

¹³ He 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."

The Calling of Levi is also recorded in Luke 5:27-29. In Luke's Gospel, it also follows immediately after the healing/forgiving of the paralytic (Luke 5:17-26). In Matthew's Gospel, Matthew, a tax collector, is called by Jesus in Matthew 5:9-13, also after the healing/forgiving of the paralytic (Matt. 9:1-7). The consensus is that Matthew and Levi are the same person. While it's confusing to us, it was relatively common for people to have multiple names (e.g. Saul/Paul, Simon/Peter, Thomas/Didymus)

The calling of Levi is the second account of Jesus calling disciples. In Mark 1:16-20, Jesus called brothers Simon and Andrew and James and John to follow Him, telling them He would make them fishers of men. What followed were stories of Jesus teaching/preaching/healing/exorcism authority. People were greatly attracted to Him, especially to listen to Him (as even the scribes did in Mark 2:6), but also to bring their sick to Him. The calling of Levi is similar in that Jesus seeks out Levi and calls Him to follow Him and Levi immediately does so without question. The biggest difference between the two callings has to do with Levi's status as a tax collector. It's not just that being a tax collector is different from being a fisherman, it's that being a tax collector would have made Levi a public enemy of faithful Jews of his day. In the calling of Levi, he, as a tax collector, is immediately associated with sinners, as though there were no distinction between him and a murder, adulterer, thief, etc.

Thus the main thing that we are left to chew on is this: what does it mean that Jesus deliberately associated with and calls tax collectors to be His followers? What will this action do to Jesus' following among other faithful Jews? The scribes give us the answer to that. They are disgusted that Jesus would eat with these people. Jesus, meanwhile, says this is exactly why He had come and it is the scribes who do not understand who Jesus is.

He went out again beside the sea – It would seem that after Jesus was “at home” in Capernaum, He now is moving alongside the Sea of Galilee again, which was the site of the calling of the first four brothers to follow Jesus. The setting of the sea is starting to become associated with the calling of disciples. Capernaum was a border town between two tetrarchies, ruled by Herod Antipas and Philip. Tetrarchies were land regions under the Roman Empire but divided up into “kingdoms” among Herod's heirs. Archaeologically, Roman milestones dating back to the 2nd century confirm that a major road led through Capernaum, and so tax collecting could very well be tied to border tolls.

And all the crowd was coming Him – Jesus' healing/forgiving of the paralytic was a stumbling block to the scribes who were listening to Him, but to the people who were there and heard about it, it only continued to fuel their desire to follow Him. Mark's hyperbole “all the crowd” emphasizes the sheer amount of people who were thronging after Jesus. Interestingly though, what will happen next seems less directed to the people who are coming to Jesus and more about the people Jesus was coming to.

And He was teaching them – Jesus' main activity here is not healing, but teaching. We're probably splitting hairs when we try to discern the difference between teaching and preaching, because in Jesus, the activity is largely the same. Jesus speaks with unsurpassed authority the Word of God, which brings with it what He says it brings. So He's not just teaching about a subject matter, He's opening people's minds to the kingdom of God. That His teaching is associated with calling disciples makes great sense. To be a disciple is to be a student or learner from a teacher/rabbi.

He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus – The main issue here is that in Mark and Luke, this person is called Levi whereas Matthew calls him Matthew. Most scholars think Matthew and Levi are the same person. Levi was the name of one of Jacob's sons, head of the tribe Levi, whose sons were born into the priestly vocation. Levi then became a common name for boys who were part of the tribe of Levi. Therefore it's possible that this Levi was also a Levite (though we have no way of knowing for certain). However, if it's true, this Levi's standing among his people would have been quite controversial, because he had given up a priestly vocation to instead serve a very secular one.

The other wrinkle with Levi's identity is that in the list of the Twelve apostles in Mark 3:13-19, there is no one named Levi. There is a Matthew, but there's also another man named "James, the son of Alphaeus." Some scholars speculate that perhaps James and Levi/Matthew were brothers (like Simon and Andrew and James and John were), but if that was the case, one would think their names would be linked together and they are not. While Alphaeus does not seem to be a common name, it does seem like they were not brothers, but both had fathers named Alphaeus.

Sitting at the tax booth – It would seem that the tax booth would have been stationed along a main road for the purpose of collecting taxes on goods in transit. These kinds of taxes were only some of the taxes that the Roman Empire forced on the people. Later on in Mark 12:14 Jesus is challenged on whether Jews should pay a different kind of tax to the Romans, one that was imposed on Judeans by the Roman Empire since A.D. 6. Jesus here though was not in Judea, He was in Galilee, and Galilee was not under direct Roman rule in the same way Judea was. Rather the taxes here would have been provincial taxes levied by Herod Antipas.

"Follow me." – Jesus' words are simple and direct, the same words spoken to the earlier disciples. Following Jesus becomes associated with discipleship based on the model of Jesus here. Following Jesus also implies an abandonment of the previous way of life. Just as the first disciples were no longer fishermen, but now called by Jesus to be fishers of men, it is implied that Levi will no longer live the same way he was living before, because now he is following Jesus into a new way of life.

And he rose and followed Him. – As before, we should be struck by the immediate response of Levi. No questions are asked, no excuses given. He simply follows Jesus. Jesus' authority has been emphasized over and over in these two chapters. When He speaks, His words accomplish what He says. When He casts out a demon, the demon leaves. When He speaks healing, the person is healed. When He speaks a word of forgiveness, sins truly are forgiven. This word of command is no different. When Jesus says, "Follow me," in a sense Levi has no choice but to follow Jesus. It's Jesus' words that move Him into discipleship with Jesus.

And as he reclined at table in his house – The pronouns here are little bit ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so. Is it that Jesus is reclining at Levi's house or is it the other way around? Did Jesus go into a house full of tax collectors to eat or did Jesus invite tax collectors into his house? Mark leaves this open to interpretation, but in Luke's Gospel it is much more explicit: Jesus went to eat at Levi's house (Luke 5:29). In either case, the scribes would find plenty of reason to be offended by Jesus' actions, because Jesus is showing deliberate action in spending time with these sinful people.

Reclining at a table is a bit foreign to us, but would have been part of the Greek/Roman customs of Jesus' day. Rather than sitting at a chair, one reclines (not

sits) on a cushion around a table. This kind of method of eating tends to be more associated with formal dining and feasting. This was not your “fast-food” kind of service, but rather an hours-long event. Jesus didn’t just pop in for a bite to eat, He really was giving His time to these people, and giving ample firepower to His detractors.

One of the big reasons why Jews were careful about their dining had to do with the rules about food and food preparation. To them, even if the food they were served was not prepared according to their rules of clean/unclean/kosher, to eat that food would defile them.

Eating with people in their homes would have showed allegiance and acceptance with them. If Jesus had merely talked with tax collectors on the street, that would not have raised the same level of criticism. This close fellowship spoke loudly that *these* people were ok, when much of Jewish tradition was focused on cleanliness and purity and not mixing company with the wrong people. Yet Jesus has a completely different take on all of this, as was previously shown with His encounter with Peter’s mother-in-law and the leprous man. Instead of running away from the unclean, Jesus seeks them out in order to make them clean and bring them back into fellowship with God and others once again.

RELATED STORIES: Jesus entering Simon’s house after the synagogue (Mark 1:29-34), Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); Peter and his vision leading him to Cornelius (Acts 10), the LORD invited into Abraham’s tent for refreshment (Gen. 18).

many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples – The picture that develops from this is that Levi was so honored that Jesus came to him that he threw a feast to welcome Jesus and thank him and he invited others, perhaps with the hope that they too would see Jesus as he saw Him. The company Levi keeps is not the company a faithful devout Jew would normally hang around with, but that didn’t stop Levi from inviting them.

This is the first time in Mark’s Gospel that followers of Jesus are called disciples. The name disciple literally means “student” or “learner,” and certainly causes one to think of the disciples primarily as seeking after Jesus for intellectual/moral/spiritual wisdom. But Jesus came to bring more than head knowledge, He transformed their lives as He called them to follow Him. They were to be eyewitnesses of all He said and did. Ultimately Jesus called those disciples to faith, to trust, in Him.

for there were many who followed him – This sentence is a little ambiguous in Greek. The question is whether it modifies “tax collectors and sinners” or “disciples” in the previous clause. If the first it highlights that among Jesus’ disciples/followers, there were many who were tax collectors and sinners. If the second, it emphasizes that the

number of Jesus' followers (of all backgrounds) were many. Whichever is chosen, Jesus' popularity is increasing, but it is not the kind of popularity that caused the religious leaders to admire Him.

the scribes of the Pharisees – The scribes once again show up (see Mark 1:22 and 2:6) and again are distinguished from Jesus' mission and ministry. The scribes are devoutly following the written Law which would clearly indicate that eating food that could be unclean, but especially being in the company of these obviously unclean people would have been gross violations of the Mosaic Law and the oral traditions that the scribes believed should guide the conduct of their life.

This is the first time the Pharisees are mentioned in Mark's Gospel. The Pharisees were a sect/party within the Jewish faith at this time. Not all Jews were Pharisees (e.g. some were Sadducees (see Mark 12:18-27 or Acts 23:6-8), but all Pharisees were Jews. We're not exactly sure when Pharisees developed within the Jewish faith, but traditionally they are connected with another group called the Hasidim who were Jewish traditionalists trying to resist the influence of Greek culture during the time of the Seleucid occupation of Palestine in the second century B.C. While the Gospels often depict the Pharisees as "the bad guys," the things that they stood for were not altogether bad and not all Pharisees were enemies of Jesus (see Luke 7:36, 11:37). Jesus shared many of the same beliefs as the Pharisees, but what He criticized was their elevation of the unwritten traditions about the Mosaic Law that led them to self-righteousness, while they completely misunderstood the heart and the spirit of what God was trying to teach them. They showed themselves to be clean on the outside, but failed to see their own sinfulness and need of a righteousness that was not their own. Jesus' strongest denunciation of them is given in Matthew 23. But even these words are after Jesus repeatedly tried to show them the error of their ways and call them to faith in Him. Because they rejected Him, He pronounced His own judgment against them.

Mk. 7:8 ESV You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

The designation here, "scribes of the Pharisees" calls to mind the divisions with Judaism at this time. Not all scribes were Pharisees (some would have been Sadducees), but here it is the fact that this scribe was also a Pharisee that is important. We're going to run into these guys especially again in Mark 7:1-13.

said to his disciples, – Here the scribes challenge Jesus by directing their question at His disciples. There could be a couple of reasons for this. Most obviously, they may not have had direct access to Jesus (because He was at the banquet, where the scribes would dare not go (see John 18:28). But even if they dared go, they might not have been able to talk with Jesus because of the crowd of people around Him. But because Jesus' disciples were readily available to them, they asked them. Their question isn't a

purely factual one, it is an accusation. They know Jesus is doing the wrong thing, and so they aren't looking for Jesus' justification, but an answer from the disciples why they would dare follow one who so brazenly breaks the traditions the scribes deem as so important.

And when Jesus heard it – Even though the question is asked of Jesus' disciples, it is Jesus who responds to the question. Ultimately the question called into question Jesus' actions, but Jesus very soundly defends His own actions and therefore puts the scribes on the defensive. If what Jesus is doing is right, that must mean what they're doing is wrong. Rather than justifying their accusation against Jesus though, instead there is only silence. Jesus' words and authority are elevated in this interchange and rather than showing themselves as repentant followers of Jesus, the scribes will continue to persist in their antagonism.

Those who are well have no need of a physician – This was a common and well-known proverb in Jesus' day. It's a common sense statement, but Jesus will apply it specifically to His actions that are being challenged. Normally it is the sick who seek the physician, and that certainly has happened in Jesus' ministry so far, but less common is when the physician seeks out the sick. That is a better depiction of Jesus' mission and ministry. Yet this is exactly the thing that troubles the scribes, that Jesus would go after these kinds of people.

I came not to call – What does Jesus mean by "call?" It could mean invite (as in to invite them into His home for a meal), but that doesn't make as much sense if we think of this scene as the opposite scenario, where Jesus was invited by Levi into his home. Later on Paul uses "call" as a salvific synonym, roughly equivalent to "save." (e.g. Rom. 8:28-30). Though this is ultimately what Jesus is getting at, the context of Jesus' ministry brings us back to Jesus' initial call to all people that they repent and believe. Jesus isn't hanging out with unrepentant sinners. He is calling all of them to repent and believe in the Good News He came to bring. It is thus the scribes who are the real sinners, not simply because of their outward condition, but because they refuse to repent and believe in the Gospel that Jesus is here bringing, even to them.

Mk. 1:15 ESV and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. – This statement is a Hebrew figure of speech, where two things that are opposites are contrasted and the point is not to say no to X, but yes to Y, but rather to show preference and priority, more like "yes X is important, but Y is even more important." A few examples of this in Scripture are as follows:

Matt. 9:13 ESV Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (quoting Hosea 6:6)

Rom. 9:13 ESV As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (quoting Malachi 1:2-3)

Lk. 14:26 ESV "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (cf. Matt. 10:37).

Thus Jesus' point is not that He is excluding anyone from those whom He has come to call and save. In fact there is no one who is actually righteous (Psalm 143:2, Rom. 3:10). Jesus came to seek and save all. The scribes and Pharisees are deceived in thinking themselves righteous, thus proving that they themselves are sinners and lost. But what does that make them? Part of the very ones Jesus came to call to repentance and believe the Gospel!