

The last few weeks we've been in a sermon series where we are fact-checking some things that we might have in our heads about Jesus. And so we're looking at Jesus' own teaching to get facts and clarity and make sure that we properly understand who Jesus is and what it means to seek him and follow him. And one thing that a lot of people believe is that Jesus is irrelevant...He doesn't really matter all that much. You know: He lived a couple thousand years ago, most people who lived a couple thousand years ago are not really all that relevant to how any of us live today.

So: Is Jesus irrelevant to us in the 21st Century? To help us get into this topic we're looking at Jesus' interaction with a guy named Levi. Now, Levi is pretty famous and is super-relevant for us today. For instance, probably many of you have clothes in your closet with his name on it: Levi's. Ok, there's actually no connection. Levi was not a first century fashion-designer. So, let's turn to **Mark 2:13-17**.

Pray. So, after teaching to a large crowd of people, Jesus is walking to wherever he's walking...and he walks by this guy named Levi. We might wonder how Mark knows he is the son of Alphaeus and that he was a tax collector. Well, Levi himself ends up being one of Jesus' 12 Disciples; that's the invitation here. So, over the course of following Jesus and hanging out with the other disciples, they undoubtedly got to know each other pretty darn well: their families, their careers, their hopes, sports teams they rooted for, did they prefer country music, hard rock, or classical, and so forth.

And one thing we know about Levi is that he's a tax collector. And: **The tax collectors in that day, as probably many of you know, were despised.** They were known for cheating, for collecting more than was needed, and keeping the extra for themselves. The Beatles' "Taxman" could have been sung in their day, quite easily "Here's one for you, 19 for me...I'm the taxman." Additionally: Levi is Jewish. So, kind of like the Herodians from a couple weeks ago, he's in cahoots with the occupying Roman government. He's working for the bad guys. So, between the reputation that tax collectors

in general had because of their practices and specifically him being a Jewish guy making a living off of working for the foreign government, tax collectors, including him, were not popular.

And Jesus invites Levi to follow him – who else would you want on your team, right? **Now, by this point in Mark’s gospel, four other disciples have been named: Simon, his brother Andrew, and then the brothers James and John.** Maybe others were on the team by this point as well, but Mark has explicitly told us about Jesus’ invitation to those four guys. All four are Jewish fishermen. These are blue-collar, up in the middle of the night, on the water before dawn, work hard, tend the nets, row the boat kinds of guys. Later, another Simon is added who’s called “Simon the Zealot” which means he was really pro-Israel, and anti-Roman – that’s what the Zealots were all about.¹ And to this group Jesus adds a wealthy, despised, Jewish traitor tax collector. These are teammates, on mission with Jesus together. On the surface, it looks like a recipe for division and disaster. They’re polar opposites. It’s like far-right Republicans and far-left Democrats coming together on the same team for the same mission, and to follow the same person. Jesus’ team is kind of stunning, really.

And then, they go and have dinner at Levi’s house. **Not only are other Jesus-followers there, but there are a whole bunch more tax collectors and “sinners.”** Mark says in verse 15, “for there were many who followed him.” So, even though the 12 disciples hadn’t all been named at this point, I’d say there’s a good chance many of them are in the mix of the crowd here, and certainly others as well who may not be one of the 12 “‘Capital-D’ Disciples” but are disciples nonetheless: they were followers of Jesus.

And some Pharisees notice the “sinners” and tax collectors that Jesus is hanging out with. We might wonder how the Pharisees got invited to this party. Seems odd. They probably weren’t. We’ve talked about this before, but: homes in their day were much more open than ours tend to be. **For instance, there were often semi-public courtyards that would be shared by multiple houses.** And so, if you had a gathering at your house and it spilled out into that courtyard or was simply in the courtyard, then it was open to those other homes and frequently to a public walkway that might run

beside it. So, events like this almost inherently became a community event. That's why you've got the Pharisees able to observe Jesus at this dinner party, and interact with the people there, even though there's a very low likelihood that they were invited. But because Jesus is gaining a following as a Jewish teacher, they certainly would have wanted to keep an eye on him, so it's not surprising to have them show up.

So, the people from the religious establishment see Jesus with these folks, and they can't believe it! **They're wondering: Why would Jesus, this man who is preaching and teaching on the kingdom of God, teaching on the Torah (Old Testament law): why would he be hanging out with *this* crowd?** The Pharisees just don't get it. They ask some of his disciples why this is. Now, maybe they asked the disciples instead of Jesus directly because Jesus was a bit too far away. But it also may be that they saw this as a way of planting seeds of doubt in the minds of the disciples. This is the way doubt often works, right? Someone poses a question: Why did you do that? Why did you say this? Why is your leader doing this? Asking questions is a great strategy to plant seeds of doubt.

And notice, the disciples don't respond. Sometimes I wonder if they looked at each other and were like: "Huh...why *are* all these tax collectors and other people with bad reputations hanging out here with Jesus? And why doesn't Jesus seem to care? In fact, he almost seems to relish the fact that they're here." My guess is they didn't respond because they weren't sure what to say. Now, you gotta think that when Jesus added Levi to the group, that Jesus had talked with them some about this mission and what he was about and why it was important to have this diversity on the team...and maybe it sounded great at first to have such a diverse group...but now perhaps they're doubting that because of the Pharisees.

But Jesus notices what's going on. So, he responds to them, **"It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners"** (Mark 2:17). Keep in mind, if there was anyone there who believed they were righteous, it was the Pharisees. In their own eyes, they were righteousness embodied...a "10" on a righteousness scale of 1 to 10.

Let's pause and briefly look at this word, "righteous." It's not a word that we use or think about a whole lot in our society, though we have talked about this before here. The Greek word here for "righteous" is "dikaios" (dee-kai-oss), and this word meant to keep the commands of God, or to live in a virtuous, upright way, to be faultless or guiltless in living this way. Primarily this would mean living by the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Old Testament holiness mandates as well. If you were righteous, this is how you lived. And in their own eyes, the Pharisees were "totally righteous."

So, Jesus is saying that he *hasn't* come for people who are already perfectly walking through life with God. If you live in a perfectly righteous way, perfectly in tune with God's will for living, and you do it without fault, then Jesus *has not* come for you. He *is* irrelevant. If that's you, then you are given permission to take a nap for the rest of the sermon. For everyone else, listen up, because Jesus is 100% relevant; Like a sick person who needs a doctor. But here's the catch: no one is *actually* perfectly righteous. It's like the person who went to the doctor for a follow-up visit. The doctor said, "I've got some bad news – you've got cancer and Alzheimer's." The patient replied, "Well, at least I don't have cancer." We might think we don't struggle with righteousness...but we do. We think we're a "good person" but Jesus tells us that only God is good.

Romans 3:23 puts it well when the apostle Paul writes, "**All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23). John 3:16 – "God so loved the world..." All people! Our problem is humbly acknowledging this fact for ourselves – that we sin and lack righteousness. We see ourselves with rose-colored lenses. Or we'll acknowledge that we're not perfect, but we don't realize the depth of the problem, that it stems from deep inside us, and we don't fully see the degree to which it impacts our relationships with people and with God.

This last week, I'm sorry to say, I had a great example of this in my own life. This is a confessional moment here and I trust you'll still want to be part of the church family here after I share this. So, I got online this last Thursday morning a bit before 7:00 to sign up our youngest kid for swim lessons this

summer at the Peter Kirk Pool. The spots always fill up rapidly – like within an hour or so of registration opening. So, you can't miss it. Gwen and I had been talking about this for a couple of weeks. We actually thought the registration day was this last Tuesday, but then that morning when I tried to sign him up, I realized that was wrong. I double-checked the dates then. So, Thursday I got online to get him registered. It was like 7:00 and 30 seconds. The online response for the first class I tried was “class full, you've been added to the waitlist.” I couldn't believe it. Like, how can 8 kids get registered for that one particular class out of like 100 of them, literally less than 60 seconds after registration opened? So, I tried another class. Same response. Another. Same response. Everything was booked. I was stunned.

I looked again at the registration information. Registration opened at 7:00 a.m. on March 26th. I looked at the date on my watch: Thursday the 27th. I was 24 hours late, and *it was all my fault*. Gwen told me a couple days earlier that she thought registration was on Wednesday, but I'm the one who last looked at the information. I don't know what I did wrong. All I know is I was 24 hours late and it was all my fault. Honestly, I was really angry at myself. And really disappointed. And sad for JD not to be in swim classes with a group of kids his age. Gwen leaves for work each day a few minutes before 7:00, so I called her to tell her I'd screwed up. She was all grace toward me. I, however, was anything but gracious toward myself.

And after we hung up, this self-hatred welled up in me like I've maybe never felt before. And then, as I was standing at the foot of our bed, the next thing I know, without thinking, my phone slipped out of my hand and broke the screen of my phone. When I say the phone “slipped” what I mean is that my arm might have been moving forward at a semi-rapid rate of speed aiming the phone for my pillow on our bed, but the phone “slipped” out of my hand probably .05 seconds early, so that instead of the phone hitting the pillow I aimed at, it was about an inch high and hit the wood headboard instead. An honest mistake had now turned into full-blown sin.²

I told Gwen about it that evening, asked for forgiveness and her response was all grace and forgiveness, and at one point she said, “That's not like you.” And she's right. And I want you to know that as well, because it's not every

Sunday that your pastor, or any pastor, confesses something like this. Normally, I'm pretty good at accepting losses and disappointments, and trusting God to work things out for good. I'd even say it's one of my strengths. But I'm not gonna be like the Pharisees and act like I'm a righteous person on my own. I'm not. And I bet you're not either.

In fact, I'm sure of it. As Paul writes in Romans: **No one is perfectly righteous.** Religious leaders like the Pharisees, pastors, Elders, Deacons, Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, choir members, worship band folks...not to mention people who *aren't* religious leaders whether they're sitting in the pews on Sundays or never set foot in a church...none of us are perfectly righteous. We all have spiritual sickness in us, and need Jesus just like we need a doctor when we are physically or mentally unhealthy.

The good news is Jesus does invite us to follow him, even as we struggle with sin. In fact, Scripture tells us, **“Christ died for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8).** So, when Jesus says that he's come not for the healthy but the sick, he's not joking. He has come for people like you and me who have this disease called, “sin” that wreaks havoc on our relationship with God, with other people, and sometimes with our phones.

He sees in us – he sees in you! – the possibility of something more than what we might see in ourselves. With Levi, and then the other tax collectors and the people labeled as sinners, Jesus didn't see that stuff as what defined them. He didn't see “sinner” and go, “I don't want you.” No! He invited them to follow him. It was stunning to the Pharisees, but: **Where other people just see ugliness or unworthiness, Jesus sees the possibility of something beautiful in each of us as his disciple, and in all the people of the world.** Jesus says to you, “I want you to follow me. Yes, I know you are less than perfect...that you've struggled with alcohol or pride or judgmentalism or lust or you've thought for most of your life that God doesn't exist and I'm irrelevant, but I still invite you to follow me. I died for that stuff in your life to bring you healing, to transform you from that state of living into a new state of living, and to bring you into a right relationship with God your Creator and Heavenly Father. I lived the perfectly righteous life so that when

you trust in me, your Heavenly Father sees my perfect righteousness and not your sin and ugliness.”

And so, is Jesus irrelevant? *Absolutely not.* Just the opposite: Jesus is as relevant as ever. We are infected with a disease called sin, we desperately need a doctor, and he’s the only one who can heal us. He’s more relevant to us than anyone else in the history of humanity.

The sin in your life is going to look different than the sin in the person beside you or standing in front of you, or in your small group, or ministry team, or in your home, or in your place of work, or your school. But it is all taken care of by Jesus through his perfectly righteous life, and his death on the cross. Let Jesus be the good doctor in your life today, by confessing your sin and your need for his healing work and presence in your life, and trusting him in this life and the life to come. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ On Sunday I got these two mixed up. My bad...sorry for any confusion! Doesn’t change the point being made, however.

² After the service, someone from the church who I’ve come to respect and appreciate his incredible Bible knowledge, suggested that while anger certainly can lead to sin, it doesn’t always (which I knew and agreed with) and that my act in his view wasn’t probably really a sin. Maybe. Jesus does express anger a couple times, for instance – overthrowing the tables of the moneychangers, curing the fig tree...he also looked around at some religious leaders in anger before healing a guy on the Sabbath because he knew the religious leaders would be critical of helping someone on the Sabbath. But I know I felt like what I did was not right – it cost me some money to get it fixed which, while we can afford it, is still money not available to my family for other things. And just the way I handled myself *felt* like a sin to me, which matters at some level. Our feelings can be deceptive of course – usually deceiving us the other way, convincing us that a sin isn’t really a sin (as in, “if it feels good, do it”). And so maybe my feelings are deceptive here the other way...but, still, the point in the sermon is valid and I think the story from this past week helps us understand it.