

The Scandalous King

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[0:00] Okay, some questions to think about. First question, is it the good people or the bad people who go to heaven? Is it the good people or the bad people who go to heaven? Next question, is it the good people or the bad people that Jesus loves?

Is it the good people or the bad people that Jesus loves? I'm not going to ask you to discuss these, but just think. Third question, is it the good people or the bad people that Jesus wants in his church?

Good people or bad people? Who does Jesus want in his church? Because some people, and even some churchgoers, would probably answer, well, it's obviously the good people.

Jesus wants the good people, he loves the good people, and it's the good people who go to heaven. But that is a complete misunderstanding of Christianity, and a complete misunderstanding of Jesus Christ, as we see him revealed to us in the Gospels, like Mark.

People do think good people go to heaven, bad people don't. That Jesus loves those who are good, he doesn't love those who are bad.

[1:09] That he wants the good in his church, he doesn't want the bad. But what we see in this short, even shocking episode, is that Jesus is a friend of sinners. Jesus calls the sinner to follow him, he's called Levi, and then Jesus spends time with sinners, Levi and his friends, because Jesus tells us he came to save sinners.

And so what I'd like us to do is to look at this passage under three headings this afternoon. First of all, who Jesus calls. Second, what Jesus does. And then third, why Jesus came.

First, who Jesus calls. Second, what Jesus does. And third, why Jesus came. So first of all, who Jesus calls. Jesus calls a sinner.

And we see this in verse 13 and 14. If you were here last week, we saw last time that Jesus healed a paralyzed man who came through the roof earlier on in Mark chapter 2. And the priority of Jesus for that man was to first of all forgive his sin before he made him walk.

And here we're introduced to somebody who'd be regarded as a sinner. Somebody who it was generally thought was a bad person in that society. So verse 13 says, once again, Jesus went out beside the lake, the large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.

[2:31] 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.

Okay, so in Mark's customary, fast-paced style, as he records this narrative, you get the briefest of details here. So the question is, well, who is Levi? Well, it's likely that Levi was also known as Matthew.

So if you see Mark chapter 3, just on the page there, Mark 3, 16 to 19, there's the list of those who follow Jesus, and Matthew's in there, Levi isn't.

Also in another gospel, we think that Levi and Matthew are essentially the same person. And Levi was a tax collector, which means he was a Jew, but he was operating a tax booth for Herod Antipas.

And so tax booths were set up all over the place to collect taxes from people at any time. And so tax collectors were hated people, just perhaps like the inland revenue are hated today.

[3:33] Tax collectors were hated because they worked for the Romans. And so they were regarded as unclean, and they were regarded as outcasts from polite society. Tax collectors, I realised, were disqualified from being witnesses in court.

They were even barred from attending the synagogue, because their fellow Jews saw all tax collectors as traitors. Traitors because they were extorting money from their own people in order to give it to the Romans.

So just think low life, scum, the worst of all in society, and that's really what the tax collectors were regarded as. But Jesus calls this man, called Levi, to follow him.

And Levi follows Jesus. And so what Jesus does here, is he demonstrates his love for sinners, for bad people, so-called bad people.

He shows his love in a way that others never would. Jesus goes after people that society would disregard. And so by enlisting Levi as a follower, Jesus was welcoming the most unlikely of people.

[4 : 45] And so the grace of God was extending to Levi through Jesus. Because Jesus didn't write Levi off, despite the life he'd chosen, and the job that he did.

Which tells us something fundamental. It tells us that there are none of us who are beyond the reach of God's grace, or the need of God's grace.

Jesus is for everyone. And so Jesus can transform anyone. And so before we move on, perhaps you're here, and you really need to hear that today.

Because you're thinking, well there's no way Jesus would ever want me as his follower. Or there's no way, because of what I've done, since professing to be a Christian, that Jesus would have me back as his follower.

And it might be, you're thinking, because of what I've done in the past, or because of how you're living at the present, you can't be a follower of Jesus. Maybe other people, maybe even the church has written you off.

[5 : 51] But what we see here, is that Jesus never writes anybody off. No matter who they are, or what they've done. Because the fact is, all of us are sinners, and all of us need God's grace.

All of us need forgiveness. And that's why Jesus calls each of us to follow him. Not simply to stay as we are, but for him to change us, and make us into who he wants us to be.

So the first point is who Jesus calls. Jesus calls a sinner. Levi's second point, what Jesus does. You see here that what Jesus does is scandalous, because Jesus didn't just call Levi, the tax collector, to follow him.

But Jesus then goes, and he hangs out with a bunch of people, just like Levi. And it's a scandal, to the other religious people, who could see what was happening. So verse 15 says, 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.

Now this is the first incident, of an evangelistic dinner party in the Bible. Which is a great thing to have. In fact I know, a couple are having a dinner party tonight, inviting people along, to talk to them about Jesus.

[7 : 08] And so here is Levi, he opens up his house, so that he can invite Jesus, to meet his friends. And isn't that what's involved, in following Jesus? Because when we've met Jesus Christ ourselves, when Jesus has changed our lives, then we will want our friends, who don't know Jesus, to come and know Jesus, for themselves.

Which means, we'll open up our homes, we'll open up our families, and we will invite people, into our lives, so that we can, share Jesus with them.

And so notice how, the focus shifts here, from Levi, who starts off as being the main character, on to Jesus. Now Jesus is the centre, of attention. And Jesus here is, he's like a magnet isn't he?

All kinds of people, are drawn to Jesus, and are attracted to him. And many of these people, were following him. Well who were these people? Well, tax collectors, we can understand tax collectors, they're one group.

But what's meant here, by sinners? Well sinners, usually refers to people, who don't walk in God's ways. Sinners are those, who violate God's law, who have no regard, for anything that God says, and they live, the way they want to live.

[8 : 26] And here's Jesus, enjoying a meal, with those who were labelled sinners. And so to understand, how scandalous this is, we need to understand a bit, how eating together, was such a big deal, back in those days.

Probably more of a big deal then, than it is today. So listen to how one, New Testament scholar puts it. Scott Barche says this, he said, it would be difficult, to overestimate the importance, of table fellowship.

In other words, eating together. Difficult to overestimate, the importance of table fellowship, for the cultures, of the Mediterranean basin, in the first century, of our era. Mealtimes were far more, than occasions, for individuals, to consume nourishment.

He says, being welcomed at a table, for the purpose of eating food, with another person, had become a ceremony, richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy, and unity.

And so he goes on to say, that Jesus, welcomed at table, an astonishing variety, of both reputable, and disreputable persons. This strongly suggests, that Jesus' open table fellowship, was a strategy, used to challenge, social and religious, exclusivism, whenever it was accepted, as normal, or officially sanctioned.

[9 : 45] So in other words, eating with other people, was a big deal. It was a sign of friendship. It was something, that you wanted to do, because you loved, and cared for the people, that you were eating with.

Or else you wouldn't be eating, with them. And isn't that what Jesus, is doing here? He is having dinner, with a group of, society's outcasts. And if you're trying to imagine, the kind of characters, who were around the table today, just like back then, we might think of, drug addicts, we might think of, prostitutes, we might think of, alcoholics, we might think of terrorists, ex-convicts, criminals. These were the kind of people, that Jesus chose, to associate with. And because Jesus does, associate with such people, around this table, it was seen as, scandalous, by the religious elite, of the day.

So see what they say, verse 16. 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?

So they just don't get, why Jesus would choose, to eat with rogues, rather than, respectable people. And this is the first time, incidentally, that the Pharisees, are mentioned in Mark's gospel.

[11 : 07] Now the Pharisees were, strictly devoted, to keeping, God's law. They tried to obey it, with a passion, and with a zeal. But they didn't just, limit themselves, to obeying God's law, as was found, in the Old Testament.

What they did, or what their scribes did, was to show, how the law, could be applied, in every single, human situation. And so they basically, made up extra laws, to help them obey, God's law.

And anyone, who didn't follow, these extra laws, that they had made up, they would regard, as being a sinner. They were a sinner, and they were an outcast, because they didn't do things, their way.

And because they were so big, on ritual purity, because they were so big, on holiness, it was an absolute, scandal, for Jesus, not just to be around, tax collectors, and sinners, in the street, but for Jesus, to actually, sit down, with them, and have a meal, together.

And so sinners, was used by the Pharisees, as a term, of disdain. They didn't like sinners, they thought they, were the bad people, whereas themselves, the Pharisees, were the good people.

[12 : 20] So surely Jesus, should be, as a good teacher, hanging out, with the good people, and not the bad people. So they were the righteous, and all these other people, who didn't follow their laws, were the sinners.

And so by Jesus' actions, here, it's clear, that Jesus, Jesus doesn't just call, a certain type of person, to follow him, whether back then, or today.

Jesus calls, all sorts of people, to follow him. So Jesus will call, nice, friendly, respectable, clean cut, middle class, nicely, dressed, socially, acceptable, people.

And, Jesus will call, unpleasant, poorly dressed, socially awkward, morally repugnant, despised people.

If you've been looking, at any of the press this week, popular culture, Kanye West, has got a new album. He's a hip hop artist, and the album is, Jesus is King. And, along with his album, which is explicitly Christian, in the title, there's been some skepticism, as to whether, this man, this hip hop artist, has, been converted, and truly follows Jesus.

[13 : 39] And so, I was doing some reports, and there are those, who are skeptical, who say, this can't be genuine. Whereas, there are others, who say, if you listen to what he says, surely it is genuine.

And I don't know, I don't know him, obviously. Only God can judge. But I loved, what somebody, summed up on Twitter, this is what they said. They said, I don't know Kanye West, but if he thinks, for one second, that calling on the name of Jesus, will somehow, forgive a lifetime, of misogyny, blasphemy, profanity, and sexual immorality, he is absolutely, right.

He is, because Jesus reaches out to, the homeless beggar, as well as, the university lecturer. Jesus reaches out to, the prostitute, as well as, the powerful person. Jesus reaches out to, the unemployed alcoholic, as well as, the successful businessman. Jesus reaches out to, the hip hop artist, as well as, the church goer. He reaches out to, the drug addict, as well as, the doctor.

You see, the reality is that, none of us deserve, friendship with, Jesus Christ. And yet, Jesus welcomes, all, into his family, no matter who they are, or what they've done.

[14 : 55] And so, the scandalous, good news of Christianity, is that God's grace, is extended, indiscriminately, even to, the very worst, of human depravity.

It goes further, than we would ever, go. And so, we should never, as those who would, profess to follow Jesus, we should never, ever dare limit, the grace of God.

Because Jesus here, befriended, he loved, he accepted, tax collectors, sinners, sinners, then. And he still, does, today.

And that's not to say, that Jesus ever, affirms, sinful behaviour. He didn't call Levi, to continue cheating people, or his friends, to continue doing, what they were doing. But Jesus called them, to himself, welcomed them, to himself, so that he might, change them, into what they should be.

Just remember, the message, that Jesus proclaimed, at the beginning, of Mark's gospel. Mark chapter 1, verse 15, says, the time has come, he said, Jesus, the kingdom of God, has come near.

[16 : 00] Repent, and believe, the good news. Now repent, means to turn away, from sin. And so for Levi, for all Levi's, tax collector friends, for all these sinners, for everybody, who was around the table, back then, for everybody today, Jesus calls us, Jesus transforms us, so that we might be his disciples.

So Levi became, a disciple of Jesus. So he was called, not just to follow Jesus, on the spot, but to live a life, of discipleship, which meant change, and transformation, in every single area.

Because when Jesus calls us, to himself, he doesn't just forgive, the sins of our past, but the Holy Spirit comes, dwells in our lives, and enables us, to live for Jesus, in the present, that we might be changed, into what we ought to be, in the future.

And so, that means there's no room, for pride, in our religious performance. Or by thinking, that we are somehow, superior to other people, we're better than them, they're worse than us, because of who we are, or what we've done, or how we're living.

This passage is telling us, that we are all sinners, and we all need, God's grace. We're more wicked, than we ever realised, and yet we're more loved, than we could ever, dream by Jesus.

[17 : 26] So, two points. First, who Jesus calls, a sinner. Second, what Jesus does, is scandalous. And third, why Jesus came. Jesus came, to save.

That's what he says, in verse 17. So Jesus heard, what the Pharisees were asking, and so he challenges them, to reveal why he came. When hearing this, Jesus said to them, that it's not the healthy, who need a doctor, but those who are ill.

I have not come, to call the righteous, but sinners. He's saying, it's the sick, who need a doctor. And Jesus came, as the doctor, for sinners.

That's why he's spending, his time with them. It's because they, need to be saved. And yet, there's an irony, in the words, that Jesus uses here, because Jesus is not claiming, that the Pharisees, or anyone else for that matter, is righteous.

That's not his point. But Jesus follows on, from the Pharisees question, by picking up this word, sinners, and he keeps the distinction, that they would have used themselves.

[18 : 31] In other words, these other people out there, around the table, are sinners. We, the Pharisees, are righteous. righteous. They viewed themselves, as being healthy.

They viewed themselves, as righteous. We're just, categorized everybody else, as a sinner. And so, the problem with that is, that they didn't think, that they needed Jesus, to help them.

Because people don't usually, go to the doctor, if they aren't sick. One of our church family, is lying in a bed, in a waiting room somewhere, in a hospital in Glasgow. He wouldn't be there, if he wasn't sick.

But people go to the doctor, when they are sick, when they are ill. Because they want to be made well. And so Jesus came, for people, who know that they need help.

And so when Jesus, was eating with Levi, and all his mates, Jesus was making it clear, that he came to save people, like him. People who were, well aware, that they were sinners.

[19 : 29] People who were, well aware, of all their faults. But needed help. And so whether we think, we've lived a bad life, or whether we think, we've lived a good life, we all need, Jesus Christ, to forgive our sin.

And yet sadly, so many people, like the Pharisees, think that they're healthy, and they don't need, Jesus' help. It's like having, cancer, eating away, inside our bodies, and yet refusing to go, to the doctor, for treatment.

And Jesus, here, came to save. And that's why his, action is, far more, scandalous, than the Pharisees, could have ever, imagined.

Because just think about, who it was, who was sitting, eating, with, these sinners, around that table. We've heard in the service, that God is holy. Means that God, cannot stand, sin, and God is angry, at sin, because he is, perfectly righteous.

And yet here is, the Messiah, the Son of God, sitting around, a table, with people, who are sinners. And so despite, the meal being, at Levi's house, the host of the meal, is actually, the Messiah himself, Jesus, the Son of God.

[20 : 50] He's the real host, of that dinner party. Because he's the one, who came, to sinners, for sinners, and that's why, this episode, early on in Mark's gospel, points towards, what's coming, it points towards, the death of Jesus.

Where Jesus would die, on a cross, so that sin, could be forgiven. And yet it also points, beyond the cross, in anticipation, of the future.

Because the meal, that took place, around that table, is a foretaste, of what's to come, in our future, as well. Which is the great, messianic banquet, in heaven.

The wedding supper, of the Lamb, when Jesus will, gather together, all those, forgiven sinners, around him, in heaven. And it's going to be, the feast, to end, all meals.

A time of, unrivaled joy, and celebration. And guess what? We don't deserve, to be there. We shouldn't be there. And yet Jesus, is the one, who secures, a place for us, through his death, on the cross.

[21 : 57] And so, how do we then, apply this message, that Jesus, is the scandalous king, and that Jesus, is the friend of sinners? Well, just three lines, of application, before we close.

The first is, that Jesus, is a friend of sinners, is good news, for bad people. Jesus, is a friend of sinners, is good news, for bad people. For people like, Levi, and his mates.

People who, are well aware, that they've never, lived a righteous life. They may never, even gone to church, in their entire life. Morally, spiritually, they're nowhere.

The good news, is that, no one is so sick, no one is so sinful, that they're, beyond the reach, of God's grace. So the invitation, to be healed, and forgiven, by Jesus, is open to all, without any, restriction.

And so if you're here today, and you've never, gone to Jesus, then Jesus, welcomes you, to follow him, by calling you, to turn away, from your sin, and trust in him.

[23 : 06] So the grace of God, reaches out to us, wherever we are, not to keep us, as we are, but to transform us, into what Jesus, wants us to be. And so, that's the first point, of application.

Jesus is a friend of sinners, is good news, for bad people. The second is, that Jesus is a friend of sinners, is bad news, for good people. Let me explain.

So people like the Pharisees, who think that, they're healthy, before God, don't realise, how sick, they actually are. And so the bad news, is that, your religious observance, your track record, your past history, your religious upbringing, your good, clean, moral living, you're looking down, on other people, because you seem to be, getting on much better, at performing, at life, than they do.

All of that, can delude people, into thinking, that they're good enough, for God. You see, our self-righteousness, can stop us, from going, to Jesus.

And yet we all, need Jesus, to save us. So that's the second thing. Jesus is a friend of sinners, is bad news, for good people. And third, point of application, is that Jesus is a friend of sinners, will shape our church.

[24 : 23] Here's how it applies, to our church. So Jesus came for sinners, and when we discover, that we are no more, than a sinner, saved by grace, then we will want, other sinners to come, and be saved, by Jesus too.

So that means, we, as a church, need to be more, like Jesus. Which will involve, mixing with people, or engaging with people, or befriending, all kinds of people, who don't know, Jesus.

So if we fill, all our time, with, Christian meetings, or hanging around, Christian people, or too busy, to mix with, or socialise with, or befriend, with anything else, there were nothing, like Jesus here. And at, Christ Church Glasgow, we need to be, like Jesus. So that everybody, is welcome, among us. So that people, who wouldn't normally, go to church, or wouldn't be, your average church goer, can come here, and find a welcome here.

And of course, I'm sure, we would all agree, with that in principle. But how are we, when it comes, to the practice? Because it's going to mean, that we will be, as flexible as possible, to help people, who wouldn't normally, go to church.

[25 : 43] So like Jesus, we'll be ready, to welcome, absolutely anyone. Perhaps people, that we wouldn't normally, associate with. I just love, how Jesus, the Son of God, has dinner, with all these, different kinds of people.

It's amazing, isn't it? And so, when the question, comes to us, will we sit down, with anyone? And I mean, absolutely anyone. So, the socially awkward person, the difficult person, the homeless person, the transsexual person, the manic depressive person, the same sex couple, the alcoholic, the drug addict, the sex offender, or whoever.

Will we, befriend such people? Will we, have such people, into our home? Will we have them, around our dinner table, and eat with them? Because, even if we, wince, and the very thought, let alone, the practice, then we might be, just as guilty, as the Pharisees, in having that, wrong attitude, to the grace of God.

As if we're, the righteous ones, and they're, the sinners. Or, we're more deserving, of Jesus, than some, other people. But the reality, is that we all, need the grace, of God.

We all need, the saving death, of Jesus, so you, or I, are no more, deserving of God's grace, than anyone else. And so that's why, Christchurch Glasgow, should never be a place, that's just for, insiders.

[27 : 20] It's not for us, to be happy, or to be comfortable, but we need to be, a place for outsiders. We began life, as a church, not for ourselves, but for others. And so we're not here, for ourselves, we're here, for others.

which means, those who are sick, and who need to find, healing, from Jesus. You know, when you look at Jesus here, it is so obvious, from Jesus' behaviour, that his church, was never meant to be, like a club, a religious club, for sorted people.

But his church, was always meant to be, more like a hospital, for sick people. Where the doors are open, for everybody. In hospitals, they don't expect people, to clean themselves up, outside the door, to sort themselves up, before they can come in, through the door.

The Pharisees, wanted to separate themselves, from certain types, of people. And that is never, what Jesus did. Jesus didn't just, spend his time, with the religious people, in the synagogue.

He was with those, who were despised, and rejected, by society. You know what he said, of Jesus? This is in Matthew's Gospel, he said, here is a glutton, and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors, and sinners.

[28 : 41] Now I've been called, plenty things in my time. You would believe, whether from people, outside the church, even from people, inside the church. But never once, have I been accused, of being, a glutton, and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors, and sinners.

I wonder, if anyone's ever, spoken of you, in that way. Probably not. And do we ever wonder why? Perhaps it's because, over time, we have just, conveniently, and easily, separated ourselves, from those, who need Jesus, because, forming relationships, with such people, is just, too hard, and difficult, too costly, and involves, too much, sacrifice.

So let's never forget, the sacrifice, that Jesus made, which was to give up, his own life, on a cross. So in our, terminal sickness, he came into this world, to be, our doctor.

And he saved us, by giving us, that medicine, which meant, his death, on a cross, for our sins. At great cost, he gave his life, so we could be made well.

And so if Jesus, has saved you, then, he can save anyone. And that's why, we must welcome people here, in Jesus' name, to befriend them, to love them, to point them to Jesus, because he is the one, that every single one of us, without exception, needs.