

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

The Company You Keep

(Mark 2:13-17)

Study #4

Introduction: Going through changes...

In every organization, there are exciting seasons of change. That change can be disruptive, but it can also bring about great transformation. When such changes occur in a church, they can bring about a God-honoring future.

The same thing can happen in the life of an individual. In fact, you may be going through some changes in your own personal life. New opportunities. New challenges. Freshly opened doors.

This morning, toward the end of our time together, I'll tell you about some exciting changes that are occurring in my own life recently. They just happen to have everything to do with some of what we see in the passage of Scripture in front of us today.

This briefly told story follows the healing of the paralytic we viewed last week and takes us, first, to the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus Preaches, Teaches, Beaches (v. 13)

At the Sea (v. 13a)

[13a] And He went out again by the seashore...

After our first few looks into Mark's Gospel, the first thing that may strike you is that there is no "*immediately*" immediately beginning this passage.¹

That is unusual since "*immediately*" has been the dominant word thus far in the book. But its absence is telling. This trip to the sea did not necessarily follow directly after the healing of the paralytic. Days or weeks may have passed. All we know is that at some point after what we have seen thus far, Jesus went to the Sea of Galilee, probably near His hometown of Capernaum.²

Of course, we've already seen Jesus at the Sea. It is where He had called the four fishermen - Simon and Andrew, James and John. And we know that the Sea of Galilee will be the scene of much activity during the Lord's three year-long ministry.

We don't know why Jesus went to the sea this time. It may have been to get some much-needed R&R. If so, it wasn't long before His solitude was interrupted by crowds of people joining Him on the beach.

Teaching the Crowds (v. 13b)

[13b]...and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them.

In addition to having seen Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, we've also seen people flocking to Jesus. They came streaming to Simon's home after the healing of Simon's mother-in-law's fever, and they came streaming to Him (again at Simon's home) to hear Him teach.

Now they've walked some distance to hear Him teach at the beach. Don't you just wish you knew what He had been teaching?

It could have been anything from the Kingdom of God to the coming of the Messiah to the love of God to the beauty of faith to prayer to servanthood.

¹ In fact, there is not a single "*immediately*" in our passage for today.

² His withdrawal from populated areas is a recurring pattern.

Whatever it was, the people loved it. Jesus was the kind of teacher who spoke in such a way that anyone could understand what He was talking about. He wasn't some esoteric lecturer for the elite.

Well, Jesus finished teaching, and when He wrapped up, He walked back from the Sea toward Capernaum.

Near the city limits, He passed a tax booth where taxes were being collected from traders carrying their wares between Damascus in the north and the Mediterranean Sea to the west.

Another Disciple Joins Jesus (v. 14)

Meet Levi (v. 14a)

Taxation, 1st Century style

The Roman taxation system was extremely complex (I know, it's tough for us to imagine a complex taxation system). Contributing to its complexity was the fact that there were lots and lots of different kinds of taxes levied on the Jewish population in Palestine.

One of the kinds of taxes was a "customs" tax - a tax on goods being shipped from place to place. The tax booth in view in this passage was a booth set up at the city limits to collect customs taxes.

The man who manned the tax booth in ancient Israel was charged with collecting a certain tax on transported goods. And, while the taxes were collected FOR the Romans, most of the taxes were collected BY Jews.

That, in and of itself, might have been enough to arouse hard feelings toward tax-collectors. But there was another factor that guaranteed hard feelings.

See, the Romans required that a certain amount of money be collected by the Jewish tax collectors. But the tax collectors' final profit consisted of whatever amount of money "above and beyond" that minimum they could extract from their fellow countrymen.

For these two reasons, it's easy to believe that the Jewish tax collector of the first century was uniformly despised by the Jewish taxpayer.

Tax collectors

In Jesus' day, to call someone a tax collector was to engage in name-calling.

In terms of reputation and social standing, tax collectors were lumped together with thieves and murderers. In fact, the touch of a tax collector rendered a home unclean. Jewish contempt for tax collectors is seen in the ruling that people were permitted to lie to a tax collector.

Tax collectors worked for the enemy and were a daily reminder of the Roman domination of Israel. And Levi (the disciple of Jesus also known as Matthew) was a tax collector.

Levi, the Tax Man

[14a] As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth...

Levi collected tax on goods which were being transported from place to place. Levi worked for the Romans, specifically for Herod Antipas, the Roman installed ruler of Galilee. Levi's profit margin was based on how thoroughly he could gouge his fellow Jews.

Everything that would have been true about tax collectors was true about Levi. Everything that would have been true about the reputation of tax collectors would have been true of Levi.

So it won't surprise you to learn that Jewish tax collectors working for Rome were generally not considered "citizens in good standing" in Jewish society or with the Jewish synagogue. They didn't observe the Mosaic Law and were, for the most part, Jewish in name and ethnicity only.

It may surprise you, then, to hear Jesus call Levi to follow Him.

“Follow Me, Levi” (v. 14b)

Levi was seated at his tax booth with books open and pen in hand, ready to tax Jesus on whatever merchandise He was carrying. As He passed by, Jesus spoke before Levi had a chance to.

[14b]...and He said to him, “Follow Me!”

Now, when Jesus had called fishermen to follow, He invited them to “*fish for men.*”

Here, it is just a stark “**Follow Me!**” There is nothing in the call related to his occupation like, “*Follow Me for a great return on investment*” or “*Follow Me for riches out of this world.*”

And it was not only a stark invitation. It was surprising and remarkably uncaring.

I mean, is Levi really the kind of follower you would expect the Jewish Messiah to collect to Himself? What was it about Levi that would have commended him to Jesus? On what possible basis might Jesus have selected Levi to be a disciple?

As I think about the kind of man Levi likely was, the profession in which he was engaged, the lifestyle he probably lived, and the character (or lack of it) that he likely possessed, I fail to see Jesus’ reasoning for inviting Levi to follow or to hold out any hope that Levi would follow.

As it turns out Jesus is a far better judge of potential disciples than I ever will be.

Levi, the Follower (v. 14c)

If Jesus’ invitation to follow was abrupt, Levi’s response was equally abrupt.

[14c]...And he got up and followed Him.

Without question or discussion, Levi (and we can insert our own “immediately” here) and *immediately* became a disciple of Jesus.

And where did things move from there? They moved to a dinner party in a private home.

Guess Who Came to Dinner? (vv. 15-17)

Dinner at Levi’s (v. 15)

“in his house” - whose house? (v. 15a)

[15a] And it happened that He was reclining at the table in his house...

Jesus has followed His newest follower back to the follower’s home. They are eating a meal together at Levi’s place.

The words “**reclining at the table**” describe the way that friends positioned themselves when they were enjoying a meal together.

They would lean back on one elbow with their heads facing the low serving table, while their feet extended outward from the table. Or they would lie on their stomachs on top of big pillows - again with their faces toward the table.

At this meal in Levi’s home there were some of Levi’s closest friends. He evidently wanted his friends to meet his new friends - Simon and Andrew, James and John - and his other new Friend, Jesus.

Who is attending this party? (v. 15b)

[15b]...and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples

We’ve already seen that Levi (and his friends, the other tax collectors) were despised in polite, proper Jewish society. And understandably so. At this dinner party there is a whole gaggle of Levi’s former business associates - tax collectors.

And there are others, referred to by Mark as “sinners.”

Sinners” was a catch-all term that could refer to notorious sinners - thieves and murderers, adulterers and Sabbath-breakers, gamblers and moneylenders, shepherds, and of course, tax collectors.

But sometimes “sinners” was a term applied to those who were too busy, too poor, or too ignorant to pay much attention to the Law or to live up to the expectations of the religious elite.³

In short, they were outsiders to the faith. But Jesus welcomed them. He gladly enjoyed the party at Levi’s house, which leads us to the last phrase of verse 15. It is a provocative phrase.

Side Note: “There were many of THEM” - who is “THEM”? (v. 15c)

[15c]...for there were many of them, and they were following Him.

The reason those words are provocative is that it is not clear to whom the word “*them*” refers in verse 15...⁴

Is Mark saying that Jesus had many disciples?⁵ Or is he telling us that many tax-collectors and sinners were following Him?⁶

After giving it a good bit of thought, I’ve opted for the latter. I think it makes more sense in this context that Mark wants us to know that many of those from the ranks of the “tax collectors and sinners” category were following Jesus.

Isn’t that fascinating?

³ Jesus had formerly been in the presence of unclean lepers. That would have been a problem for the religious elite. Now He is in the presence of people with unclean habits, and that is even more of a problem because the uncleanness of “tax collectors and sinners” is a chosen uncleanness.

⁴ The question is a grammatical question (which interests me; once an English major geek, always an English major geek), but it is one that may not ultimately be answered by sentence diagramming.

⁵ This is what John Grassmick thinks, Knowledge Bible Commentary.

⁶ This is the opinion of R.T. France, as expressed in his commentary.

Jesus welcomed the outsiders and was glad to hang with them. And they were glad to hang with Him, too. They were drawn to Him.

But there were some in Capernaum who thought Jesus’ posture toward these folks was scandalous.

A Crowd for a Messiah? (v. 16)

[16] When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?”

Scribes of the Pharisees

This is the first mention of the Pharisees in Mark - but we’ll definitely see them again.

The Pharisees were the most influential religious party in Palestine. They were popular with the people and they loved the Law of God. They were fine, upstanding citizens and were looked to as spiritual leaders in the community. I could easily see a Pharisee being selected to serve as the Senior Pastor of a local synagogue - and they didn’t like the company Jesus was keeping one bit.

Appalled at the company Jesus keeps

Here was Jesus parading around like an up and coming rabbi - and everybody knows that rabbis shouldn’t hang with irreligious people.

The common wisdom that held sway in that day was a doctrine of separation. If you want to be godly, hang with godly people. Separate yourself from people who don’t love God, who have bad habits, or who could otherwise be a bad influence.

And, you know, there is real wisdom to that common wisdom. Solomon writes in Proverbs about the need to choose friends wisely and Paul says that bad company corrupts good morals.

But Jesus was not separating Himself at all from these people. In the minds of some He was running the risk of being polluted. He was eating and enjoying close fellowship with these folks. Bad move, Jesus!

Now, it is likely that the scribes of the Pharisees were objecting from a distance. They would not have gone inside Levi's house for fear of being contaminated.

So, picture them outside on the front lawn, shaking their heads with a "tsk, tsk" sound. Their complaint about Jesus' behavior was expressed, not to Jesus, but to His newbie disciples. Interesting...

Talking behind Jesus' back

We wonder why they didn't go straight to Jesus.⁷ And we aren't told. But instead of telling Jesus of their concerns, they asked His disciples to defend their rabbi's ways.

When Jesus got wind of their concerns, He walked straight up to the scribes of the Pharisees and spoke, boldly and confidently, with no stuttering.

A PERFECT Crowd for the Messiah! (v. 17)

Physicians go where there is a need for medical help

[17] And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick"

This is a rather famous, almost proverbial saying and it applies in all kinds of life contexts.

Look at the work done by the group, Doctors without Borders. You never find them in a hospital in a developed country. They are involved in crises in some sixty countries, worldwide, where armed conflict, epidemics, malnutrition or natural disasters have overwhelmed local health care systems.

⁷ See also the silent criticism of verse 7.

It wouldn't make sense to have Doctors without Borders show up at The National Convention of Healthy People. They don't need a physician.⁸

In the same way, it only made sense for Jesus, the Great Physician of the soul, to go to those with spiritual need.

Listen to what Jesus says to the Pharisees and we will begin to understand His mission strategy as we get a glimpse into His great heart.

Messiah goes where there is spiritual need

[17] And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."⁹

He went to those who knew their need

Very logically, He wound up spending time with people who were sinners in need of salvation.

There is some irony in His words here because EVERYONE is in need of salvation. No one can stand before God and say, "*Well, I did it. I lived a perfect life. My efforts merit eternal life with You.*"

No, we have all failed - but the tax collectors and sinners Jesus was hanging with at Levi's house (and Levi himself) KNEW that they were in need of salvation.

The problem with the scribes of the Pharisees was that they thought they were doing just fine, thank you very much, and didn't really need a "doctor" to make them well.

⁸ The Greek philosopher, Diogenes (founder of the Cynic school of philosophy) wrote, "As a doctor must go among the sick, so a wise man must mix with fools."

⁹ Early church fathers quoted this verse frequently. (Clement of Rome; Justin Martyr)

By His answer, Jesus is letting everyone know that He will go to anyone who admits their need. He will be of no help to the self-assured and the independent. But Jesus rushes to the poor in spirit who know that they need a Savior.

Notice, too, that when He walked in to Levi's home, He walked in without demands or conditions.

He went without conditions

Here is the scandalous part of Jesus' way with the irreligious and the outsider. He didn't demand that they change. He didn't make moral repentance a precondition of His love and acceptance.

Did He fellowship with them only after they cleaned up their acts? No. Did He fellowship with them on condition that they would clean up their acts? No.

Jesus simply hangs with those who had "had it" with the religious scene. He went to the home of a man who had stopped trying to fit in with the "righteous" crowd because he knew he could never measure up. A whole bunch of that man's friends showed up and He lavished grace on them, too.

Jesus is the Good Physician of the Soul because He opts for the profligate love of God over a system of merit.

But all of this is not to say that He didn't walk in to Levi's home with an agenda. He had a very clear agenda.

He went with an agenda

To say that He only wanted to hang with the tax collectors and sinners would be as foolish as saying that the physicians who work with "Doctors without Borders" just like being around sick people.

No! These brave doctors go to devastated people living in crisis to heal them of their diseases. And Jesus went to Levi's house to redeem those who knew they needed redemption.

He wasn't interested in reform. He was interested in the salvation of the eternal souls of these folks. He knew that reform comes as people follow Him.

But He never put the cart before the horse. He always dealt with the heart of the matter first. He moved from the core outward to the crust. It was salvation first and then a transformed life.

So, Jesus moved from the comfort of Heaven to earth to bring salvation to people who weren't even all that interested.

He went out of His way to save us, not bothering to differentiate between those who were outwardly righteous and those who weren't, knowing that EVERYONE was in need of the salvation He was offering.

And He didn't wait for people to come to Him. He went to where they were.

That is Jesus' story. Now here is my story. File this under "A Pastor's Confession" or "Dave's Parsonal Journey."

Conclusion:

As some of you know, I have been following an exercise regimen for a little over three years now called "Crossfit."

It would be understandable if you hear the name to hear the name and jump to the conclusion that Crossfit is a Christian-based workout (whatever that would mean), but it's not. The "cross" in Crossfit refers to a cross-training approach to fitness.

Back in 2008, my son, Ben, told me about Crossfit and I started doing the daily workouts - which are posted at www.crossfit.com - in my garage. Within weeks, I was hooked.

Well, recently I participated in the International Crossfit Games (in my age category, of course) and did a couple of workouts at a Crossfit gym on Mainland that had just opened up called "Flex Studios."

Well, not long after I did those workouts, I got an email from one of the gym's managers, a really nice gal named Stephanie, asking if I would consider being an assistant coach for Crossfit.

Thinking at first that they thought they had discovered the next Jack Lalane, I have since learned that the business model of this gym is to find people who are even somewhat familiar with Crossfit and give them a shot at coaching as a way to spread interest through the community.

I thought about the offer for a bit, talked with Kathy - and then told the manager that I would be happy to give it a try.

So I am now devoting a couple of hours a week to helping new Crossfitters learn the ropes, encouraging and cheerleading people in their pursuit of fitness, and otherwise sweating profusely in an un-air-conditioned gym with a few new friends.

Now I love Crossfit and am enjoying the exercise and the chance to do some coaching. No mistake about that. But here's the part of the deal that is most exciting to me - and I want you to take this in the right way.

I like Northwest Community Church. No. I LOVE Northwest. I love you and I love serving here. But after nearly three decades of pastoring Northwest, I rarely have much contact with people who don't attend Northwest.

Stephanie's invitation to me to get involved with Crossfit has opened a door to a bunch of relationships with people I would have never known outside of Crossfit. I can now list a dozen or so folks I've met in the three weeks I've been helping out at the gym.

I thank God that I now have a non-churchy environment available to me to hang with people, make friends, and easily talk about life and God.

This new open door has been, so far, one of the most surprising and delightful serendipities with which God has blessed me in years.

So, what about you?

I think Jesus might say to each one of us here today, *"Where is your Levi's house? In what non-churchy environment are you investing time, energy, and talent to hang with people?"*

That, after all, is what Jesus did. He hung with people and He talked with people about life and God while He was hanging with them.

Sometimes it was in the home of a former tax collector and sometimes it was on a boat. At other times it was on a hillside and at times it was on the road. On occasion it was even in a synagogue.

But if we would imitate our Savior we will take advantage of the simple pleasure of being with people, friending people, and telling them about the love and the grace of God - in community.