

## **Irreligious: Forsaking Religion and Finding Jesus' Call (Mk. 2:13-17)**

**Chris Altrock – June 27, 2010**

Sociologist Rodney Stark is the author of What Americans Really Believe.<sup>1</sup> He writes about people in America who are “spiritual but not religious.” About 1 of every 10 Americans identifies himself/herself as being “spiritual but not religious.” The percentage increases with education and youthfulness. That is, the greater your education and the younger your age the more likely you are to be interested in spiritual things but not in religious things.

“Spiritual but not religious” seems to capture the tension many people feel. On the one hand, we are attracted to the spiritual, to God, to Jesus, to prayer and to the transcendent. On the other hand, we are fed up the failings of religious institutions and religious people.

We’ve been exploring this tension as it is seen in Mark’s Gospel. Mark focuses on ten conflicts between Jesus and the religion of his day. Ten times Jesus and religious leaders spar, box, or debate. In these conflicts we learn a lot about what it means to follow Jesus rather than just be religious.

Conflict #2 takes place along a lake shore: *13He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. 15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."* (Mk. 2:13-17 ESV).

As we heard last Sunday, Jesus has been at Peter’s home in Capernaum. There he healed a man who was paralyzed. This Sunday Jesus leaves Peter’s house and according to verse 13, “*went out again beside the sea.*” The word “sea” refers to a large lake called “the Sea of Galilee.” It was called the “*Sea of Galilee*” because it is situated near the province of Galilee. This large lake lies in the lower section of the Jordan Valley amidst a range of mountains. In the time of the New Testament the Sea of Galilee was surrounded by towns like Capernaum, Bethsaida, Korazin, Magdala, and Tiberias.<sup>2</sup> Here is a photo of Capernaum nestled on the north-western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus leaves Capernaum and “*went out again beside the sea.*” This is not Jesus’ first visit to the popular lake. Earlier in Mk. 1:16 Jesus was at this lake when he called Simon and Andrew and James and John and urged them to follow him. The large lake has been place of important ministry for Jesus.

During this visit we hear in verse 13 that “*all the crowd was coming to him.*” This is probably the same crowd which had earlier gathered around Jesus at Peter’s house and in front of whom

Jesus healed the paralytic. Afterwards, Mark tells us in Mk. 2:12, “they were all amazed and glorified God saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’” That amazed crowd cannot get enough of Jesus. So they follow Jesus out of Capernaum to the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

But somewhere along the shore, Jesus stops teaching this crowd and starts talking to just one person: *14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.”* Levi is also known as Matthew, one of the original twelve disciples, one of the apostles, and the author of the Gospel According to Matthew. Jesus looks beyond the crowd and singles out this one person: Levi.

Levi, Mark tells us, is “*sitting at the tax booth.*” If we are to understand anything from this story we must get straight in our minds what Mark means when he tells us that Levi was “*sitting at the tax booth.*” A person who sits at a “tax booth” was called a “tax collector.” Levi’s tax booth probably sits on a commercial road that runs along the shore. Here he collects taxes on goods being transported on that road.<sup>3</sup>

- That job, in and of itself, earned Levi a certain bad reputation. After all, who likes the person who collects your taxes?
- In addition, being a “tax collector” meant that you worked for the hated imperial power of Rome and the equally hated local dictator, Herod. That is, tax collectors were despised because their boss was a disliked dictator and their boss’ boss was a maligned Caesar.
- Further, tax collectors were considered to be greedy, dishonest and immoral.<sup>4</sup> Jewish Rabbis would not allow tax collectors to appear as witnesses in a court. In this regard, they were on the same level as gamblers, robbers, shepherds, and slaves. Even the family of the tax collector was considered disreputable and ungodly.<sup>5</sup>
- Finally, tax collectors were ceremonially unclean because, in their line of work they had to be in contact with non-Jewish people.<sup>6</sup> Even the handle of a tax collector’s staff was considered unclean. And an entire house could become unclean if a tax collector entered.<sup>7</sup>

It is important for us not to romanticize Levi the tax collector. He’s not just a good ol boy. He’s not a likeable red-neck. In modern terms, Levi is a...

- BP oil executive who mishandles the worst oil spill in history.
- a university sports coach whose cheating is discovered by the NCAA and results in heavy fines for the university.
- a white supremacist who shoots police officers dead after they pull him over.
- the head of a Mexican drug cartel responsible for record murders in border towns.
- a dead beat dad who leaves his family and rarely sends support.
- a pimp of several prostitutes in downtown Memphis.
- a television minister who uses money contributed by church members to support a lavish lifestyle. Levi is all of these.

Later, in verse 15, tax collectors are lumped together with “sinners.” The word “sinners” is used four times in this story. It literally means “not hitting” or “missing.”<sup>8</sup> “Sinners” are people who are “off target,” “off base,” “off course,” and “off track.” And since tax collectors

are lumped together with “sinners” in this story, we can appropriately apply that label to tax collectors as well. Of all sinners, Levi the tax collector was considered to be a human being who was grossly “off target.” He had missed everything that was important about being a Jew, about being a man, and about being a human. Levi was “off-target.”

*And we’re about to see that one of the major ways in which Jesus and religion differ is how they deal with off-target people.* If you want to find out quickly whether a group or a person is just religious or really following Jesus, all you have to do is look at how they deal with off-target people.

Three surprises greet us as Jesus meets this off-target man named Levi:

- The first surprise comes when Jesus says, *“Follow me.”* *Jesus invites an off-target man to follow him.* Jesus tells a man on the spiritual most-excluded list to “Follow me.” Jesus does not say, “Clean up your life, then follow me.” Jesus does not say, “Go get a seminary degree, then follow me.” Jesus does not say, “Get into a tax-collectors-anonymous group, work the program, and then follow me.” He simply says, “Follow me.”
- The second surprise is this: *And he rose and followed him. This off-target tax collector named Levi follows Jesus.* Not only must the crowd be speechless when Jesus says to Levi, “Follow me.” But they must be picking their chins off the floor when Levi gets up from his chair, walks out of the booth, and follows Jesus. Not only is it unfathomable that Jesus would recruit someone like Levi. It is also unfathomable that someone like Levi would actually follow Jesus.
- The third surprise comes next: *And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.* The only party Levi can get an invitation to in Capernaum is one that he throws. And the only kind of people willing to come to a party hosted by one of the most excluded people in town are people equally excluded: other tax collectors and sinners. And what is shocking is many of these sinners and tax collectors were also following Jesus. Mark notes, *“for there were many who followed him.”* Mark is saying that there were many tax collectors and sinners who followed Jesus. Not only has Jesus reached out to one outcast named Levi. But now it seems that every outcast in town is eating with Jesus and following Jesus.

The religious leaders have also shown up at this party. Not as invited guests. Not as willing followers. They’ve shown up as spiritual paparazzi, as tabloid journalists. They are here to get some dirt on Jesus. It’s a wonder, given the fact that all these tax collectors and sinners would have made Levi’s house very unclean, that these religious leaders can even get close enough to Levi’s house to see what’s going on. We can imagine them standing outside, peering in through the open door, holding their noses from the unclean stench, and blocking their eyes from the moral filth. Here’s how the New Living Translation puts it: *16 But when the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him eating with tax collectors and other sinners, they asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with such scum?”* Why would someone claiming to be a religious leader attract people like this? It doesn’t make any sense.

In reply Jesus uses an ancient proverb: *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."* In other words, a doctor is attracted to one kind of person: the sick. A doctor attracts one kind of person: the sick. Similarly, Jesus was attracted to one kind of person: the sick, those who are "sinners." Correspondingly, Jesus is attracting one kind of person: the sick, those who are "sinners."

And in that closing proverb we begin to see some of the central differences between just being religious and really following Jesus. *First, we see that Jesus is drawn toward the off-target. But the religious leaders are driven from the off-target.* The very ones religion runs from are the ones Jesus runs to. Jesus is drawn toward the off-target. The religious leaders are driven from the off-target.

*Religion functions within what is called a "Bounded Set."* A bounded set is one in which there is a clear and hard boundary between those who belong and those who do not. The boundary is there to keep the off-target people out. If you want to be "in," if you want to cross that boundary, you cannot be off-target. You have to get your life together. You have to look right, speak right, and act right. Once you are right, then you can cross the boundary. Religion, as a bounded set, is driven away from the off-target. The boundary exists to keep the off-target people away.

Jesus, however, functions within what is called a "Centered Set." In a centered set, there is not a hard and fast boundary defining who is in and who is not in. Instead, there is a central set of values, and people are seen as either closer to or farther from those values. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch suggest that the difference between the bounded set and the centered set is the difference between fences and wells.<sup>9</sup> In some farming communities, farmers might build fences around their property to keep their livestock in and the livestock of neighboring farms out. But in rural communities where farms might cover very large areas, fencing becomes impractical. So, the farmer sinks a bore and creates a well. It is assumed that the livestock, though they may still stray, will not roam far from the well, lest they die. In Jesus' way of life, Jesus is the well. Jesus places himself at the center. And he invites all to drink. He invites all to follow. Especially the off-target. Jesus doesn't try to keep the off-target away. Instead he invites them to come and drink.

A second-century Greek philosopher named Celsus is said to have made this speech regarding the Christians in his day:<sup>10</sup> *Those who summon people to the other mysteries [i.e. other religions] make this preliminary proclamation: "Whosoever has pure hands and a wise tongue." And again, others say, "Whosoever is pure from all defilement, and whose soul knows nothing of evil, and who has lived well and righteously." Such are the preliminary exhortations of those who promise purification from sins. But let us hear what folk these Christians call. "Whosoever is a sinner," they say. "Whosoever is unwise, whosoever is a child, and, in a word, whosoever is a wretch, the kingdom of God will receive him." Do you not say that a sinner is he who is dishonest, a thief, a burglar, a poisoner, a sacrilegious fellow, and a grave-robber? What others would a robber invite and call? Why on earth this preference for sinners?* Living in the second-century Celsus says that others religions called only people with pure hands and wise tongues,

those pure from all defilement, and those who have lived well and righteously. Only those kinds of people were invited to join other ancient religions. But Christians called sinners, the wretched, the dishonest, and the thief. They actually had a preference for sinners. And where did they learn that? They learned it from Jesus.

But not only is Jesus drawn toward the off-target. The off-target are drawn toward Jesus. The off-target people actually like Jesus. They want to be around Jesus. They want to eat and drink with Jesus. They'll even leave lucrative careers to be with Jesus. And with religion, it's just the opposite. Not only is religion driven from the off-target. But the off-target are driven from religion. The off-target people want nothing to do with religion. They are turned off by the religious.

And this is both comforting and challenging. For those of you who see yourself as off-target, it's comforting. Maybe you've tried religion, but you've been put off by it. You've been burned by it. Have you tried Jesus? Chances are you'll love him. Some of the most off-target and religiously suspicious people in Jesus' day ended up loving Jesus. Give up on religion. And give Jesus a try. He's drawn to people like you. I think you'll be drawn to him.

But the challenge comes for the rest of us. The off-target were drawn toward Jesus. But are they drawn toward us? How many off-target people love to hang out with you? Are off-target people drawn to you like they were to Jesus? Or are they driven away from you like they were from religion? And what about us as a church? Are we the kind of community to which off-target people are drawn? Are we as a church a bounded set or a centered set? Do we have an implicit list of expectations that says before you worship here, before you Sunday-School here, before you get help here, you've got to have everything fixed in your life? Or, are we a centered set where what matters most is the Jesus who is in the center? Do we, like Jesus, invite all, especially the off-target to come and drink from his well?

Where does this start? It starts where it did for Jesus—at a table. That's why we've designated this week—June 27-July 3 as Divine Dinners. We want to encourage you to find a Levi and invite him/her into your home for a meal. You don't need to worry about baptizing him/her. You don't need to worry about fixing him/her. Just find a Levi this week. And invite him/her to a meal.

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Stark, What Americans Really Believe (Baylor, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). Tyndale Bible dictionary. Tyndale reference library (1173). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gundry, Mark, (Eerdmans, 1993), 127.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, D. A. (1994). New Bible commentary : 21st century edition (4th ed.) (Mk 2:13–17). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>5</sup> . Vol. 8: Theological dictionary of the New Testament. 1964- (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (102–103). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, D. A. (1994). New Bible commentary : 21st century edition (4th ed.) (Mk 2:13–17). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>7</sup> . Vol. 8: Theological dictionary of the New Testament. 1964- (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (101). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

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<sup>8</sup> Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1995). Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, The Shaping of Things to Come (Hendrickson, 2003), 47.

<sup>10</sup> [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)