

**Mark 2: 13-15; "Dining in Levi's House", Sermon # 10 in the series -
"Astonished at His Teaching", Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on June 29th, 2008, in the Morning Worship Service.**

With all of the interest generated in Jesus' healing ministry, He was still desirous of finding the best setting for His teaching. He taught them in the house and He taught them in the synagogues, but now we find Jesus taking the gospel out into the open air. With all of the crowds that pressed upon Him in the house, this ought to be no surprise. I suppose that some people who are very religious would think that this kind of a setting for teaching and preaching was inappropriate, but our Lord thought it to be one of the best. Some of the greatest times of teaching and preaching in the history of the Church have taken place in the open air. George Whitefield, in the time of the first Great Awakening sometimes spoke to as many as 20,000 people in the open air. This place at the sea side allowed for many thousands of people to be able to listen to Jesus at the same time. And after He was done preaching there, He went back into the city of Capernaum where the opportunity to call Levi took place. The call of Levi to be the disciple of Christ is one of the most graphic examples that we have in the gospels of the kind of people that Jesus came to call. He came to call sinners to repentance. In order to do so, He would by necessity have to associate with people who were despised by the scribes and Pharisees; the religious elite of that day. When He did freely and openly associate with these socially despised categories of people, His authority as a teacher was questioned. Wouldn't a man who was seeking to teach the law, and keep the law, distance himself from such people instead of drawing near to them? If Jesus would not keep Himself aloof from such people, then how could He be a teacher sent from God? This is how these ultra religious men reasoned.

Although the scribes and the Pharisees would criticize Jesus for associating with sinners, Jesus very boldly and deliberately would say that this was the very kind of people that He came to call and to save. So we are asking the question this morning, "What was the purpose in Jesus' association with sinners?" Jesus had a three-fold purpose in His associating Himself with those who were the outcasts of the Jewish religious society of that day. 1st of all, there was a purpose that Jesus had in the calling of Levi. Secondly, there was a purpose that Jesus had in celebrating that call by dining with Levi. And there is thirdly a purpose that Jesus had in responding to the criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. Let's see if we can discover more about these purposes and learn from them.

1st - Let's look at Jesus' purpose in His calling of Levi. (Verse 14)

"As He passed by, He saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office." "And He said to him, 'Follow Me.'" "So he arose and followed Him." Here we find Levi was sitting at the tax office, the house of customs, and he was doing his job. He was a publican. A publican was a person who worked in an officially appointed public office gathering the taxes for the Roman government. I am told that, "The

customs officers were not "publicans," who were usually Romans of the Equestrian rank, but rather publicans were subordinate officials, most of whom were Jewish." "The practice of leasing the customs duty of a district at a fixed sum encouraged gross oppression by tax officers who were anxious to secure as large a profit as possible." "When a Jew entered the customs service he was regarded as an outcast from society: he was disqualified as a judge or a witness in a court session, he was excommunicated from the synagogue, and in the eyes of the community his disgrace extended to his family as well." (William Lane's Commentary on Mark, P. 101, 102) The publican was looked down upon and despised almost more than any other class of people in Jewish society. They were considered as both spiritually and politically disloyal to the nation. They were seen as those who were as bad as thieves and adulterers. It was an assumption in that day, just as there is an assumption in our day that there are sinners; and then there are sinners. There are some smaller levels and degrees of sin which are acceptable among men, and then there are some greater levels and degrees of sin which are unacceptable to the social evaluation of the generality of the people. This is not how God views sin, but it is how many people view it. People like to put themselves into the position of judging other men as though they were great and mighty judges on the level of God Himself. In that day in the nation of Israel, the scribes and the Pharisees attempted at many points to control the social evaluation of people according to whether they were taught in the law and accepted the traditions of the elders and rabbis of Israel. Individual people and groups of people were all evaluated according to whether they would submit to the evaluation and the teaching of scribes and Pharisees. They taught a ceremonial and outwardly moral works salvation. Their teaching was based upon self-righteous pride in their supposed knowledge of the Scriptures. Their actual knowledge of the Scripture had been corrupted by the traditions which they added to the Word of God which really made it the word of men imposing itself upon the Word of God.

These religious men would never think of calling a man like Levi to a position of spiritual responsibility or authority. He was despised and disqualified because of the greatness of his social and religious sins in their sight. But he was not despised or disqualified in the sight of a God who could and would give him grace. Jesus knew the purpose of His Father in Election, and He knew that this man, who was so despised in the sight of other men, was not only one of the Elect of God, but He was also one of the men whom He would chose to become one of His Apostles. He would write one of the four gospels called by His name Matthew; a book which is read by people all over the world. Will you not remember this morning that the choice of God which distinguishes a man in grace and brings him to the spiritual position of usefulness in His sight is not in accordance with men's evaluation of things? Christ called men to the ministry who were not only were not religious before they became His followers; they also came from the classes of people that religious, but unsaved people, would despise. Sometimes the same kind of judgment takes place in the church among believers. Can a person who has been a

notorious sinner become a follower of Christ, and even in time become a minister? Yes, if He follows Christ. The issue is not background or even our job situation before conversion. The issue is the obedience of faith.

The only words we read of here, coming from the lips of Christ are, "Follow Me." "And He arose and followed Him." This is the great requirement of discipleship and usefulness in Christ's cause and kingdom. Christ's great purpose in calling us into fellowship with Himself, and with the Father, is that we would follow Him. It is not so much that we would follow religious men. It is that we would follow Him in humble obedience. Now in this case, it was essential in the mind of Christ that this man Levi resign his job in order to follow him. Christ's call to him was to full time ministry and his first allegiance and loyalty would be to Christ and his kingdom, not to Rome and her Caesars. This is the first thing in terms of following Christ; your loyalties. Who is it, or what is it that you are most loyal to? Is your heart completely God's, completely Christ's, or are you split between serving Christ and your job. Levi was willing to leave his job immediately when Christ requested it. And in leaving his job he showed that he was also willing to leave his sins behind also. Luke's gospel says, "And he forsook all, and rose up and followed Him." If you had to choose, as Levi no doubt did, between being rich and dishonest and being poor and honestly trying to follow Christ; which would you choose? To follow Christ is first of all, to watch Him, to gaze upon Him by faith, even as Levi saw Him personally; to see the greatness of the grace that is in Him inherently and by nature. Follow Jesus and you will see perfection of heart and actions. Everything is done to the glory of God, but nothing related to doing good to men's souls is omitted. Follow Jesus and you will see the graces of love, humility, patience, and self-denial all demonstrated in the right way and at the right time. Follow Jesus and you will find the truth of every moral virtue, every kindness, every motive of love to God and love to man in perfect array and order, in relation to each and every situation that He encountered. Follow Jesus and you will see zeal in relation to God's worship and God's glory. Follow Jesus and you will find the truth of the Scriptures taught and demonstrated even to the point of regularly suffering for that truth. Follow Jesus and you will see a love for sinners; a love that did not despise them because of their sins, but which always showed them the truth about themselves. Follow Jesus and you would find Him preaching by word and deed that in Him was to be found the answer to all the questions about how to live and how to die to the glory of God.

Are you a follower of Jesus Christ? This is what He calls every person to, who believes in Him. To follow Him you must have faith in Him that as you pray to live like He lived, and to walk as He walked, that grace will indeed come to you to keep His commandments and to learn obedience to the many things which He taught. The graces which are in Him, He will give to you. You will learn by faith to be patient, and kind, and thoughtful. You will learn by faith in Him, to be zealous, and righteous, and holy. You will learn by faith in Him to face temptation and overcome it. You will learn by faith in Him what it means to suffer for

righteousness sake; to face misunderstanding, to overcome your fears in relation to men, to endure hardship and persecution, difficulty and trial, and to rejoice in all things that God orders for your life. You will learn by faith in Him to love and to give and to serve even when others are making excuses why they cannot do it. You will learn to be satisfied with having Him to talk things over when there is no earthly friend to help you think it through. You will learn to long for the day when you shall see Him face to face and pray to finish your earthly race with joy knowing that He is the One who has led you all the way. Are you a follower of the Lamb? He is the good shepherd. He knows His own, and His own know Him. His sheep hear his voice in the Scriptures and speaking to their hearts in relation to that Word. They follow them and He gives them eternal life. This was the first of His purposes in calling Levi. It is the same with every believer.

2ndly- Let's look at Jesus' purpose in celebrating that call by dining with Levi. (Verse 15)

"Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him." Luke's gospel says, "And Levi made Him a great feast in his house: and there was a great multitude of publicans and others that were sitting at meat with them." It appears to me that the Lord Jesus Christ, our pure and holy Lord, took great delight in accepting Levi's invitation to this feast at Levi's house. Even though the vast majority of the people that came to the feast were unconverted, yet He did not disdain to go. It would have been wrong if the Lord Jesus had made this multitude of sinners and publicans His regular companions. But I believe that He truly enjoyed being there that day. He was meeting many people who needed the words of eternal life. And having been invited to this feast, they were able to see Him and spend time with Him, the One who had completely changed their friend Levi. Who could this man be who had called Levi away from his lucrative job to a life of following Him? He must indeed be very great. They wanted to see Him, and Levi would give them the opportunity to do so. In the book of Hebrews, Chapter 7, verse 26, it says that Jesus was "holy, harmless, and separate from sinners". But here we find him drawing near to them. I want you to understand that in doing this that the Lord Jesus was working from a position of strength, not weakness. He was not giving in, or compromising any truth of the Scriptures or principle of holiness. He was still holy, harmless, and undefiled. But this act shows his kindness and compassion for those who needed to know the truth about the meaning of life. It says that all of these many tax collectors and sinners "followed Him." That is; they were willing to attend upon His teaching and to think about it. They had the witness and example of Levi right in front of them. They could now see the Man Himself and hear and judge for themselves.

In going to this feast Jesus was celebrating the call of Levi. Another sinner had been brought out of darkness. Another sinner had been brought to repentance. Another sinner had been brought into real and satisfying fellowship

with Himself and His Father. He was celebrating by going to dine with Levi, a sinner made a saint. Zephaniah 3: 17 says, "The Lord your God in your midst is mighty." "He will save, He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing and shouts of joy!" The Lord Jesus was indeed rejoicing over Levi. It is the same picture that is given to us in spiritual form in Revelation 3, verses 17-20. The same Savior who says to his backslidden saints, "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked-- I counsel you to buy from Me..."; is the same one who three verses later says, "Behold I stand at the door and knock." "If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." If Jesus does not reprove His saints in order to condemn them but to bring them back into fellowship with Him, then see also that He does not condemn worldly sinners who come out of curiosity to see if there is anything to this religion of following Jesus Christ. He will truly enjoy getting to know each one who has come out of a sincere curiosity. How else will they learn the way to eternal life? How else will they understand the goodness and the kindness and the mercy of God which brings sinners to partake of the gospel feast of good spiritual things?

We can learn from this my brethren. Turn with me over to Luke Chapter 14 and listen to the words of Jesus Himself in Luke 14: 12. When he had been invited to the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath and they were watching Him closely, He said to the man who invited him, "When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid." "But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind." "And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Jesus is making a tremendous point here. He is saying in effect, "How will sinners who have never darkened the door of a church come to know His power and grace and love for them? They will learn it when we, out of thankful hearts, will invite those who are usually despised in society to dinner; those who are despised by self-righteous religious men. Publicans and tax-collectors and poor and lame and blind. Go and invite them to a feast and tell them of the greater feast in the gospel. Tell them how there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the 99 who think that they do not need repentance. This was the purpose of Jesus in attending this feast. It was to show to all sinful men that He truly desires the fellowship of sinners who want to listen to His words and who want to learn to follow Him. By inviting them to an earthly feast, we may be able to persuade sinners of the reality of the heavenly gospel feast.

Look at Verse 15 of Chapter 14. "Now when one of those who sat at the table with Him heard these things, he said to Him, 'Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!'" "Then He said to him, 'A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were

invited, 'Come for all things are now ready.'" "But they all with one accord began to make excuses." "The first said to him, 'I have brought a piece of ground and I must go and see it.'" "I ask you to have me excused." "And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them.'" "I ask you to have me excused." "Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'" "So that servant came and reported these things to his master." "Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.'" "And the servant said, 'Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.'" "Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.'" "For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper."

You see, God would have men to believe in Jesus Christ. Not just religious men, not just men who are moral men who do not think that they need Christ's salvation and repentance; but men of all kinds, sinners of all kinds, sinners in all places of the world. If the religious Jews would not come to the feast; those who were first invited and made excuses; then why not open up the doors for everyone else to come in. This is a good way for us to think about inviting people to church and to the feast of the gospel which awaits all who come to Christ. "Go out into the streets and the lanes of the city, and bring them in. And if there is still room go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in. I hope that we will begin to think more this way. Men, women, and children must be brought to Christ. Why should we be ashamed of our faith and the great salvation which is in Christ? Why not celebrate it by inviting people we meet to church. If religious people are not curious about what the Bible says, still we can minister to those who are not religious. A gentle holy force may be all that is necessary. Do not be ashamed of Christ or the gospel, or of all that He has done for you. Be like Levi and have a feast. Be like the Master Himself and celebrate the conversion of vile sinners to Christ. Do not be afraid to associate with such if there are evidences of true conversion. This is the purpose of Christ, to see many sinners saved and following Him.

Then 3rdly- Let's look at Jesus' purpose in being criticized for His association with sinners. (Verses 16 and 17)

Yes, I said Jesus' purpose. Jesus knew that He would be criticized for associating with sinners. He had a purpose in mind in taking such a stand. It says in verse 16 of our text, "And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, 'How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?'" "When Jesus heard it, He said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.'" "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." Jesus' purpose in taking his stand in associating with sinners was so that everyone would know and understand that He was, and that He is to this day, the Great Physician of men's souls. I wonder if you have come to know Him in this all-important way? The

"those who are well" are really those who think that they are well, but are really sick. They are those who do not think that they need Christ or repentance. They think that they have no sin sickness that needs Jesus diagnosis or cure. They trust in themselves that they are righteous and despise others who would suggest that they are not. The "those who are sick" are those who understand their own sinfulness and know that they cannot cure themselves of their disease. If Jesus had not been criticized for His associating with sinners we would not know that He is the great Physician of men's souls. But Jesus was not afraid of the criticism. He knows that those who are sin-sick cannot be cured without His diagnosis, without His touch, without His medicines of grace. He would have to die in order to procure them for us. This is truly a marvel, a Physician who will come to you and will pay the price in His own blood for the cure to your disease. Let me ask you in closing, in the words of J.C. Ryle - "Have you ever felt your spiritual sickness and applied to Him for relief?" "You are never right in the sight of God until you do." "You know nothing aright in religion if you think that the sense of sin should keep you back from Christ." "To feel your sins and to know your sickness is the beginning of real Christianity." "To be sensible of your corruption and abhor your own transgressions is the first symptom of spiritual health." "Happy, indeed, are they who have found out their soul's disease!" You should know that "Christ is the very Physician that you require." "You should apply to Him without delay." You are the kind of person that Christ has come to call; a sinner whom He can save and bring to repentance.