

Jesus, Friend Of Sinners

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[0 : 0 0] So I'll start with a wee story. When I was in primary school the highlight was always break time, because all the boys in the class would assemble outside for a game of football.

One of the lads would always bring his football from home, and with only 20 minutes for break we needed to get a move on timers of the essence. So after a wee argument there would be two people picked as the team captains, and then the rest of us would stand against a wall to be picked. And as it went on, Andrew, Elliot, Connor, Lee, so on and so forth. More often than not I was one of the last ones, if not the last one to be selected. You see, things as much as I love football, I was never really any good at it. Two left feet and a head like a 50pence piece, uncoordinated is not the word. You see, you didn't want to be left over with me. We took the games really, really seriously and if you wanted to win, and believe me you did, you didn't want to pick me. I wasn't really the person you'd have chosen.

And so this evening we come to the column of Levi and Mark's Gospel and we can't help but think he's not really the one I'd have chosen. But unlike me at school, Levi was not the last pick. Jesus wasn't left over with Levi and thought, I suppose I'll go with you. Jesus could have picked anyone, and then at the time, but he went with tax collectors and sinners. I've entitled this evening sermon, Jesus Friend of Sinners. I want to look very briefly at these five verses in Mark's Gospel under two headings, firstly the ministry of Jesus and second of all the mission of Jesus. Both of which to show that in Jesus' kingdom the logic of the world does not hold sway and in fact is flipped on its head. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, for consider your calling brothers, not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. Whilst God does choose people, sometimes who are lowly, who are wise, who are not lowly, who are wise, we're also told that God chooses those who are weak in the world to shame the strong, those who are foolish to shame the wise. And in line with that we're told by Jesus what he came to do in John's Gospel, where he says, for I've come down from heaven not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me. What we see this evening is an example of that being played out. And so to begin with first head in the ministry of Jesus. This evening's passage is picked up in verse 13 of chapter 2, where we're told Jesus went out again beside the lake and all the crowd was coming to him. So quite early on we're told that the crowds are already coming to

Jesus. You see Jesus at this point had already, early on in his ministry, began to make quite a name for himself. He had cast out an evil spirit. He had taught as one with authority in the synagogues, healed silence, mother-in-law, cleansed lepers, healed paralytics. He even told a man his sins were forgiven. As you can imagine the stories are spreading, the name of Jesus has been spoken about. He's even got the attention of the religious elite, the Pharisees. And so consequently all the crowds are gathered to hear what the man has to say. Could it be true? The lepers cleanse the paralytics healed? Can it be so? With people nearby Jesus teaches them. And earlier in Mark's Gospel the crowds have already remarked, what is this? A new teaching with authority? Jesus teaching amazed and astonished and now a crowd had gathered. But interestingly the teaching is not the main event in this church. We continue in verse 14 where we are told Jesus saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, follow me. And he rose and followed him. There's a couple of things I want to note here. Firstly, Levi's not doing anything to warrant Jesus calling him. He's not bowing down before Jesus and saying, son of David, have mercy on me. He's not asking good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life. Nothing. He sat at his workplace. Yet Jesus calls Levi to follow him. The wonderful thing in Jesus' ministry is that he has and is calling people to himself, not because of what they've done, not because of any merit they can claim, not even because they asked Jesus if they could follow him, but because Jesus directly pursues his people. He calls them to follow him, not because of our love for him initially, but because of the love with which God the Father loves us. God the Father calls, God the Father loves us and God the Son calls us to follow him. And the response is incredible. We see here with Levi, he rose and followed him.

There was no hesitation. Levi rose obediently. Jesus called to follow as met with faith to follow. And so it is with us. There was nothing that we did to merit or warrant God calling us to himself, but yet he pursued us and called us to himself. The second observation I want to make is that not only did Levi do nothing to warrant Jesus calling him to himself, he also did much to deter Jesus from calling him. Now Levi was a tax collector, which nowadays may elicit no more than a shrug of the shoulders. So why collect the taxes? But in Jesus' day, the tax collectors were the lowest of the low. They were a despised people, outcast and ostracised, disassociated from. First and foremost, their money, their work took the money of the Jews to the dreaded Romans. In cahoots with the Romans, you bet they were the enemies of the

[6 : 46] Jews. Secondly, many tax collectors were corrupt. It was reported that whilst they did collect money for the Romans and taxes, they also charged a bit more so that they could line their pockets. So as you can imagine, Levi and his tax-collecting friends, they were enemies of the Jews for budding up with the Romans, but also for the corruption. So as you can see between the two, Jesus calling Levi, it's not that Jesus is calling this fine, upstanding, valued member of society. Jesus is calling the lowest of the low a hated member of society. Indeed, he chose he who was weak to shame the strong, he who was foolish to shame the wise. The mission of Jesus was taken to all sorts of people, even the despised tax collector, Levi. And in verse 15, we see the reconciling power of the Gospel at work, Levi who was once an outcast, once disassociated from. Now he's got a house school, dining with Jesus, with other tax collectors, with other sinners. What an incredible image of the Gospel at work. What is also incredible is that Jesus is there. In the ancient world dining together was a primary expression of identity and belonging. And right here we have sinners and Levi the tax collector finding identity and belonging with Jesus. Dead old religion had cast off Levi to the margins. Sinners were, had their identities impressed on them, unclean. Jesus however is willing to identify with those who are unclean in the eyes of the Pharisees, rejected by the world. Now imagine that. Jesus who is holy, holy, holy. He who had the praise of angels, the one who is eternally glorious, the perfect one without fault, perfectly God. He who though he had equality with God did not count that as something to be grasped. But became one of us, not to dining with princes and kings and rabbis and chief priests, but to dwell with sinners. And we can really gloss over the same. I came not to call the righteous but sinners. It can become part of the furniture, become unmoved by the profundity of this statement. But we must never lose awe and wonder at the fact that the one who is eternally and unchangeably good and righteous came to dwell with sinners.

I ask you I have done everything to deserve eternal estrangement from God, yet it is Jesus who comes to seek and save us in our lostness. Now this should evoke in us awe and wonder and worship that the holy God of the universe would come down to save sinners. But in the eyes of the Pharisees it provokes jealousy, bitterness, hate. Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? Jair'd describe in verse 16. He was appalled. He was shocked.

Why would he eat with those sinners? It provoked jealousy because in the eyes of society the Pharisees had gained a bit of a reputation as these hyper-spiritual, uber-religious, morally superior people. You see, so when Jesus turned up on the scene everybody had their money on Jesus being best pals with the Pharisees, including the Pharisees themselves.

They actually thought they were good enough for Jesus. But Jesus flipped the expectation on its head. Jesus does not save those who think they are good enough, but those who know that they are bad to the core. The Pharisees' religion which led to pride and arrogance over their morals was and is incompatible with following Jesus. And today if you believe yourself to be good enough for Jesus, then Jesus is not for you. Jesus wants the people who know they're sick, know they miss the mark. Because we all do, Jesus wants us just to recognise the truth. We are all far from where God wants us. Jesus is not interested in those who believe themselves to be good enough because they simply aren't good enough for Jesus. And in verse 17 we have the second point, the mission of Jesus. And when Jesus heard it he said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Now to have a quick discussion on the mission of Jesus, I want to highlight a couple of things from this verse. Firstly,

Jesus is not saying that there's anyone who is well or who is righteous. We are in knowledge of this because of the Bible's presentation of humanity. The Bible's not a great advertisement for the moral excellency of human beings. Certainly Paul's doctrine of humanity, which comes from Jesus' doctrine of humanity, is pretty damning and definite. And in Romans 3 Paul quotes the Psalms where he says, none is righteous, no not one. No one understands, no one seeks for God. And then he later on goes to say, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Now these are two very small examples of countless examples where the Bible is clear on how far from God humanity has fallen. So I think Jesus is not stating here that there are some good and that there are some bad and he's come only for the bad people. In fact, I find a new living translation of the Bible, helpfully translated verse 17 as, I have come not to call those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent. And I think that's key to understanding this verse, not those who think they are righteous because nobody is righteous, but rather those who know and acknowledge their sinners and know that they need to turn to Jesus for forgiveness.

[13 : 12] The second thing I want to state is that Jesus takes sin seriously because he is holy. Holiness matters to Jesus. Holiness does not turn a blind eye to sin, pretend it did not see wrong, but it confronts wrong. Jesus does not turn round to the Pharisees and say, how impolite, how rude of you, calling Levi a sinner. And also furthermore, when Jesus does call people out of sin, he calls people into righteousness, he calls people to follow him in obedience.

So Jesus here with Levi, he's not ignoring the fact that Levi is a sinner, he's being very straight on here. It is these sinners that he has come to save. He recognises the sin for what it is. He recognises the unrighteousness of humanity as it is. He doesn't sugarcoat it and make them feel good about themselves, but nor is he utterly pessimistic and feels utterly hopeless about the whole thing, but says yes, they're sinners, but it is these sinners that I have come to save. Which leads me on to the third thing I want to say about this verse, which is Jesus' mission is to save us from our sin. Now there was a non-Christian book that a friend of mine was reading and I was having a wee flick through and inside it said, nobody is going to save you, only you must do that. Now that's an interesting thought, a popular one in today's culture, that we have the power to save ourselves.

The other is going to do it for you, so you need to. Better yet, you can do it. But I must say that's one of the saddest thoughts possible. If we are the problem, we can't fix the problem and thus in and of ourselves we're still hopelessly lost. In the same way fire cannot be put out with fire, so we cannot deal with ourselves if we are the ultimate problem. And another thought is maybe, well I know I've done some bad, but I've also done a lot of good, you know, your good outweighs your bad. I don't doubt that there are many people who have done many good things. However if you've done wrong, you've done wrong. Your sin still requires punishment. If you went before the judge on account of murder and says I know I've done that, but actually I've done a lot of good stuff as well. Well of course you'd expect that the judge would say that's totally irrelevant. You've still broken the law and so it is with God. We've broken his law and that requires punishment.

But you see the problem is I think it can be all too easy to think of sin as just as something that we do. Cheating someone as a sin, lying as a sin, murder as a sin. And yes that's true and God's word does speak of individual sins, but it does so in the context of the entire human nature. For example the story of Joseph and his brothers in the Old Testament. When Joseph's brothers get jealous that Joseph is being honoured instead of them and they sell him to slavery, they respond in anger and jealousy and bitterness.

Are we left puzzled thinking that's a peculiar episode of human history? That's a bit out of the blue. No. You see people are not sinners because they sin, but they sin because they are sinners. Let me say that again. People are not sinners because they sin, but they sin because they are sinners. So in other words people are not sinners just when they do something wrong or because they do something wrong, but it is their nature which informs their behaviour, not the other way around. For example an angry person is not angry when he raises his voice, but he raises his voice because he is angry. So is with human nature we are born sinners and it is out of that sinful nature that we go on to sin. Now I've left over the last three months getting to know my baby son Alistair. It's really been such a great joy and pleasure, but something which is really funny is how innocent of you

[17 : 45] I had a baby before Alistair came along. Of course I believed that humans were sinful from birth, but I didn't quite think that I would see the effect of it working out quite so early on as I did. I remember him in my arms cradling him, two weeks old, he's crying so I'm trying to settle him, I'm singing to him and then out of nowhere the most tremendous left hook comes up and gets me one in the jaw. I might say something about my singing, but I think it better yet highlights his sinful nature working out in his life. He is upset, frustrated, angry, doesn't know how to express himself so what's he doing? Punches his dad in the face. Was it from that point forward that Alistair E. Amiel Murray became a sinner?

No, he already was, that was just the out-working of that. So it goes much deeper than just the things we do, it's at the very core of who we are and that is why we can't save ourselves.

Because it's not a case of just reforming our behaviour or changing our ways. Our sinful nature is inseparably annexed to us. It's part of us and it works its way out in a number of different ways, but that's why we can't save ourselves because it's helplessly a part of us and therefore we are in dire need of a saviour. And this is where the mission of Jesus really comes in here. Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 1, the saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I'm the foremost. That is the mission of Jesus, that he would come into the world to save sinners. And how did he come to save sinners? By taking upon himself human flesh. Jesus came down with the most beautiful condescension ever known. And when I say condescension, I'm not saying it negatively as we do nowadays when somebody thinks himself a bit aloof and looks down upon you. No, I'm talking about the eternal God stepping into time, becoming one of us. He would come from his exalted glorious state in heaven to be born in the stable, to dwell among sinners, to teach sinners how to live for God, to display to sinners how to live for God, to serve sinners and to save sinners. This journey would lead him ultimately to the cross where sinners would mock, sneer, belittle, reject, spit on

Jesus and nail him to a cross. They would cry out, if you're the Son of God, come down from the cross then. Jesus' response, Father forgive them, they know not what they're doing.

And on the cross Jesus who called sinners, dined with sinners, loved sinners, died for sinners. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, for our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. That is our only hope this evening, that Jesus became sin. He took on himself our sin, the punishment worthy of sin, in order that we might be reconciled to God, that we might be made right, and that God might be at work in our lives with works of righteousness. That we might display better Jesus in this life. That was the mission of Jesus, to save sinners, to call them into righteousness. That he who knew no sin would take on himself the sins of the world. The very people who cried out among the crowd, crucify him, are the people he has come to save. Indeed it was my sin which held him there. The good news however of Christianity is that the story doesn't end there with an innocent man dying on a cross. It doesn't end with a dead deity in the grave, but Jesus rose from the dead for our salvation. The Holy Spirit comes to his people, sinners, to enable faith and the desire to want to turn to God and to live for God, to obey his commands. We're welcomed into his family, us who were once orphans without hope in the world, welcomed into the family of God. To wrap up the main body of the sermon, the ministry and mission of Jesus is a calling, sinners to himself, and in doing so saving them from their sin, that we may be freed from ourselves to live for God, to enjoy God forever. How then can we respond to this? I want to say two things in response.

[22 : 58] Love Jesus and love the sinner. To love Jesus we must first be shown love from him. John writes in 1 John chapter 4, and this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. You see, we were his enemies, we were against him, separated, estranged. We were orphans without a father, without hope in the world. We are sinners who have no business belonging with Jesus. But yet God demonstrates his love for us in this. Whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And the most truly wonderful love is just that. A love that we did not earn, a love that we did not deserve, but yet it's so freely poured out and given to us. And that is that love which causes us, it's that love that Jesus gives to us, that causes us to love him in return. It is unthinkable to truly behold the love of Christ on the cross and to come away indifferent. Only love, adoration, worship and obedience is the only true response.

You see, we are the tax collectors and sinners in this story. We are with Jesus. But before we were, we were enemies of God, sinners lost without hope in the world. Once sinners, liberated from God, now reconciled to God through his Son, Jesus Christ. Once we have seen this love, the love which would cause him to dine with sinners, to call sinners and tax collectors to himself, to save the ungodly, love for him is the only response.

And love works its way out in obedience to him. Jesus says, if you love me, you'll keep my commands. And that is the thing, when Jesus calls us from our sin, he calls us into righteousness.

You see the women caught in adultery and John chapter 8, he welcomes her in, but he says, go and sin no more. And so he does with us. Jesus says, if you love me, you'll keep my commands. What is the greatest commandment? Jesus says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second is like it, love your neighbour as yourself. Since we are all sinners, to love your neighbour is to love the sinner. Now, by that, I don't mean a universal, unqualified, let's just be nice to people. But following the example of Jesus, the friend of sinners, to love the sinner. We see two responses here to the sinfulness of Levi. We've got the Pharisees, which distance them themselves.

Unclean, sinners, not wanting to identify with them. Cast aside, disassociated with them. And then we see Jesus. You see, the sin was a barrier, a hindrance to the Pharisees, but not to Jesus. Jesus comes down from heaven and dwells among sinners, calls them out of sin and rescues them from darkness and to light. And so for us, walking with people in the community, there's nobody we're above. There's nobody we're better than. There's no reason to act that way. And so maybe there's a family member, or maybe there's someone infamous on the island perhaps. And as soon as you see them, turn the other way, distance yourself. Of course, we don't want to follow that. We want to follow Jesus's example. Not to distance yourself and turn away, but to draw near, because Jesus's example shows us that sinners are not to be feared, but to be welcomed, to be embraced. Not turning a blind eye to sin and ignoring it, of course. And as I said, Jesus calls out the sin as it is, and calls us into righteousness. We do not stand ready to condemn, but we point them to the one that can deal with their sin. I love the quote from the theologian, Don Carson, who says, we are never more than poor beggars, telling other poor beggars where to find bread.

[27 : 36] And I think that just encapsulates what it is to love sinners. Not that we are distancing ourselves, these unclean folk over here, I'm going to be here in my righteous bubble, but that we draw near. And we draw near not as one lording over them. Look what I have to give to you. Look what I am bestowing upon you. But rather just saying, look, there's the bread of life. There's the Lamb of God who's ready to take away the sins of the world.

Here's the one who's told me everything I ever did. Love your non-Christian friends well by pointing them to Jesus, by your words, by your conduct, by your whole life. Hold up to them, this man, Jesus, friend of sinners. Let's pray.

Our God and Father, we thank you so much that our sin was not a barrier, that you did not distance yourself, though you have been perfectly right in doing so, but that you were merciful, that you had compassion upon us. And so Lord, I would ask that you would soften our hearts this evening, that you would give us mercy and compassion upon those who do not know you, do not walk with you. Help us to walk in humility and love before them, to show them who Jesus is, to show them the love of Christ on display. Lord, we thank you that we can only do so, not because we are good ourselves, but that because you have called us out of darkness into light. Our Lord and our God, we thank you for your incredible mercy. And we pray that that would change us from the inside out, that we would follow the, we would follow

Jesus and how he has displayed this for us, that you may be glorified in our lives and may be glorified by others. In Jesus' name, amen.