Banqueting Bad

Mark 2:13-17 April 9, 2025

In 2013, The Mark restaurant in Bakersfield was host to a gathering of civic leaders. At one table sat an assemblywoman, a state senator, and Pauline Larwood and her husband. For years Pauline had been a governmental relations consultant and was appointed to the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges by Governor Schwarzenegger.¹

Pauline didn't usually eat steak, but that day she made an exception.² Unfortunately, she choked on it. After multiple attempts at the Heimlich maneuver failed, Pauline passed out and was turning blue. Her life would've ended except for the fact that Dr. Royce Johnson, chief of infectious diseases at the Kern medical center was *also* at the Mark that day. He calmly borrowed a friend's knife and a pen. He made an incision in Pauline's throat, broke the pen in half and emptied the contents, then inserted it to serve as a breathing tube until the ambulance could arrive.³ By the next day, Pauline's family reported that she was doing fine.

Pauline did a lot of things during her life. She was Kern County's first female supervisor,⁴ honored as a distinguished citizen, involved in a variety of organizations and enterprises. But search her name and it is the saving of her life that always comes up first and foremost.

We have a similar situation tonight. We know stories about Peter or Paul, John-Mark or Judas. But when it comes to Levi, we don't know much more than the day his life was saved. But, it's a *great* story - when it happened, it was shocking and glows with the dazzling light of God's grace.

Mark 2:13 - ¹³ Jesus went out again beside the sea. The whole crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.

We're in a section of Mark where he shows us 5 different stories of conflict between Jesus and mostly the Jewish religious leaders who did not like the things Jesus was saying and doing.

But here, after the interruption of the paralytic coming through the roof and the conversation with the scribes right after, we see Jesus back on mission. He's out teaching and preaching the Good news that the Kingdom was at hand. It was time to repent and respond and join the King.

Now, Jesus had many followers by this point, but Mark has only introduced us to 4 by name: Peter, Andrew, James, and John - all fishermen. All had been called while on the shores of Galilee. Perhaps they thought they were headed out to pick up a few more fishermen - guys they knew, guys they worked with, guys like them. Instead...

¹ https://gardenpathways.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Pauline-Larwood.pdf

 $^{^2\} https://www.bakersfield.com/news/community-leader-saved-from-choking-recalls-harrowing-incident/article_ada596d6-e113-5e72-aca1-0c6f020182b2.html$

³ https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/25/man-saves-womans-life-penknife

 $^{^4\} https://www.turnto23.com/news/local-news/local-boy-scout-troop-hosts-awards-dinner-honors-2016-distinguished-citizens-of-the-year-local-news/local-n$

Mark 2:14 - ¹⁴ Then, passing by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "Follow me," and he got up and followed him.

Levi was not like them. One scholar writes, "For Jesus to call ordinary fishermen to be his disciples was extraordinary; but to call a tax-gatherer to follow him was nothing short of scandalous." 5

The tax system at the time was complicated and changing during these decades.⁶ But, there were tax collectors who were directly farming funds for Rome, and there were also *toll* collectors who gathered taxes and customs charges on things like trade for the local Judean government.

Levi would have been a *toll* collector working for Herod Antipas.⁷ To the Jews around him, that would've been a *little* less terrible than being one of the direct Roman tax collectors, but toll guys like him were still hated. More than hated, they were excommunicated from synagogues.⁸ They were not allowed to be witnesses in legal proceedings. They were viewed morally on the same level as thieves and robbers. Some rabbinical writings taught that if a tax collector entered a house *everything* in that house became unclean.⁹

Jesus inviting this man to be a part of His group would not only have been a surprise, it would have been extremely hard for the faithful Jews already in the group to accept.

Fish was a commodity that Peter, Andrew, James, and John would've had to pay tolls on.¹⁰ They were almost undoubtedly familiar with Levi and how he had turned his back on God, turned his back on his countryman and community for money and position and power.

His very name highlights his treason. *Levi*. Not just a name, but a tribe. Not just a tribe, but the tribe meant to *serve* God's people - to bring *their* offerings to the Lord and to minister to them. Instead, he extracted treasure from God's people to present to the phony king, Herod.

He could not have been more culturally or religiously different. Yet Jesus' words to him were exactly the same as the fishermen received. "Follow Me." He treated Levi just like the others. "Wait, wait, what about all he has done? Doesn't he have farther to catch up than the rest of us?"

No. Because the call was the same: "Turn away from your old life in faith and repentance and bind yourself to Me, your Messiah." Actually, you can make the case that Levi's step of faith required a *greater* human sacrifice than the fishermen's had. You see, once you left your post at the tax booth, you couldn't go back.¹¹ Whereas, after the crucifixion, what does Peter say? "I'm going fishing."

⁵ Morna Hooker The Gospel According To Saint Mark

⁶ John Donahue Tax Collectors And Sinners: An Attempt At Identification

⁷ James Brooks The New American Commentary: Mark

⁸ William Lane The Gospel Of Mark

⁹ Donahue

¹⁰ Ben Witherington The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary

¹¹ Frank Gaebelein, D. A. Carson, Walter Wessel, and Walter Liefeld The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke

But Levi immediately got up and starting walking with Jesus. Luke tells us that he left *everything* behind.¹² No matter who or where you are, the call to follow Jesus is the same. And the choice to turn and walk with Him is the same distance - a step. A choice to believe and to obey and to trust.

We know Levi more commonly as Matthew, the writer of the first Gospel. The first two Gospels clearly present Levi and Matthew as the same person. What's interesting is that in Mark he is identified as the "son of Alphaeus" and in Matthew, the *other* James is also called the son of Alphaeus. Were they brothers? The Bible never specifically says so, but it's possible. Or, maybe their dads just had the same name.

Mark 2:15 - 15 While he was reclining at the table in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who were following him.

I love this: Jesus tells him, "Follow Me...to your house!" These guys left a lot behind, but being a disciple didn't mean they had to immediately torch all their belongings. Jesus wanted Levi to be a disciple in his home, to follow Jesus among his friends and colleagues and peers. Now, that group would eventually change - Levi would become part of a new family and new partners in a new purpose. But whatever stage of faith he was in, he could "follow Jesus."

The Lord wants you to live out your discipleship where you are. Now, "where you are" will change over time, but today you are part of certain situations, certain social groups, certain endeavors. Be a disciple in the midst of those things. There *may* be groups you have to separate from, but generally, the Lord asks you to follow Him back home and to school tomorrow and to the workplace. To be His light and representative through your life and relationships.

Levi threw a "grand banquet."¹³ It was a celebration feast, *full* of people. Four different groups are referenced by Mark: Tax collectors, sinners, disciples, and others who also followed Jesus.

Sinners here would refer to either people who, because of their jobs, could not stay ritually pure or people who regularly, purposefully refused to obey the Law.¹⁴ They were people who Pharisees saw as truly inferior - outcasts from true religion.¹⁵

Attending this dinner would have been a *big* ask for those people who wanted to follow Jesus but also cared about the Law of Moses. Their tradition taught them that being at this feast would make them impure - ritually unclean - separated from God. But Jesus was redefining spirituality for them. They *could* go to this banquet full of bad people. They could mingle with them *for a purpose*.

But the Lord was *also* making it clear that following Him would often lead to some difficult, even uncomfortable situations. But truth and grace and compassion and heaven's mission should trump

¹² Luke 5:28

¹³ Luke 5:29

¹⁴ EBC

¹⁵ Lane

our comfort in life. You see, Levi and these other individuals were becoming *disciples*. That word is used for the first time here and will be seen another 57 times in Mark. A disciple is a devoted learner. It doesn't mean you're an expert or that you never make mistakes. It means you are dedicated to learning the way of Jesus, the plan of Jesus, the methods of Jesus and following after Him in those things. Jesus' plan is that His disciples become ministers the way *He* was a minister. Despite the social discomfort of breaking bread with these traitors, they would have to learn to allow love and compassion to cut through the cultural boundaries, the personal hangups, the easy arrangements and be about the business of rescuing the lost.

That is still the calling for Christians today. Now, we're not scandalized if an IRS agent comes to church. But sometimes Christians *are* bothered when certain other people come to church. The characters on that list are different at different times and different places. But we must welcome *anyone* in to hear the good news of the Gospel.

Mark 2:16 - 16 When the scribes who were Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

The Pharisees were *horrified* that Jesus accepted a man like Levi and entertained his friends. How could someone Who claimed to speak for God be at a dinner like this? The house was wrong, the food was wrong, the guest list was wrong. There is *outrage* in their question. On the part of the property of the property

If these people wanted to start having a spiritual life, according to the Pharisee perspective, they needed to first right their wrongs, clean up their lives, and make themselves worthy. The problem is: for tax collectors, repentance was essentially impossible according to the teachings of the time.²¹ And so, there was no reason to preach to them, no reason to reach out to them. God did not care about them. Write them off and leave them to their fate with no mercy or compassion.

This is what a Pharisaical heart always does. It condemns everyone else and elevates self. I find it interesting that the name "Pharisee" refers to the "separated ones."²² They thought they had separated themselves out from the impure. Meanwhile, God introduced Himself as Emmanuel. God with us. A God Who chose to identify with humanity so that He could gather us to Himself. A God Whose love does the cleansing for us, gathering His people together for His glory.

Mark 2:17 - 17 When Jesus heard this, he told them, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."

There are Christians who use Jesus' willingness to dine with tax collectors and sinners as license to involve themselves in all sorts of questionable gatherings and activities. "Don't you know that Jesus

¹⁶ Brooks

¹⁷ John 14:12

¹⁸ Donahue

¹⁹ R.T. France The Gospel Of Mark

²⁰ ibid.

²¹ Donahue

²² Hooker, Brooks

spent His time with gluttons and wine-bibbers?" And so that excuses some of their own indulgences. But Jesus was not there that day to just *hang* with these people. He was there to *heal* them. Doctors don't go to ebola camps for fun or to look cool. They go to try to save lives.

Jesus saw these people as sick, dying, and in terrible spiritual condition. Elsewhere in the Gospels He speaks *very* seriously about the spiritual health of tax collectors and their need for salvation.

He says here that He came to that dinner to *call* them. Call them to what? Luke tells us: To repentance.²³ To turn from their old way of life and to follow after Him no longer as tax collectors but now as disciples. To be saved from that life and put on a new path.

Jesus was there not for the filet, but because He was on a rescue mission. In fact, later, when the Pharisees again question why He's willing to interact with tax collectors, Jesus tells the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin and the Lost Son. These people were not only sick, they were lost. And His mission was a search and rescue mission - intervening for them before it was too late.

But the scribes couldn't see it because they were *self*-righteous. That's what Jesus meant here - not that they were *actually* righteous. There's a hint of sarcasm and condemnation. They were merciless and blind. While they accurately diagnosed the wicked tax collectors, they didn't recognize the Messiah right in front of them. They simply could not accept that God might *love* sinners.²⁴ But He does. He loves them so much He was willing to come looking for them, to give Himself for them.

That day in 2013 when Pauline almost choked to death, there was another doctor on scene: Her husband, Tom. Now Tom was a great doctor, involved in medical missions and lots of other good work. But it's an interesting illustration. The doctor at her side couldn't save her. A stranger came along and knew just what to do.

Some commentators suggest that Levi was throwing a farewell party. Maybe. More than saying goodbye he was welcoming Jesus into His life. Welcoming Him to be the gravitational center of his life. The focus of his life. For Jesus to be the *host* of his life. It was Levi's house, but Who was hosting this shin-dig? Who was the Master of the feast?

For Levi, the call to follow was the same as Peter had received, but the implications were different for each person. Disciples like Peter or Simon the Zealot would have to put away their resentment and hatred for people like Levi. Levi would have to take on a spirituality he had long walked away from. All would have to choose Jesus over self, over tradition, over culture and join together in a life of devotion and learning as Jesus healed them along the way.

The call to follow Christ is a *summons*. A demand to discipleship - to be a devoted learner, dedicated to walking with the Lord wherever He leads. And one of the places He always leads is to others so that they, too, can hear the Good News. And, as we see here following Christ is not just

²³ Luke 5:32

²⁴ EBC

about being saved from guilt, spared from hell, but it also means we allow Him to define spirituality and culture and conduct for us, even when it's challenging, even when it's uncomfortable, even when it means we will have to relate to people we wouldn't normally relate to. But that's what Christianity is about: The love of God, which is faithful and sacrificial and compassionate and true being shed abroad in our hearts, saving us from sin. Saved to serve. Saved to share the summons with all the other people God loves. Our families, our friends, our neighbors, and even those tax collectors we'd rather avoid. Learning as we go and loving as we go.