2 Cor 5:21, 1 Pet 3:18). This means that his righteousness becomes my righteousness, perfect and stainless. Can you see how the Gospel dismantles this illusion of self-righteousness? The good news is that I don't have to strive to attempt to establish my own righteous, which is impossible anyway, but now Christ is my righteousness. How does the hymn go?

*My life is built on nothing less,  
than Jesus blood and RIGHTEOUSNESS.  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame  
but wholly trust in Jesus name.  
Christ alone.*

The tragedy of the Pharisees is that they trust in their own righteousness whereas those who are in Christ, possess and trust in Christ's righteousness alone. Here's a liberating truth, we both begin and end the Christian life 100% righteous, because it is not mine, but his. You see the Pharisee's and even many other religions advocate that you are accepted by God based on your performance. True Christianity states that we are accepted by God based on Christ performance for us. Therefore, if you are also a 'sinner', which you are, congratulations, you qualify for salvation. If you're sick, again which you are, Jesus is your physician. And Jesus is the only physician in the universe who can deal with your sickness.

### *The Implications for the Church*

So how do we, as the people of God, live in light of this? What would our Church look like if we were to embrace the example set forth by Christ? I wonder what would happen if we had a massive sign outside saying 'sinners welcome'. I wonder if this would expose the Pharisee in each of us. How many of us would stay? But, this is the Church that Jesus wants to build. A church that embraces people like tax collectors. This is our mission. Its funny, I often hear people say that this or that person would make a great Christian and I always wonder, why? Because they are good. That's totally at odds with this passage. In fact, sometimes it is actually the opposite that is true. Those who sin, much love much (Lk 7:47). We also see in this passage that sinners were attracted to Christ. Could the same be said of the Church? Are they attracted to us? Or do they just walk on by, hopeless. Isn't that a challenge for us?