

**“Jesus, Friend of Sinners”**  
Mark 2:12-17 (NRSV)

It won't be long now before we'll all have to fill out those pesky Canada Revenue **income tax returns** again. I think it was **Bernard Shaw** who said that there are only two inevitable things about life: death and taxes. Moreover, the older I get, and the more money I want to save, **the more complicated the reporting procedure seem to have become**. There are no short forms here. Besides the basic “general” form there are all kinds of “supplementary” forms to fill out. So beyond reporting my regular income and any bank interest I may have received this last year (precious little, I might add), I now also have to report any dividend income and capital gains. Frankly, I'm getting ready to have someone else do it for me. Taxes are a pain in the neck as well as a depletion of the pocketbook.

If there's any consolation, I gather **it's been this way for the last 2,000 years in the Western world**. Such also were the conditions in Palestine in Christ's own day, under Roman dominance. **The Romans collected their taxes through a system called “tax farming”** – a cute term, similar to farming out franchises such as MacDonal'd's fast food restaurants. They assessed a district **a fixed tax figure, and then sold the rights to collect these taxes to the highest bidder**. The buyer had to hand over the assessed figure of money at the end of the year and could keep whatever he gathered above that. The obvious **potential for extortion** was compounded by the poor communication characteristic of ancient times, so that the people had no exact way of calculating what they had to pay. In that sense, our system of forms – tedious as it is to fill them out -- is a little fairer.

The Roman system consisted of **two categories of taxes** (William Barclay, Luke, p. 61). **First, there were certain stated taxes:**

There was **a poll tax** that all men ages 14 to 65 and women 12 to 65 had to pay simply for the reason of being alive. There was **a ground tax** that required one tenth of all grain and one fifth of all oil and wine produced. In some places the Romans also exacted a tax on fish. Very possibly this was done in Capernaum where the fishing industry was so vital. Finally, there was **an income tax** that was one percent of one's annual income – not bad, eh (William L. Lane, Mark, p. 102).

**In these stated taxes there wasn't much room for extortion.**

But in **the second area of special taxes called “duties,”** there was **ample opportunity for abuse.** For example, the people paid separate taxes for using roads and docking in harbours. There was also a sales tax on certain items, as well as import and export duties. A tax was even paid on a cart; in fact, each wheel was taxed!

The system fostered **exploitation by the arbitrary power of the tax gatherers.** They could stop anyone on the road, make him or her unpack their bundles, and charge just about anything they wanted. If the person couldn't pay, the tax collectors sometimes would offer to loan money at an high rate of interest, thus pulling people further into their greedy hands. Tax collectors became skilled practitioners in finding different ways to take an extra bite every time they taxed anyone; they were **“trained extortionists.”** Quite naturally, they attracted a criminal element of thugs and enforcers – the scum of society. So rare was honesty found among tax collectors that a famous Roman writer said he only once saw a monument to an honest tax collector (Barclay, p. 61-62)!

The **Jewish tax collectors** were easily the most hated in Jesus' society. They were considered to be despicable vermin. They were not only hated for their extortion, but also because they were the lackeys of the Romans – much like Jewish collaborators in the Nazi death camps were despised by their fellow Jews. At the time of Jesus, these Jewish tax collectors couldn't serve as a witness or a judge in court sessions and they were routinely excommunicated from their synagogues (Lane, p. 102)

All this made Jesus' dealing with **“Levi son of Alphaeus,” a tax collector,** remarkable. Let's examine **Christ's revolutionary social practice** in the situation that is described for us in Mark's Gospel. It will tell us a lot about how he related to all kinds of people in his day, how he relates to us, whatever our status or profession, and how we might relate to the world.

### **1. Jesus, the friend of sinners (Mark 2:13-15).**

In our passage for today, we find Jesus teaching the crowds that gather around him – by now he's become famous -- and then, when he goes for a walk along the shoreline of the lake of Galilee, **he meets Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax collector's booth,** and he drops a bombshell on him. Looking him straight in the eye, Jesus invites him to **“Follow me,”** and, do you know what, Levi does it; **he gets up and follows him (2:13-14)!**

Luke says Levi **“got up, left everything, and followed him”** (5:28). It was a decisive act. Levi gave up his old life, his customs office business, everything; there was no going back. How does that happen? There must have been inadequacies in Levi’s life. He must’ve been thinking about things. He must also have had some inkling that Jesus was worth following.

**In a few minutes the whole town knew about low-life Levi’s transformation and decision, and they couldn’t believe it.** Even though they despised his trade, they must have wondered, “Would it last?” “That’s an awful lot of cash to give up! And for what: an itinerant’s and, essentially, a beggar’s life?” “He’d soon enough come down to earth!”

Little did they know; yet, later theologians believe that Levi, as he’s called here, **became Matthew**, the one whose name is associated with what is now the New Testament’s first gospel. In support of that view, they quote an interesting parallel passage, in Matthew’s Gospel, that describes the same scene in this way, **“As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him”** (Matt.9:9). Whether Levi was called Matthew when most people knew him as Levi we do not know. But it is just possible that even as Simon was called Peter (or “the Rock”) by the Lord, so Levi was tagged Matthew (or “the gift of God”) by Jesus. If this was so, this was divine poetry, because then the covetous rip-off artist would soon enough become, as his new name suggested, **a gift of God to his people**. Thus Levi had stopped becoming a taker; in following the Lord, he soon enough became a gift and a giver.

This had to be **utterly amazing**, for of all the people of Capernaum, Levi would have been among the most unacceptable to be one of Christ’s disciples and apostles! Jesus sought out a someone no one else wanted, someone whom everyone else had probably wished would’ve fallen under the wheels of some cart. But, **such choices were to become one of the trademarks of Jesus’ ministry**. You see, Jesus chose people like Levi and Mary Magdalene, and many other similarly despised and rejected who will remain forever nameless, and **gave them a new characterization, a new name, a new life and a new ministry**. You see, Jesus saw **what people** like Levi and Mary Magdalene **could become**, not what they were, and certainly not what other people categorized them as being.

Centuries ago, a number of workmen were seen dragging a large marble block into the city of **Florence, Italy**. It had come from the famous marble quarries of Carrara, and was meant to be made into a statue of some great Old Testament prophet. But it contained imperfections, and when the famous sculptor, **Donatello**, saw it, he refused at once. So there it lay, in the cathedral yard, a useless piece of stone, albeit of beautifully striated grey-white marble. One day another sculptor caught sight of the flawed block of stone. As he examined it there arose in his mind something of immense beauty, and he resolved to sculpt it. For two years the young artist worked feverishly on the work of art. Finally, on **January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1504**, the greatest artists of the day assembled to see what he had made of the despised and rejected block. Among them were **Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Pietro Perugino**, the teacher of **Raphael**. As the veil dropped to the floor, the magnificent statue was met with a chorus of praise; it was a masterpiece! The succeeding centuries have conformed that judgment. **Michelangelo's David is one of the greatest works of art** the world has ever known.

**Christ saw in the flawed life of Levi, a tax collector, a Matthew, a disciple, an apostle, a gospel writer and an evangelist.** He still sees men and women and young people with his consummate artist's eye today. The Scripture confirms his estimate: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Eph. 2:10). Do you think you're a blockhead? Do you think you're useless? Think again. Christ Jesus sees in us what no one else sees.

**Levi's life was revolutionized. So he decided to sponsor a reception at his home** – probably a rather nice and expensive place -- in Jesus' honor, and many other tax collectors and so-called "sinners" were invited to share in the good time. Luke says it was a "great banquet (5:29). And this motley, usually ostracized crew obviously had a great time sitting (or reclining at the table) with Jesus. They enjoyed hanging out, chatting and visiting with him. What was the attraction? Well, his message was getting through to them. Mark observes, "many" of them "followed him" (2:15).

## **2. Christ, the enemy of the self-righteous (Mark 2:16).**

But it was **all too much for the good citizens of Capernaum**, and especially the moral guardians of the town, the scribes and the Pharisees.

Mark tells us that “When the scribes and the Pharisees saw that [Jesus] was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat [and drink] with tax collectors and sinners?’” (2:16). Interestingly enough, **the Pharisees, whose name literally means “separatists”** (Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According to Mark, 1981, p. 206), **were glad enough to attend Levi’s banquet**. After all, it was nice to be seen, and to see what was going on. It was also nice to enjoy the good, presumably appropriately kosher, cooking. But **they had a decidedly negative opinion about being in close proximity to anyone whom they considered to be ritually unclean** – like tax collectors, “sinners” and the like -- so they would have probably sat at another table while they enjoyed Levi’s dainties. And, of course, to top it all off, **it was an unforgivable disgrace that Jesus, who claimed to be a teacher of the Law, had disregarded their traditions and time-honoured customs** (Lane, p. 104).

**There are Christians who operate on similar unspoken suppositions.** In nineteenth-century England, for example, there was a woman who attended a church’s women’s meeting. She’d been living with a man of another race, by which she’d also had a baby, and she brought the child with her. She liked the meeting and came back again. But then the vicar came to her and whispered in her ear, “I must ask you not to come to this meeting again.” Seeing her questioning look, he continued, “The other women say that they will stop coming if you continue to come.” Looking at him with poignant wistfulness, she remarked, **“Sir, I know that I am a sinner, but isn’t there anywhere a sinner can go?”** Fortunately, she soon found the Salvation Army and received a different, more welcoming reception. And in case you think this only happened in the nineteenth century, I need to tell you I have met Christians who criticize others for the clothes they wear -- or don’t wear -- in church!

**Perhaps none of us espouse such Pharisaical opinions.** In fact, we may loathe them. **But many of us live them out nevertheless.** We’re Christians, and in our desire to be “godly” **we seek out “people like us.”** We arrange our lives so we’re with unbelievers or non-church goers as little as possible. We attend churches, Bible studies and prayer meetings that are 100% Christian. We play tennis with Christians, and eat out with Christians. We have Christian doctors, Christian dentists, Christian plumbers, Christian veterinarians, and even our dogs are Christians! Why, I’ve even seen Christian “yellow pages”! The result is, we pass by hundreds without ever noticing them or caring for them or positively influencing them for Christ.

**None of us are Pharisees philosophically, but we may be practically.**

The truth is that, in spite of what some people think, most of **the tax collectors of our time are not particularly sinful**. Why, even our late, beloved **Susan Swanney** used to work for the UK Department of Inland Revenue for a number of years!

But **there are plenty of other so-called “sinners” or pariahs with whom we might associate so they might find help and healing**. There are some at work, about who people gossip; we need to speak with them, go to lunch with them, or invite them over. There are also some who are in trouble, say a young person at odds with his/her parents, or a young unwed mother; we need to offer them support and encouragement. There are immigrants, who dress and act differently than us; we need to make them feel at home. There are street people; we may feed them and offer them a hand up. There are all kinds of addicted people in our community; we need to befriend them. There are plenty of prisoners in jail, including drug dealers, murderers and sex offenders; we need to visit them and help them eventually reconnect with the community. **No one should be off-limits for our interest and attention.**

Jesus once prayed for us as Christians: “I am not asking you [O God] to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (Jn. 17:15). The implication is that there is work in the world for us to do.

**The Pharisees were scandalized by Jesus.**

**3. Christ’s defense of his socializing (Mark 2:17).**

**Jesus heard what they were saying and**, thoroughly disgusted with their shrunken, hard-hearted hearts, **he responded brilliantly**. **First, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (2:17a)**. This was a supremely common-sense answer that was well known in both secular and spiritual proverbs of the time (Lane, p. 104). The doctor needs to visit the ill; but the whole should go to the fractured, the able to the disabled, the joyful to those who are sorrowful, the strong to the weak, the literally and spiritually rich to those who are really poor.

History records that when **Oliver Cromwell** ruled England, the nation experienced a crisis. They ran out of silver and could not mint any

coins. Cromwell sent his soldiers to the Cathedral to see if any silver was available. They reported back that the only silver was [contained in] the statues of the saints, to which Cromwell replied, “Melt down the saints and get them back into circulation.” Sometimes God must do that with us. We must be melted down so that we will get into circulation in the world for him (Preaching, vol. 1, no. 4, Jan/Feb. 1986, p. 55).

### **This is only common sense!**

Secondly, Christ completed his response with a statement of his own, overall purpose for coming into the world: **“I have come to call not the righteous but sinners”** (2:17b). He spoke ironically and truthfully. The Pharisees were just as needy as the tax collectors and other “sinners” they derided; but, tragically, they didn’t know it, they didn’t see it. In effect Jesus was saying, “To people who think they are righteous, I have nothing to say. But to those who know they have need, I have come.”

**The person who says, “I have no need,” or who says, “There is no significant sin in me,” is beyond God’s (and our) help.** All we can do with such people is to wait. Sooner or later, life may go sour, and their dreams will collapse at their feet, and then, perhaps, they will begin to know their need. Perhaps that is why God allows trouble to come into people’s lives, to strip away the terrible delusion that we can make it all by ourselves, and thus open us to God’s grace. Unfortunately, however, some will never see it, some will never get it. I wonder if the Pharisees got it.

### **What do we learn from Levi’s party?**

**First, that Christ and his followers did not (and still must not) isolate themselves from a needy world, nor did they assimilate it.** They went out with Christ in mission. They did things differently. And they ended up changing the world for the better. The Christian’s life is not to be one of isolation, nor assimilation, but mission.

**Secondly, Christ and his followers sat down (and still sit down) with all and sundry, including so-called “sinners.”** He partied with them. He dined with them and talked with them. He laughed with them. And, I suspect, he cried with them when that was warranted as well. And he met their need.

As I conclude, I suggest we might **begin this potentially fruitful connection with unbelievers and so-called “sinners”** by confessing all our own, known sin to the best of our ability, before we think about it in others. For the first link between my soul and Christ, my Saviour and Lord, is not my goodness, but my badness; not my merit, but my misery; not my standing, but my failing; not my riches, but my need.

Amen

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