

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday After Trinity, June 25, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 369, 380:1, 373:1-4, 382, 371:1-4.

Lessons: Psalm 38, Romans 5:8-19, Luke 5:27-32.

Sermon Text: Mark 2:13-17.

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

Dear Friends in Christ our Savior:

What do you think about most - what you have done to please God and win His favor, or, what God has done for you in Christ Jesus? If you in all honesty have to answer that your thoughts are mainly about what you have done, don't be surprised. For man's sinful nature is always inclined toward self-righteousness and exaltation of self. The Pharisees, for example, were told by Jesus: ***"You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."*** Luke 16:15 (NIV)

While we need not be surprised that our sinful nature is always inclined toward self-righteousness and pride, we ought to always be concerned about this. The Bible clearly teaches that no one can be justified by his own works or efforts. No one is declared righteous in God's sight because of what that person has done. ***"To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."*** Romans 4:5 (NIV)

We shall learn more about this as we consider:

JESUS' TEACHING: "I HAVE NOT COME TO CALL THE RIGHTEOUS, BUT SINNERS."

- 1 He called Levi (Matthew), a tax collector, to be His disciple;**
- 2 He was condemned because He ate with tax collectors and "sinners"; and,**
- 3 He would teach us who are the "righteous" and who are the "sinners".**

Our text tells us about one of the times when Jesus was busily engaged in His teaching ministry. This was near Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. We are told: ***"Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him."*** Levi is also called by another name more familiar to us, the name Matthew. After Jesus called him to be His disciple and later His apostle, he is the one who by inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote the Gospel of Matthew.

Our text tells us what he was before Jesus called him. He was a tax collector, also called a publican. For a proper understanding of our text we have to know about these tax collectors and why they had such a bad reputation. The land where Jesus lived during His earthly ministry was ruled over by the Roman government. Taxes had to be paid to the Romans by the Jews. These taxes were collected by men who usually came from a lower class of society. Since the Jews did not want to be ruled over by the Romans, they especially hated the tax collectors who took their tax money. These tax collectors also had a reputation for cheating by collecting more money than was due. Through their dishonesty many became wealthy.

Capernaum was a city on the main caravan road between the West and East, between the Mediterranean Sea and the city of Damascus. So it was an important place for collecting taxes. This is where Levi worked when Jesus called him. He inspected the goods that were being transported, and collected the tax money. So Levi, or Matthew, was a man despised by the Jewish people. But Jesus chose him as one of His disciples.

Our text gives only the barest details of Jesus' call. He said to Levi: ***"Follow me."*** It may well be that Levi had previously come to know about Jesus and may have heard His teachings. We don't know. But we do

know that Jesus' call was effective. The Bible speaks about those whom God *"has called ... into the fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord..."* 1 Corinthians 1:9 (NIV) Paul also writes that God *"has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace."* 2 Timothy 1:9 (NIV) Jesus certainly did not call Matthew because he had done many fine things, but because of his own purpose and grace. The call of Jesus was effective, for our text says: *"Levi got up and followed him."* The Gospel of Luke also adds that Levi *"left everything and followed him."* Luke 5:28 He willingly left his earthly wealth and became one of Jesus' disciples.

We can well imagine how Levi was despised by many people in becoming one of Jesus' disciples. But it was Jesus who was condemned for associating with the likes of tax collectors and sinners.

2.

Levi made a great feast for Jesus and His disciples, and for other tax collectors and sinners. It was at Levi's house that Jesus was condemned. *"While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"* These teachers of the Law were Pharisees who were traditionally the bitter enemies of Jesus, and known to be self-righteous people who looked down on others. They found fault with Jesus for the company he kept, and especially that Jesus would even eat with this lower class of society.

We note from our text that *"tax collectors and 'sinners'"* were considered to be the same low class of people. Tax collectors were regarded in the same class with the scum of society. These were people who had been put out of the synagogue, usually for some minor transgression against Jewish tradition.

That Jesus would consent to eat and associate with such people was most strongly disapproved by the Pharisees. They thought He should show that He wanted nothing to do with such "sinners". There is an important lesson for us to learn here. Jesus did not associate with sinners in the sense that He was drawn down to their level of wickedness, nor did He in any way condone their sins. He associated with them because as He Himself said *"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."* Luke 19:10 (NIV) The Bible says that God *"wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."* 1 Timothy 2:4 (NIV) And Paul emphasizes this precious truth: *"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."* 1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV)

These teachers of the Law, who also happened to be Pharisees, condemned Jesus for doing the very thing the heavenly Father sent Him into the world to do, to be the Savior of sinners. While the self-righteous Pharisees rejected Jesus as their Savior, we are told this about the lower class of society: *"Even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John."* Luke 7:29 (NIV) And of them as a class of people, Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews: *"I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you."* Matthew 21:31 (NIV)

While the Pharisees brought their complaint against Jesus to the disciples, Jesus answered them personally. From His answer we can learn who are the "righteous" and who are the "sinners".

3.

Our text records Jesus' answer to the Pharisees: *"On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"* Let us first understand this parable Jesus spoke. It's very simple: It's sick people, not the healthy ones, who need a doctor. As that is true in a physical sense, so it also teaches an important spiritual truth. He who is truly righteous and without sin does not need spiritual help. But who is there in this world who can be put into that category? Paul in the Book of Romans quotes from the Psalms and gives us the answer: *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."* Romans 3: 3:10-12 (NIV) This is said of all people as they are by nature before conversion. It is such that Jesus came into this world to save, such that He calls by the powerful Gospel Word to repent and believe on Him.

Who, then, are the "righteous" and who are the "sinners" as Jesus speaks of them? The majority of people regard themselves as belonging in that category of the "righteous". They regard themselves as being spiritually healthy and think they need no spiritual Physician.. These are the people who glory in their deeds, and boast about

all the so-called good works they have done. These are the people who belong to organizations which emphasize doing good and then want the praise of men. These are people who have been deceived by the religion of the world which is work-righteousness. Because they proudly reject the Savior of sinners in unbelief, these are the ones who will in eternity be ***“thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*** Matt. 8:12 Surely we do not want to be counted among them!

The Bible says: ***“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*** James 4:6 (NIV) Surely then, we should like to be numbered among those who humbly confess that they are “sinners”. Jesus said: ***“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*** The “sinners” are they who humbly confess: ***“I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.”*** And they are those who cry out: ***“O Lord, do not forsake me; be not far from me, O my God. Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Savior.”*** Psalm 38:18, 21-22 (NIV)

Is there supposed to be some merit in making such a confession, or do we draw comfort from confessing that we are sinners? No indeed! It is with sadness that we make such a confession. With David we have to say: ***“I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning.”*** Psalm 38:6 (NIV)

The comfort comes from the precious good news which we call the Gospel of Christ. It tells us: ***“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** Romans 5:8 (NIV) It tells us: ***“When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.”*** Romans 5:10 (NIV) It compares Adam and Jesus saying: ***“Just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”*** Romans 5:19 (NIV) It tells us that because of the reconciliation by Christ God no longer counts ***“men’s sins against them.”*** 2 Corinthians 5:19 (NIV) It tells us that Christ became our Divine Substitute so that His righteousness might be imputed to us sinners. ***“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)

Therefore, as sinners who have been made righteous in Christ, we joyfully acknowledge:

“Tis not by works of righteousness
Which our own hands have done,
But we are saved by God’s free grace
Abounding through His Son.” Amen.
(The Lutheran Hymnal 382:3)

(Revised from a Ministry By Mail sermon for August 18, 1985)