

Healed by God's Love



Purpose

To consider the acceptance we have in Jesus and the way that calls us to accept others

The Scripture for this lesson is Mark 2:13-17.

Listen

Mark 2:13-17

13 Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.

14 As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

15 And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. 16 When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

17 When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Key Verse: I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. (Mark 2:17)

Look

Religion is not always a good thing. Because of their beliefs, religious persons can sometimes become moralistic, close-minded, and afraid of life and laughter. Under the influence of religious conviction, one can become hostile to persons who are not of like mind and allegiance. Religious differences can fuel family feuds and international conflict. No wonder people are reluctant to discuss either religion or politics! We all have probably known people who got a serious dose of religion, and afterwards we realized that we liked them a whole lot better before they did.

When the hallmark of religious practice is disapproval rather than love, and when the typical facial expression we associate with the adherent is a frown rather than a smile, the religious practice is in serious danger of being an ungodly and dangerous thing. Out of a concern for religious purity, with anger in their hearts, "the scribes of the Pharisees" showed their disapproval of Jesus by asking his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mark 2:16).

Live

Christians have a tendency to think of Pharisees only as hypocrites. Jesus, after all, had plenty of harsh things to say about them. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" he said repeatedly in Matthew 23. Having read that kind of language from the mouth of Jesus himself, we are a bit disinclined to give Pharisees the benefit of the doubt. Yet perhaps we should, at least initially. The scribes of the Pharisees had good reasons to question Jesus' eating with tax collectors and other so-called sinners.

For the most part, the Pharisees were laypersons. Few were of the priestly class. Even so, they were concerned to apply the law of Moses to every aspect of everyday life. They wanted to live lives as free of impurity as possible. Some were rather liberal-minded regarding the law, however. Some-times seeing a law as unattainable or nonsensical, they interpreted it so as to make it relevant to everyday life. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee, and proud of it (Philippians 3:5).

Of all the religious parties of the time, Jesus was probably closest in his beliefs to the Pharisees. They were among the most reputable religious people of his day. Even in Matthew 23, which is Jesus' most extended and hostile statement about the Pharisees, he said of them, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do" (Matthew 23:2-3). In other words, Jesus respected their teachings and taught his disciples to do the same. Had we lived in their time, many of us, in all likelihood, out of a desire for religious integrity, would have aligned ourselves with the Pharisees. If the Pharisees lived in our day, I believe many of them would hold respected leadership positions in our churches.

The tax collectors, on the other hand, to whom the Pharisees objected, really were sinners. We ought not think of them as anything like the tax people we may know today. In our time there is nothing shameful about working for the Internal Revenue Service. People who work for the IRS play a vital role in our society. They help collect the taxes for our federal government, in accordance with the laws our national legislature has mandated; and the taxes are supposed to be used for the benefit of our nation.

The tax collectors of Jesus' time, however, were another matter. First, they were collecting taxes for Rome, which was the foreign power occupying their land. They were thought of as agents for an alien government. More than that, they were oftentimes little more than legalized extortionists. Tax collectors typically had a contract to collect taxes for a certain region and were expected to produce a certain amount of income for Rome. If they and their employees could raise more than that amount, then the tax collectors profited from the excess.

The hostility of the Pharisees towards the tax collectors may also have been enhanced by class factors. The Pharisees tended to be more middle class (tradesmen, craftsmen, and the like), whereas the bulk of the tax collectors were drawn from those persons who had no other reputable way to make a living. In a land politically and militarily dominated by pagan foreigners, many tax collectors got rich off the sweat and produce of their neighbors. No wonder the rabbis said of the tax collectors that they "had made themselves into Gentiles." The general religious consensus would have been that tax collectors were not even fit to be called Jews.

So let us try to be fair to the Pharisees. In speaking ill of tax collectors, they were trying to discourage people from undertaking a socially disruptive profession. Yet, how could they discourage persons from becoming tax collectors? The job was protected by Roman authority and could be quite lucrative. The answer is that they could ostracize those persons who chose to become tax collectors. By refusing to socialize with them, by shunning them, the religious people could imply that wealth gained in such a way could never make one respectable and socially acceptable.

When is it appropriate for religiously devout persons to ostracize people who are undermining the social order?

A Lack of Love

One of the functions of religion is to create and help maintain appropriate moral and ethical standards for society. We expect religion to "lay down the law," to let people know what is socially acceptable behavior and what is not. It provides a reward for the "righteous" and punishment for the "sinner." It is the guarantee that if justice does not prevail in this lifetime, it is bound to do so in the next.

Religious leaders are expected to lead the way in their public appreciation for virtue and their disapproval of those they feel are undeserving. Disapproval is a major weapon in the religionists' arsenal. The religious adherent is expected to show disapproval of "inappropriate" values, and that disapproval may be extended to those believed to be "inappropriate" people. A person who is characterized as "devout" is generally expected to be morally judgmental.

It is no wonder then that the Pharisees thought Jesus' behavior was appalling. They assumed, as people have ever been doing, that a religious leader's function was to support and maintain religious and social values by joining the rest of the religious community in showing disapproval of sinners. As a religious leader, Jesus had an obligation, they thought, to take a stand for good against evil.

Religious people are always wanting to take a stand for good against evil. The opportunity to disapprove and be angry and to feel utterly justified in one's passion is almost too gratifying to be avoided. It appeals to our egos to be the moral hero, standing alone against the forces of moral decay and degeneration. Jesus, however, profoundly disturbed the Pharisees by taking a stand for the "evil" (the tax collectors) against the "good" (the Pharisees). While Jesus could appreciate their religious fervor and commitment to the pure standards of their faith, what frustrated Jesus was their seeming lack of love for the persons they denounced. Instead of helping "sinners" overcome their sin, they simply cut them off.

The implied function of religion in society has always been to support the moral and ethical standards of the community, to confer respectability on the one hand and to confer disapproval on the other. We ought to beware of being too hard on the Pharisees. They were doing what we often expect religious leaders to do.

How do you account for Jesus defying community religious standards? If Jesus were in ministry today, with whom would he be having fellowship and eating? Who would be his most vocal opponents?

The Church—A Hospital or a Courtroom?

Jesus responded to the criticism of the Pharisees with an aphorism, a wise saying very similar to a parable. It was intended to give a completely different perspective to things, a new and altered view of the world. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Mark 2:17). The point of the saying is clear. Jesus had not come as a judge; he had come as a physician.

The implication for us is that if Jesus came as a physician, the church established in his name should not function as a courtroom, making judgments, but as a medical office. It is not a clubhouse for the well, but a hospital for the sick.

Let me be clear. The definition of what it means to be well does not change. Sickness is not normative. Sin is not normative. A hospital does not just house the sick or leave them to continue to be sick. The goal of a hospital is wellness, just as the goal of a church is holiness. That Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners does not mean that he condoned their behavior. He ate with them to offer to them God's healing and to express divine forgiveness.

True physicians do not want to give the impression that sick people are unwelcome in their practice. In fact, to do what is best for patients, it is imperative that they suspend voicing moral judgments. Physicians who constantly express their outrage whenever a patient comes to them with a sexually transmitted disease are probably not going to receive a complete health history from the patient and thus will be far less able to help her or him.

A hospital is a place where both the sick and the well mingle for the benefit of those who are sick. A hospital would do well not to give the impression that sick people are unwelcome or unappreciated. A church cannot give the impression that sinners are despised and expect its work to be redemptive.

Jesus had a larger vision than the Pharisees. They had separation in mind. He thought in terms of transformation. They wanted to purify the minority of the population who already bought into their program. He wanted to include everybody in the society, even those who had so lost their religion that they "had made themselves into Gentiles." The Pharisees' program included a large amount of disapproval. Jesus' program was based on love.

All the Pharisees could see to do was to take a stand for community values, to “lay down the law” without giving anyone the capacity to begin to fulfill those expectations. There was condemnation in their method, but there was no power. Rule making contains no power to improve people. It just tells folk what not to do and makes people resentful. Ironically, it may actually promote the desire in them to do the very thing forbidden.

Jesus, however, did not just want to take a stand for a moral point. He wanted to give people the strength and capacity to come to health. Jesus was like an old-time physician who made house calls. He did not wait until one had the strength or the will to come to him. He went into the homes and the marketplace to be where the sick people were. Then, in their presence, he did not condemn them. Instead, he accepted them as they were. He signaled his reconciliation with them by eating and having fellowship with them. He loved them. Empowered by his love, accepted by him, they stood a chance of being healed.

“I have come to call not the righteous,” Jesus said, “but sinners” (Mark 2:17b). The “righteous” in this context refers to the Pharisees. “Sinners” refers to the tax collectors. Jesus was being ironic here. Although he referred to the Pharisees as “righteous,” and they surely thought of themselves in that way, he clearly did not think they were. In thinking of themselves as “righteous,” the Pharisees were deceiving themselves. They were like the schizophrenic who was convinced that everyone else but him needed a physician. Sometimes the most dangerous situation we can be in, spiritually speaking, is to perceive ourselves as the good, moral, reputable, “righteous” people. Ultimately the really righteous (the “justified”) are the ones Jesus declares to be such.

Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). They both went to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee, thinking he was righteous, prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income” (18:11-12). The tax collector meanwhile stood afar off and would not even look toward heaven. He beat his breast and said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (18:13). Jesus said, “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (18:14).

Jesus came into the world to save sinners. We may imagine him dining with the tax collectors, the outrageous sinners of his time, enjoying their company, smiling and laughing with them, accepting them just as they were, out of his great love for them. For our part, we would do well to leave our “righteousness” behind us; instead of joining in a religious chorus of disapproval of sinners, we would do well to join with Jesus and accept those he accepts. For when he calls sinners to his side, he is accepting us, too.

Is your church a courtroom for judging people, a clubhouse for saints, or a hospital for sinners?

Almighty God, who in Jesus Christ ate with and was reconciled with tax collectors, draw us into your healing presence and enable us to reach out in love to other sinners. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

¹ From *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, by Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (Fortress Press, 1992); page 190.