

## Who's At Jesus' Table

### Mark 2:13-17

#### Introduction

I had a Chinese Indonesian student, Liz, who was coming to Australia to study and live for a year or two in Sydney. Liz asked me before she came whether she would get a lot of attention in Australia like we received in Indonesia. I told her, "Are you kidding me, Liz? You'll blend right in! There are so many asians in Australia you'll get less attention there than you get in Indonesia as a Chinese Indonesian."

Liz did indeed fit in very well during her time in Sydney and, to my knowledge, never received unwanted attention because of her race. Australia is an incredibly multicultural country and I believe that we rank second, behind only Canada, for effective and peaceful integration of migrants and refugees into our country.

Yes Australia is not perfect but with Australia being so multicultural does that mean that we automatically receive people into our religious community? And, if we do receive people openly into our church family, is this story from Mark's Gospel which has been read to us still relevant today?

This morning I'm going to summarise what was shocking about what Jesus was doing and I'm also going to share how this message is still relevant and even challenging for us today because we need to ask whether we're really welcoming or not.

#### What Was Shocking About What Jesus Did?

Is there anything important about Jesus calling a tax collector to follow him? While tax collectors today aren't always well liked, we don't normally regard them as traitors to the nation or as unwelcome in church. Back in Jesus' day the tax collectors worked for Herod who was predominantly regarded as something of a Roman stooge or puppet. As such, tax collectors were regarded as collaborators with the Roman occupiers and thus traitors to the nation.

To make matters worse, tax collectors were normally required to pass on a particular amount of money to their superiors and thus any additional money which was collected was their own. This, of course, encouraged tax collectors to greedily collect as much money as they could while doing the job and then perhaps they and their families would leave the area on the conclusion of the job.

Antagonism towards tax collectors was not just limited to the individual either. A tax collector's family was also tarnished with the reputation of the work and were often ostracised from their communities.

However, the trouble for tax collectors extended beyond social problems. Tax collectors were also excluded from the temple and from coming to the synagogue. Tax collectors were essentially excluded from being part of the religious community and blocked from having the access to Yahweh which was associated with those locations and ceremonies.

This problem of being excluded from the religious community was not limited to tax collectors and so we're told that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. These sinners are not people who have broken God's law in some general way like all Jewish people knew they had, but rather were those who were unwelcome at Jewish religious events and thus cut off from God.

Within this cultural and religious view of who tax collectors were, we can see that it was indeed significant for Jesus to have called Levi to follow him and then to have had dinner at Levi's house where Levi invited some fellow tax collectors as well as other people who were religiously excluded and thus who wore the title, 'sinners.'

While Jesus is enjoying the dinner, the teachers of the law, which is the Pharisees, turned up and asked why Jesus would be eating with people who are excluded from the religious community. Jesus is identified as a religious teacher and so why would a religious teacher risk defilement by hanging out with people who are religiously unclean?

Jesus answers the Pharisees question with a phrase or proverb which appears to be known and accepted, “Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’”

We’ll return to this statement at the end of today’s message but it’s clear that Jesus is saying that his goal is to reach people who are sick and in need and the people whom Jesus had dinner with (the tax collectors and sinners) fit into that category.

### Who Do We Decide to Invite? What Do We Invite Them To?

So then, that’s the summary of this little story and a bit of a cultural explanation as to why it was a big deal for Jesus to have a meal with tax collectors and others who were excluded from the religious community. Now we come to the far more difficult part, how is this story relevant to us today?

I mentioned in my introduction that Australia has become an incredibly multi-cultural community. This, normally harmonious, multi-culturalism, combined with our predominantly egalitarian society, as well as a misunderstanding of what it means to be a welcoming church, has created two large problems in applying this story today. What are these problems?

First, there can be a belief that this is simply no longer an issue for us - full-stop! Some Christians hold that if we’re no longer openly racist and we allow people to come in and sit where they’d like (well, as long as it’s not in my spot, of course!), then we can say that we no longer exclude people from our religious community.

This view-point is a problem because it ignores the various ways in which a person can feel welcomed or not. No, we may not exclude people from entering our church but will we engage them in conversation afterwards? Will we pass looks to each other if someone doesn’t speak the way we were taught to speak? And this list for how people can be excluded could go on. All churches, including our own, need to consider whether we are actively or passively creating an environment where people are excluded from our religious community and take steps to correct it.

Here is one simple little thing you can do to start with, to see whether you may be excluding someone or not. Who are the people that you meet who you could invite to church (to our Christmas services as an example) and you decide for them by telling yourself, “I won’t ask because they won’t be interested.” What makes you so certain that they won’t be interested? “Well... they were wearing a shirt which didn’t look nice.” “Well... the bloke’s name was Muhammed and so he clearly follows another religion.” “Well... she’s always talking about how busy she is and so I didn’t want to add another thing to her plate.” Well, well, well ... maybe we are continuing to exclude people from our religious community? No, there may be very few people that we deliberately make to feel uncomfortable were they to join us, but how many do we exclude by simply refusing to invite them?

The second large problem we have in applying this story today is the view that assisting people from various race, religious, socio-economic backgrounds, etc. and telling those people that they are welcome in our church is the same as doing what Jesus did. This may sound a little confusing because didn’t I just say that we should be inviting people in? Yes, we should be inviting people in, but we need to recognise that that’s not the end of the story.

I know of various Christians who will say, “Jesus was so welcoming and he sat and ate with sinners and so we should welcome people just as they are.”

To such a statement I would often respond, “I agree, and then what?”

“Oh,” the person continues, “then we love them and care for them in various ways because God loves people.”

And I then ask the same question, “I agree, and then what?”

At this point I’ve known people to stop and say, “What more do you want us to do? We’re just doing what Jesus did.”

And this is the problem that people have in applying this story today. We say that people are welcome, we love and care for them and then we think we’ve followed Jesus’ example or fulfilled what is asked of us. But that’s not actually what we see in this story.

Let's remind ourselves what we're actually told here, "As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him." What does Jesus say to Levi? "Follow me." Later when we're told about the tax collectors and sinners who were eating with Jesus and his disciples were told that "there were many who followed him."

We fail to apply this passage today if we fail to call people to follow Jesus. To follow Jesus really means to become his disciple (or in the process of becoming one) because that's one of the meanings of a disciple, "a follower." Jesus was indeed welcoming of people who had previously been excluded from the religious community and who thus had been blocked from access to Yahweh through the Jewish systems, but Jesus was also uncompromising that people were being welcomed to him to follow him.

As a church we should indeed be creating environments where people are feeling welcomed and cared for whether it be through an op-shop, markets, crisis care, craft group, play groups, etc. but we must also remember that until we invite people to follow Jesus (called people to become Jesus' disciples) then we have neither followed Jesus' example nor truly welcomed people into our religious community.

If we can avoid these two problems then we will be in a stronger position to be faithfully applying this story to our lives and church. We will avoid these problems by being alert to ways our church may be intentionally or unintentionally excluding people, as well as by being conscious that welcoming people will include calling people to follow Jesus.

### Where Do We See Ourselves (Mark 2:17)

I mentioned earlier that I want to return to Jesus' statement to the Pharisees, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' A questions which is asked of this statement is, "who are the healthy people who don't need to be called by Jesus?"

The clearest way of answering this is to ask, who are the people who go to a doctor? The people who go to a doctor are those who recognise that they are sick and in need. Likewise, Jesus is accepted by those who recognise their need and Jesus gives them what they need - reconnection with God, healing, forgiveness, restoration into community, etc.

The Pharisees, in contrast, did not recognise their need, they regarded themselves as righteous, and, as such, believed that they had no need of Jesus.

I have only been here a short time but please, as your pastor, allow me to ask you this personal question, "Where do you see yourself? Do you see yourself as sick and in need of healing or as righteous and with no real need for Jesus?"

In the various conversations I had with people from Laidley and Hatton Vale about the type of pastor I was and what the churches were looking for, I made it very clear that I was going to focus upon Jesus. Jesus is the only hope for this church - I'm not to be the hope of this church and neither are you. Many of us here have known Jesus to be our Lord and Saviour for a long time and we have accepted his call to follow him. However we need to continue to recognise our need individually and corporately for when we embrace Jesus more and more, desiring to grow healthier and stronger in him, then we will more easily create a welcoming religious community because we recognise our equal need with others but we will have a greater message to share because we will be pointing to Jesus - the One we follow - and not to ourselves.

[Pray to close]