



Jesus' Condemnation of Condescension

Mark 2:13-17

TO: LEGISLATORS

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DATE: MARCH 17, 2010

*This past week found Danielle and me in Buenos Aires at our Latin American Training Conference. Twenty new ministry leaders, who desire to begin ministries throughout South America were present for a week of preparation which we were blessed to help lead. These gifted men of God from eight countries are desirous of building ministries in their respective capitols in order to evangelize, teach the Bible to, and disciple political leaders. I taught for about five hours a day and came away more blessed than they. Pray for them as they start new ministries throughout the Southern Hemisphere. May the spread of the Word of God and the conversion of politicians to Christ someday stem the corruption which characterizes far too many a Latin American nation. As D.A. Carson states in his magnificent work titled, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, "The proclamation of the gospel transforms people wherever it is believed and received, and sooner or later such transformation will either improve the state or excite its opposition." May the former be the case throughout our nation too.*

INTRODUCTION

Jesus had a way of exacerbating the Pharisees. Remember earlier in 2:1-12 the conflict that resulted from Jesus' forgiveness of sin? Here the conflict is over whom He chose to dine with. The Pharisees were a Jewish sect that considered binding their own added oral traditions to the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament. Stemming from the Hasidim, the "pious ones" during the Maccabean times, the term we use today regarding one possessing a "Pharisaical" attitude is a historically accurate label to the extent that one is extra-biblical in the standards they impose on another. It follows that the Pharisees despised the Jewish sect known as the Sadducees because the latter were more lax in their OT interpretation of the Law of Moses.

What we are about to witness in this week's passage is a grand statement by Jesus. He will say that the OT Law—regardless if or not one adds to it their extra-biblical standards—should never be cited to justify a condescending attitude toward others. The Pharisees and Scribes were super-separatists possessing a "holier than thou" attitude with supposed scriptural justification. But such is not what Jesus models here.

THE PASSAGE: MARK 2:13-17

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the multitude were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. 14 And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax office, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose and followed Him. 15 And it came about that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax-gatherers and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. 16 And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers, they began saying to His disciples, "Why is He eating and drinking with tax-gatherers and sinners?" 17 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."

Notice the following four points in this passage that illustrate Jesus' condemnation of a condescending spirit:

I. THE MOMENT FOR MATTHEW V. 14

The excitement of Jesus' teaching and miracles must have been well known throughout the Galilean region by now. There is no indication from any of the gospel texts that Jesus and **Levi the son of Alphaeus** (aka the gospel writer Matthew) had any previous acquaintance. Therefore the immediacy of Levi's response to Jesus' imperative command, **Follow me** indicates his previous ponderings of Jesus' proclamations. The aorist (past) tenses in this text record his decisive response, **and he got up and followed Him**. Such language is synonymous with his conversion. Keep in mind that a tax collector, working as a traitorous Jew for the Roman ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, meant that once one left their position one could not return to it. This is unlike the earlier response of the fishermen who followed Christ; Matthew's decision for Christ put his whole career on the line. Accordingly, Levi must have been convicted earlier by Jesus' preaching ministry and had counted the cost of his decision.

A word should be said about tax collectors in Roman times. Levi had sold his soul to the occupying Romans. The Empire's tax collection system in occupied countries was characterized by much graft and corruption and it attracted enterprising



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Mark 2:13-17

individuals who were not adverse to such in their franchise operation. Much more could be said here, but it is sufficient to state that tax collectors (aka publicans) were viewed as social and religious outcasts; they became wealthy at the expense of their own people. Jesus, rather than avoid, engaged them.

II. THE MODELING OF THE MESSIAH V. 15

Jesus' main medium for propagating the gospel was via visiting and teaching in the synagogues. But since **tax gatherers and sinners** were banned from such, Jesus went to them. In a move that metastasized his offensiveness in the eyes of the Pharisees, Jesus proceeds to visit Levi's house and **dine** with **many tax collectors and sinners**. Table fellowship was a sign of genuine intimacy with another. Again, the phrase **and they were following Him** indicates their volitional acquiescence to His gospel. In candid reality, Jesus is supping with categorical reprobates! These were people, "who were too busy, too poor or too ignorant to live up to the rules of the religious authorities."¹ Rather than ignore or castigate the outcasts, Jesus went to them and built a non-judgmental, genuine relationship, imbuing them with His love. Interestingly, the four times the word for **were dining** *katakeimai* occurs in Mark, it refers to Jesus' contact with alienated and needy people. Application: Model Jesus! Even if you or I possess a biblically-based morally-correct position, we shouldn't package it in condescending overtones of superiority. Such pharisaical couching engenders favor with no one. Win their heart!

III. THE MISTAKE OF THE MALIGNERS V. 16

The Pharisees and the scribes had not the nerve to admonish Jesus directly, so they sheepishly questioned His disciples **Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?** Here revealed are their disdainful attitudes of moral superiority; Jesus' actions were scandalous. Interestingly in the Greek, there is an absence of the words "Why is He." The emphatic condescension is therefore more pronounced: "With the tax collectors and sinners He eats!"²

Notice further in this account that there is no mention or precondition of repentance. Forfeiture of sinful activities was not a prerequisite for garnering Jesus' favor and love; Jesus accepted them as they were. If they might repent and forsake of their ways, it wasn't for reasons of gaining His love; as social outcasts Jesus had already gone overboard to prove that

by supping with them, entering their world. Conversely it is the other way around: It is Jesus' love that led them to repentance. This principle is stated in Romans 2:4, wherein the Apostle Paul states, "knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance."

OH THAT LEGALISTS COULD LEARN THIS LESSON!

Don't be one who places unending preconditions on love, making people feel like they don't ever quite measure up to your standards. Sadly legalists end up as lonely folks, hanging only with a similar ilk, less like Jesus than they may think.

IV. THE "MEANT" OF THE MESSAGE V. 17

Jesus closes this powerful passage by setting the record straight. His message is meant for not those who think they are righteous, but for those who know of their spiritual bankruptcy and need for a Savior. Whereas the Scribes and the Pharisees came to require, Jesus came to redeem. Given His ministry of saving sinners, for Jesus to have shunned societal outcasts would be as ridiculous as a medical doctor refusing to see patients. "Ironically, in one sense great sinners stand closer to God than those who think themselves righteous, for sinners are more aware of their need of the transforming grace of God."³ The fact that Jesus called Levi, having **passed by** his tax collection location, and then visited his house for dinner, is a great, sobering insight. God is a God of love and compassion who seeks sinners for salvation. Here is the doctor calling on the sick, not the sick begging the doctor. What kind of physician are you? Make spiritual house calls.

SUMMARY

Throughout the New Testament Jesus utilized His most condemning language for the self-righteous: Those who are quick to judge, to cast the first stone, those with little apt for self-reflection, humility or responsibility. May we condemn our superiority attitudes of condescension. May we lead with love.

¹ Edwards, James R. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) p. 83

² Heibert, D. Edmond *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974) p. 75

³ Edwards, *ibid.*, p. 86