

The Audacity of Grace
Mark 2:13-17

James 2:1-9

Isaiah 51:1-8

Responsive Reading: Hebrews 12:12-17

The account that we will be looking at today in Jesus' ministry around the sea of Galilee closely parallels that the accounts recorded in the 1st chapter when Jesus was gathering his disciples to himself. So this morning before we read our passage that we are looking at today, I want to go back to chapter 1 real quick and read a few verses of the account of Jesus calling the fishermen to follow him. Starting in verse 14. "Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God and saying. The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent, and believe in the gospel. And as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then Jesus said to them, follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men. They immediately left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther from there, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after him. Then they went to Capernaum and immediately on Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught.

Before we read chapter 2, I want to point out something in the way Mark has recorded this. Notice the immediacy in his writing, Just in these 8 verse he uses the word immediately 3 times. There is a sense of urgency and movement here. Jesus does not take on the roll of the wisened teacher sitting under a tree and waiting for people to come and seek him out for his teaching. No, rather he is searching, he is gathering followers to himself, and he is constantly teaching to all those around him as he travels. As we read through chapter 2 keep what we read here in chapter 1 in mind and see if you can notice the parallels yourself. Since we did not gather together last week, I want to just start here at verse 1, so we can refresh our memories as to what was going on before we jump into this weeks passage.

(READ 13-17) right off the first thing that stands out, is what Jesus himself is doing. We see him once again, walking around the sea of Galilee just as mark recorded earlier. He is on the move, searching out specific people and calling them to be his disciples. Does this sound familiar? Jesus' ministry here in Galilee directly reflects the gospels calling in a few ways. First and foremost, there seems to be two different gospel calls. As Jesus is walking, and teaching he is telling all those around him to repent, and believe for the kingdom of God is at hand, yet we see very few actually doing so in fact most of what we see recorded in the gospels of the reaction of these mass groups of people who follow him is the religious leaders being disgusted by his teaching, and are actively seeking to find a way to stop him. Everyone is hearing the gospel, some are believing, many hear and and see his works and marvel but do not truly believe, and some become angered and aggressive toward him.

That sounds very much like the effect of the gospel today does it not? Even here we see the effect of the call of the gospel, and I think we also see the doctrinal ideas of the difference between a common calling of the word of God, and a particular calling of the gospel. Notice in verse's 13 and 14 Jesus is walking by the sea with a multitude of people following him, teaching them and as he passes by Levi, he stops and calls out to him specifically to follow him. To which Levi does so immediately, just as Peter, Andrew, James and John did in the previous chapter.

They left what they were doing, and they followed him, they did not prepare, they did not finish up what they were doing, it was immediate, sudden. It was a personal, and effectual call to be one of his Disciples. Which is the exact same way the gospel call works on the hearts of men. In this account of the calling of the 4 fishermen, and now levi this word that Jesus uses that is translated as follow is the Greek word Ako-loo-theh-o, which is only used in the gospels when referring to Jesus disciples, and appears throughout Mark's gospel account 19 times. This term following, is a load bearing term, it is an action. This is not a passive belief, but rather it is an active belief. It is an act of faith, it is one thing to say I believe it is another thing to act on that belief.

There is the general call to worship, to repent, and to follow, but it isn't until one is personally called by Jesus himself to become one of his followers that they go from being one of the many who listen, who hear, and marvel, or even argue and react in anger and disbelief and turn to be a true disciple of Christ. Another thing to notice here, is those who is calling to be his disciples. It is not the privileged, or the religious, but rather he has sought out those who were poor and despised, which he addresses later and we will get to here in a minute. There are those who take an extreme view of the doctrines of grace, who hold that there is no real reason for ministry outside the church since God is sovereign and has ordained everything and has already chosen his disciples. But that is not what we see here, in fact that is the complete opposite of what we see the entire bible teaching.

Jesus is not shut up in some university gathering to himself only his most loyal and just followers but he is out walking about, talking to people, teaching, healing and calling all to repent and believe. Those who hold to a hyper calvanistic type view seem to miss this point that the gospel is offered for all, it is taught to all but is only effective on those that God calls. It should not be us who puts a limit on God's word, who determines who should hear it, or who is worthy or not worthy. Who God calls is not our concern, our concern is to preach and teach the word and let God work in the hearts of men to hear, repent, and believe. That being said, the idea we see also of God's gospel call being an open call just waiting for our response is equally wrong. The idea that God has done all that he needs to do, and now it is up to us to do our part, to make that choice to follow him is just as wrong as those who are so stringent in their belief of God's particular call that they don't share the gospel with anyone.

What we see here in Jesus ministry is exactly the example of our gospel ministry. Meet people, share the gospel as given the opportunity, be active in the general call of the gospel to all people and trust that God will use it to his glory, whether it be effective in the calling of one of his children, or if it has the effect of hardening their hearts toward the gospel is little concern of ours, we are to be faithful to the ministry that God has given us.

Moving on here, continuing in verse 15. “ Now it happened, as he was dining in Levi's house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many and they followed him. And when the scribes and pharisees saw him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to his disciples, how is it that he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners.” Tax collectors were despised by the Jews, and I suppose they are despised today as well but it is not the same. Throughout all of scripture tax collectors are often lumped in with sinners., and there is a good reason for this. Tax collectors were men who were employees of the Roman government who the Jews saw as their oppressors, as the enemy. So if one was a tax collector, they were someone who was colluding with the enemy. Tax collectors were known as being dishonest, liars and thieves, for it was common practice that they would collect more than was required and would pocket the rest for themselves.

The collection of taxes on land was collected directly by the Romans, but the tax collect on trade goods was contracted out to local tax collectors, most of whom were ethnic Jews but were probably not practicing Jews for a practicing religious Jew would not transact business with a Gentile. These tax collectors were despised and hated by the Jews, they were seen as having their loyalties with the enemy. James Edwards in his commentary likened them to the moles and informants of Nazi Germany or Communist Russia. Those who would turn on their own friends and family, in the hopes to gain wealth and status. It is for this reason that a Jew who collected taxes was disqualified to act as a judge, or witness in court, and they would be expelled from the synagogue and would be a disgrace to their family. In fact, they were considered unclean, Jews were forbidden to receive money from tax collectors since the money they had was considered to be gained by robbery. They were so despised that Jews were encouraged even to lie to them, and it was considered a justified act. These tax collectors were a constant reminder of the Roman domination over Israel, and they were detested for their robbery, and injustice, and for their gentile uncleanness. Many Jews saw taxation as an act of Treason toward God himself.

So now we have a better understanding of this deep hatred the Jews had for tax collectors, they were unclean, sinners, who had turned away from God in their pursuit of wealth. And here we see Jesus walk up to one, and call him personally to follow him, to be a disciple. It is one thing to call a poor Jewish fisherman, it is entirely another thing to even talk to a tax collecting roman colluding god abandoning traitor. Yet that is exactly what Jesus did, and not only that we see that he went to his house and ate dinner with many other tax collectors and sinners. Eating with Gentiles, or outcast unclean Jews was not just a practice that was frowned upon, it was strickly forbidden and here we see in verse 16, the religious leaders were not happy about this at all.

“And when the scribes and pharisee's saw him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to his disciples, How is it that he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners? When Jesus heard it, he said to them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” This act of Jesus, defying the traditions of the Jews, to have the audacity to be gracious to these sinners was unheard of. The Jewish Laws and traditions put a barrier around them, protected them from the unclean, set them apart, from the rest of the world, and then here comes Jesus who at every chance shatters those barriers to coming in contact with the leper, and dining with traitors and sinners. Is this not a perfect picture of the gospel? Jesus Christ himself, breaking down the barriers and bringing in reconciliation to these who are in desperate need. As he said, I have not come to call those who are righteous, but the sinners.

Notice that Jesus did not hold conditions upon his dining with the tax collectors and sinners. The religious leaders may not have had such an issue if he had laid down some ground rules first. Jesus did not first require them to change their lives before he associated with them, he did not require them to become godly, religious people before he would eat with them. Jesus met them where they were, he showed grace and love toward them, while they are sinners. As James Edwards says, “The scandal of this story is that Jesus does not make moral repentance a precondition of his love and acceptance, Rather, Jesus loves and accepts the tax collectors and sinners as they are. If they forsake their evil ways and amend their lives, they do so as did Zacchaeus, not in order to gain Jesus' favor but because Jesus loved them as sinners. It is this that scandalizes the religious leaders of his day, as it scandalizes those who who define the gospel in terms of pure moral reformation and character formation in our day.

This statement of Jesus here in verse 17 has a rather condemning message for the religious Jews who were angry for Jesus' association with these sinners. Here is one claiming to be the promised messiah who Israel was waiting to free them from Roman oppression and he says to them, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." The Jews thought themselves righteous, their entire social, political, religious system was built upon the fact that they held themselves accountable to God's law. That they alone were God's chosen people, and Jesus says, I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners. This statement is interesting for I doubt that this was lost on them, I am pretty sure they, thinking themselves righteous would have heard this and seen it as directed at them. But it is interesting, for as Jesus constantly points out to them, they too are sinners who need the gospel just as much as the gentiles and tax collectors.

So he was pointing out the fact that he did not come only for the religious Jew, but for all sinners, Jews and gentile alike. Jesus shows not only in word, but also in deed that, accepting and following him are more important than following the Torah, the law, and the traditions. It is only by following him that sinners will enter the kingdom of God. It is not by living a righteous, moral, law-abiding life, but rather by a life in Christ himself, bound in love. It is the life that seeks to grow in love and understanding of God, not a life that seeks to gain merit by righteous acts. That is the audacity of grace, to provide love and hope to the undeserved, to the lost, to the rebellious, and to the sinners.

As I was thinking about this over this past week our study in James kept coming to mind especially the passage we read this morning about in Chapter 2. "My Brethren do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory with partiality." It is so ingrained in our human nature to judge, to look down upon those that we feel are lesser than us. We justify it by saying these poor are just lazy entitled people who need to just get a job and take care of themselves. We always have an answer or a reason as to why someone is not as good as we are. But look at the example of Jesus, he touches a leper to heal him, he walks by the sea and talks to the fishermen who are not clean well-kept people by the way. And now we see him eating dinner with one who is considered a liar, a thief and a traitor to his people. Isn't this how we are supposed to be? Are we not supposed to be witnesses to those who are in desperate need of a savior? It is not for us to judge who is worthy of this gospel, it is only for us to share it.

This example of Jesus, and his care for the sick, for the unclean, for the despised, and outcast sinners is exactly the love and compassion that he calls his followers to give to all around them. Christianity is not a militant, national pride, bigoted arrogant belief. It is one of compassion, one of grace, and one of love. The Jews of Jesus' day look a lot like the Christians we see today. Haughty, arrogant, flush with national pride and respond in anger, hatred, and vile threats. Aaron shared a post on Facebook this week by James White, and it showed a Muslim woman walking down the street and behind her was a guy dressed in his camouflage, covering his face and walking behind her with his gun. Sadly there are many who call themselves Christians who are in support of such action, and James White calls them out on it. This is not Christianity, I am afraid that much what we see being called Christian today is nothing more than national pride and bigotry wrapped up in a veil of religion, just like these Jews thinking themselves righteous, thinking themselves superior, thinking themselves holy while all the while committing sin, and their own pride and arrogance condemning themselves to hell.

I have become quite tired of these who claim Christ but are full of so much anger and hatred. We need to stand up against such for the only effect it will have is the opposite of what is desired. It is already beginning, we hear it now and those who claim Christ are being labeled as bigots, and haters. This ought not be, Christ is our example, he shows grace, mercy, and love to the undeserving. This is the message that needs to be heard in our churches today.

We are to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves, yet it seems today we have that turned around. Let us instead put down our hatred and bigotry, let us be more like our savior, instead of casting judgment upon the poor and the sick and acting with partiality, let us extend our hand to them, meet them where they are, show them the grace and mercy that our Father has shown us, live as Christ being our example, live the gospel, share the gospel, be those who Ako-loo-theh-o Christ. Follow, not only in word, but in word and in deed.