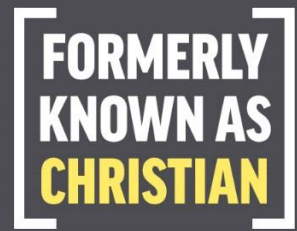


Week 4 - Mark 2:13-17



This week Jesus picks up another disciple: Levi.ⁱ Levi's call looks similar to that of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, except for one major detail: his occupation. Levi was a tax collector. While this designation might bring up some negative feelings for modern readers, it would have certainly elicited an even stronger reaction from Mark's first readers and from those present in the story. You see, Levi didn't collect taxes for the Temple. No, he collected taxes for the Romans, who were the latest foreign force to occupy Israel. Roman taxes were often high for their provinces, and Israel was a particularly unruly province.ⁱⁱ Levi would make his money by adding whatever fee he desired on top of Rome's cut. Needless to say, he probably wasn't well liked by the general public. His profession put him in the same social space as the modern, stereotypical lawyer, politician, or Wall Street banker: generally distrusted and disliked.

On top of this, Levi's job required him to collect taxes from all different types of people. The money he received would often come from "unclean" hands, and the people he hung out with were other tax collectors and sinners.ⁱⁱⁱ Peter, Andrew, James, and John may not have been learned men, but at least they had respectable professions! Levi was no better than a common sinner. He was an active participant in the Roman occupation of his own people. And yet, Jesus called Levi to follow him.

Chapter 2 of the Gospel of Mark is one example after another of Jesus coming into conflict with (and often enraging) the teachers of the law.^{iv} In 2:5, Jesus forgives a man's sins while healing him. The teachers of the law object, asserting that only God can forgive sins.^v Then Jesus walks straight up to Levi (the "scum"^{vi} of the earth), invites him into his circle, and hangs out with all of his sinner friends. Jesus, the Son of Man,^{vii} who has the authority to forgive sins, actively chooses to associate himself with sinners in spite of the criticism he knows he will receive from those who set the standards of respectability.

The Pharisees just can't figure Jesus out. To be fair, though, nobody in the story has Jesus figured out at this point. As we saw last week, even Jesus' disciples still had a lot to learn (as do we!). Jesus isn't like any other Rabbi^{viii} of the time. Rabbis typically took on the brightest, most reputable young men to teach and mentor. Jesus went around calling uneducated "scum," bringing them to "scummy" areas, and introducing them to other "scummy" people. Jesus meets people where they are and *moves into* their world. And he invites us to join him.

Questions for discussion/reflection:

1. Put yourself in the place of Peter, Andrew, James, or John. How would you have reacted to Jesus' invitation to Levi? Would you have been happy about going to Levi's house for dinner?
2. Do you identify more with Levi or with the Pharisees? Try to envision how you might be both at different times.
3. Whose house do you need to eat dinner at? Who do you need to invite to your own house for dinner? Extra challenge: invite them to dinner!

ⁱ Mark and Luke names this disciple as "Levi," but Matthew names him as "Matthew." Clearly each of the Gospels is talking about the same person, as the rest of the story is the consistent. Mark and Luke both list Matthew, and not Levi, among the 12 Apostles. The most likely conclusion is that Levi's name was changed to Matthew very early on in his discipleship. "Matthew" means "Gift of the Lord." The etymology of "Levi" is more difficult to pin down, but it's closest translation is "joined." "Levi" also has relations to borrowing and to monetary transactions.

ⁱⁱ While Rome gave some autonomy to its provinces, it did expect a significant level of devotion to the Emperor. The Jews, being strict monotheists, were largely unwilling to offer anywhere near that level of devotion. Also, the Israelites had a history of being oppressed by, and yet resisting and outlasting, huge world powers (Egypt, Babylon, Assyria).

ⁱⁱⁱ Recall the unclean spirit and the leper from Mark 1:16-45.

^{iv} Various called "scribes," "Pharisees," "teachers of the (religious) law." These men were the spiritual leaders of the community. A close modern equivalent might be local pastors. Pharisees took righteousness very seriously, though Jesus often criticized them for their hypocrisy. Because Pharisees were known for their righteousness, Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:20 that our righteousness should *surpass* that of the Pharisees is particularly provocative.

^v This is another example of how Mark portrays Jesus as God (c.f. last week, Mark 4:35-41).

^{vi} NLT; the Greek says "tax collectors and sinners" (2:16)

^{vii} "Son of man" is a messianic title take from Daniel 7:13-14.

^{viii} Rabbi = teacher