

Jesus, Friend Of Sinners

Mark 2:13-17

Bryn MacPhail / Jan. 15, 2012

Some of us are not very good at accepting help from others.

We have streaks of independence where we want to get things done all on our own.

These attitudes of self-sufficiency will likely have many manifestations.

There is the person who will not let another buy lunch.

There is the husband (it's always the husband) who refuses to stop and ask for directions when lost.

There is the store manager who, instead of delegating, tries to do things well beyond his/her job description.

I know that such tendencies exist in me. I think I'm getting better, but I'm not very good at receiving help—even when it makes perfect sense.

An obvious example for me is my reluctance to go see a doctor. With all due respect to the doctors among us this morning—it's not you—it's me.

Irrationally, I try to beat every illness and injury on my own. Foolishly, my instinct is to try and make myself better by sheer will power, and the modicum of knowledge I possess.

I haven't had much success with that, by the way.

It is humbling when we realize that we lack the ability to remedy our own problems.

We do not have to wade very far into the gospel accounts before we see self-sufficient tendencies confronted by Jesus.

What we soon see is that Jesus recruits followers, not according to their fitness, but according to their need.

You've heard me say this before. Contrary to the modern day proverb, God does *not* help those who help themselves. *God helps those who are helpless.*

We see this principle very clearly in the calling of Levi in Mark, chapter 2. Parallel accounts can also be found in Matthew 9 and in Luke 5.

Levi, also known by the name Matthew, is noticed by Jesus while sitting at his tax-collection booth.

If there was a lengthy exchange between the two men, we know nothing of it. The only dialogue recorded for our edification is the two-word summons of Jesus: **“Follow Me”** (2:14).

Again, if there was any hesitation on the part of Levi, we read nothing of it—only that he **“got up, and followed (Jesus)”** (2:14).

Luke’s version tells us that Levi **“left everything”** behind in order to follow Jesus (Lk. 5:28).

There are, at least, two astonishing aspects to this exchange.

The first astonishing aspect is *that Jesus would call Levi* in the first place. And the second astonishing aspect is *that Levi would respond to the summons by leaving his occupation.*

It is astonishing that Jesus would call Levi to be a disciple. As a tax collector, Levi was regarded among the most despicable of society.

Within the Jewish community, Levi was unacceptable on a number of different levels.

Firstly, Levi was *politically unacceptable*.

As a Jewish man, Levi collected taxes from Jews on behalf of the Roman government. Levi was regarded as a collaborator with the occupying authorities. He grew rich by extorting money from his own people and, as a result, he was politically unacceptable.

Secondly, Levi was *religiously unacceptable*.

As a tax collector, Levi was considered 'unclean' and was therefore barred from entering the synagogues.

And thirdly, Levi was *socially unacceptable*.

Orthodox Jews were forbidden to go on a journey with tax collectors, they were forbidden to do business with them, and they were forbidden to dine with them (Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 149).

And, yet, in spite of all this, it is astonishing to see that Jesus sought after, and called Levi to be His disciple.

R. Kent Hughes says it well: “Jesus sought out the man no one else wanted” (Hughes, *Preaching The Word: Luke*; Vol.1, 184).

Almost equally astonishing is the fact that *Levi answered the call of Jesus, left everything, and followed Him.*

1st Century tax collectors were typically quite wealthy. It would have been a considerable sacrifice to leave behind a profession that paid so handsomely in order to follow a religious leader who was offering no stipend.

Bear, also, in mind that if following Jesus had not worked out, the fishermen could have returned to their trade. Levi, however, would not have that option.

It is highly unlikely that the Romans would rehire someone who abandoned their office. For Levi, following Jesus was a definitive break from his previous way of life.

Impressively, there are no signs of reluctance in Levi's decision. There are no signs of regret.

Quite the contrary, Levi throws a party to celebrate his new direction. Jesus attends the banquet as the guest of honour, and we're told that "**many tax collectors and 'sinners'**" were in attendance (2:15).

But remember, Levi the tax collector was *politically, religiously,* and *socially* unacceptable within the Jewish community.

This helps us to understand why the scribes and the Pharisees were startled by the news that Jesus was dining with Levi and his motley crew.

Addressing Jesus' disciples, they ask, "**Why does He eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?**" (2:16).

Jesus, overhearing the question, steps in and responds, **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”** (2:17).

We know enough about Jesus’ view of the scribes and Pharisees to know that He did not actually regard them as “healthy” or “righteous” (see Matthew 23).

The scribes and the Pharisees were only healthy and righteous in their own eyes.

Much like Bryn MacPhail, who is often in denial regarding his weakened physical health, the scribes and Pharisees were in denial about the status of their spiritual health.

Much like Bryn MacPhail, who is determined to overcome every illness by sheer will power, the scribes and Pharisees believed they could fix any religious imperfection by relying on their meticulous compliance to rules.

The scribes and Pharisees were sick, but they would not recognize their spiritual condition.

I can think of nothing more dangerous than to imagine yourself to be well when, in reality, you are desperately sick.

The Bible tells us that sin has made all of humanity sick.

Unfortunately, there are some people, perhaps fearing the Great Physician, who are attempting to treat themselves by simply making adjustments to their outward behaviour.

But this is like applying make-up to cover a facial blemish—the treatment is but superficial.

We need to respond like Levi who, when called by the Divine Doctor, dropped everything in order to follow Him.

We could spend time this morning detailing the various differences between Levi and the Pharisees, but it seems to me that the damning difference has to do with *pride*.

The Pharisees and the scribes were unwilling to accept a negative diagnosis. They were unwilling to admit to their need.

Levi, by contrast, understood that he was sick, and was eager to be received by Jesus.

It has been rightly said that the difference between the U.S. army and Jesus Christ is that the army won't enlist you unless you are healthy, and Jesus won't enlist you unless you are sick.

I worry that there are people out there who are waiting until they “get everything together” before they come and be a part of a local congregation.

But this is a skewed perception of what the church is. Theologian, J.I. Packer, accurately describes our present context when he says that “The church (is like) a hospital in which nobody is completely well, and anyone can relapse at any time” (Packer, *A Quest For Godliness* , 65).

You could say that the Kirk is our hospital. You could say that our attendance here today is tantamount to seeking treatment.

And the good news is that we're not terminal. We're not beyond saving...because Jesus the Physician pursues those who recognize that they are sick.

In our day, if we are sick (and if we're not foolish like Bryn MacPhail), we go to a doctor's office or to the hospital.

It's possible for a doctor to make a house call, but that is less common in our day.

In Jesus' day, there were no hospitals or doctor's offices. Accordingly, *doctors went to their patients*.

Jesus drew on this pattern as He explained to the Pharisees why He was dining with 'sinners'.

As a spiritual doctor, Jesus was visiting with His patients—He was seeking out those who were sick.

If Jesus is our Divine Physician, it will help us to think about how we typically engage doctors.

Good patients will submit to their doctor's leading and will yield to their doctor's wisdom.

Good patients do not place orders for the medication they prefer, but rather, good patients trust the doctor to provide them with appropriate prescriptions.

Friends, this must be our approach as we come before the Great Physician.

We must yield to His wisdom and we must trust that what He has prescribed for us in His Word is best.

We are not required to fix ourselves.

We are not capable of fixing ourselves.

Our task is simply to recognize our sickness, and to submit to the Great Physician.

Whenever I swim in the ocean I am reminded of the time I nearly drowned as a young boy.

I was playing in the ocean at Boynton Beach, Florida when a strong undertow caused me to lose my footing.

When the ocean pulled me under, it felt like I would be permanently pinned to the ocean floor. It was a terrifying thing.

I remember trying to get my bearings, and trying to figure out which way was up.

Anyone who has been gripped by an undertow knows the panic one feels—you wonder if you will ever break free.

You feel totally helpless.

After a few seconds of struggling underwater, I felt my grandfather's hand take hold of my upper arm like a vice grip. My grandfather, with the hand strength only a farmer could possess, pulled me effortlessly to the surface.

When my grandfather grabbed my arm, I remember yielding completely to his strength. I did not resist.

The thought never entered my mind that I should show him that things aren't so bad; or that I could help myself. All I thought was, yes! Thank you!

Friends, this is how it should be when God grips us. It is not wise to wave Him off and act as though we have everything under control.

Your weakness qualifies you for God's help.

Your sickness gives you entry to the office of the Great Physician.

Dear friend, the Doctor will see you now. Go to Him in prayer.
Take the medicine He prescribes and you will be made well.
Amen.