Tax Collectors and Sinners

Hosea 6:1-6

Mark 2:14-17

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, the depth of Your word is so great and we see it here in this chapter in the sayings of the Lord Jesus, and we acknowledge that our minds are too small and the blindness of sin is too complete for us to understand these things, to understand this truth unaided. Even as Christians, Father, we acknowledge that we need Your illuminating grace so that we may understand, so that we may believe, and so that we may apply what we read. And we seek that grace again this morning, and we do so for Christ’s sake, and in His name, AMEN.

Covenant people of God, this passage deals with the calling of Levi, also known as Matthew, and this Matthew was almost certainly the gospel writer, Matthew, although some have a different opinion, but most likely that’s the case. And not surprisingly then, we find a more detailed account of this in the gospel according to Matthew, and we find again, a longer account also in Luke’s gospel. Once again in the gospel according to Mark there is not so much information given about this event. But as we saw last time, by leaving out some of that detail, more focus is thrown on to Mark’s purpose, his theme, in these two chapters that we have here. And that purpose, as we noted last week, is teaching on the forgiveness of sins. And that done against the backdrop of the Pharisees’ growing hostility against the Lord Jesus. We could even go so far as to say this text is Jesus’ view of forgiveness of sins over against verses the pharisaic view of forgiveness.

In order to make that contrast, the Lord Jesus raises the stakes. Previously we found Him bringing forgiveness to a paralytic. Before that, He was bringing healing to a leper, someone who was regarded as untouchable by the Pharisees, but now we find Him bringing forgiveness to tax collectors and sinners who were even more untouchable than a leper, as far as the Pharisees were concerned.

We look at this under three headings this morning,

First of all, close contact with sinners;

Secondly, objections from the Pharisees; and

Thirdly, Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees

So close contact, some objections to it, and then Jesus’ answer and explanation of it to the Pharisees and also for our benefit.

In the first place, I would like to show how Mark is drawing attention here to Jesus’ willingness to have this close contact with sinners and even those who we may describe as notorious sinners. First of all, to make that point we are told about the calling of Levi, or Matthew. And this is part of the picture of the forgiveness of sins because Levi is one of the tax collectors. He was someone who was working for the Romans. He was probably working for the Romans under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, who was a very bad man. The tax collectors, as many of you would know, they were despised by the Jews, and especially by the Pharisees. They were despised as traitors because they were helping the Romans. They were despised as those who defrauded their brethren. Very often they would offer bribes to the Romans so they would get the job as tax collector of a particular area, because it was a very lucrative job opportunity. When you finished paying the quota that you’d given to the Romans, people would put in their job application by making an estimation of how much money they could make for the Romans, then they would add on to that quota, whatever they wanted for themselves, and often that was a very large cut that they took for themselves and by doing that, they were defrauding their own people.

They were often Sabbath breakers, collecting the taxes on the Sabbath day, they often failed to pay their tithes properly, because they didn’t want to admit how much money they were making on the side. They were generally speaking, excommunicated from the synagogue. They were regarded as untouchable, as outcasts – to come into contact with them was also to transfer uncleanness to a third party, and as far as the Pharisees were concerned, they were lumped in the same category as robbers and murderers.

And so, here we find Jesus calling, as a close disciple, someone who was regarded in that way. And from a pharisaic point of view, that was even worse than close contact with a leper. And you can only imagine how Jesus’ other disciples would have regarded that as well. We are not told that – but that would be an interesting question – how the other disciples felt about this?

That is one way that Mark shows us how the Lord Jesus is bringing forgiveness even to the worst of sinners. But then the story continues, and we find another way in which this point is made, by showing Jesus reclining at the table, not now simply with Levi, but with a whole bunch of Levis. A whole crowd of these tax collectors and sinners. Luke 5:29 tells us that it was a great crowd. As it turned out, Levi threw a party and he did so because apparently he wanted to invite his fellow tax gatherers and other outcasts with whom he had contact, other sinners – no doubt he did so at his own joy at finding forgiveness by the grace of God – and he wanted to share that with the others so no doubt he told his friends about it and his friends wanted to hear more of this good news and so they came to hear the Lord Jesus.

Technically then, Levi was the host at this party- it was his house – but it is almost as if Jesus is the real host here from the way it is described in verse 15 - that is describes these people reclining and dining with Jesus and His disciples, rather than saying it was with Levi. And this reclining and dining indicates close contact, close fellowship – either intimate with these sinners.

Now the term ‘sinners’ as it is used in this context was a kind of technical term in Israel at the time, and especially amongst the Pharisees, they acknowledged that everyone was sinful, but when they used the term in this context “Sinners with a capital S we might say”, it was a technical term for the disreputable part of Israel. For those who didn’t pay very much attention to the law of God, and they didn’t pay very much attention to the Pharisees’ interpretation of that law and all of their rules. Those who were seen as outside of Judaism really, they were seen as second-class citizens. And tax collectors is only one example of that. We find from Luke 7:36ff the account of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus with perfume – she also was a sinner in this technical sense. The adulteress woman that Jesus forgave in John 8:1-11, again a sinner in this technical sense. In Mark 2:15 we are told that many such people were following Jesus and that is why they were there. And the word ‘following’ is a word often used to describe Jesus’ disciples.

Again in this account close contact with notorious sinners is being very much emphasised. Now some use this to justify any sort of contact of any sort with any sinner. Including those who have been rightfully and lawfully excommunicated by the church with the authority that God gives. And often we hear that said that Jesus example is used to override the many, many other verses in both Old and New Testament – and there are many of them – that teach that some kind of difference must be kept on the part of the believer from those who have committed themselves to outright rebellion against God. Including those who have been excommunicated. And I have given a list of some of those verses previously. Often this kind of contact is justified by people saying ‘I am just doing it for a witness’. And perhaps if they were doing it for a witness, that might be more appropriate – and I say this not from some kind of guess or surmise because I have looked into this on a number of occasions, and I am aware that very often, the people who say they are doing this for a witness don’t in fact, speak at all about the gospel, or about the sins of those who have been excommunicated or leading a wicked life – they just socialise. And if you start to talk openly with in people in this situation, and you press the claims of the gospel upon them, and you point out their sins and call them to repent of that, in many cases your welcome will soon wear out and you will not be invited. And people will say to you, if all you can talk about is the Bible and God, and what I’ve done wrong, then I don’t want you in my house, I don’t want you here.

Note however, that this is not at all what is going on in this passage. This is not a case of free unrestricted association on the part of the Lord Jesus with those who were wicked and excommunicated. The Lord Jesus did not go to their party on their terms. They were invited to Levi’s home and they were invited, as we find from the clues in the text, because they wanted to hear the gospel. Probably many of them had not heard the gospel in any clear way explained to them, until they either heard it from Levi and/or the Lord Jesus. They probably did not hear it clearly from the Pharisees or the synagogue.

The fact that we are told that many of them were following Him in connection with their presence in Levi’s house demonstrates that that’s what going on in this context. As does the fact that Mark sets this in the context of Jesus view of forgiveness over against the Pharisaic view.

And so the parallel to this passage today would not be a member of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand socialising freely and restrictively with someone excommunicated, the parallel to this passage would be if one of our members said I am having a meeting at my home, and I want you to hear the gospel again, and talk about what you’ve done – and that person says yes, I am willing, I will come, I want to hear that again. That would be a better parallel.

Despite this distinction however, the Pharisees still objected. Our second point – objections from the Pharisees. In fact what we find here is growing objection and growing hostility. Previously we saw silent hostility – silent objection which Jesus knew about anyway because, as God He could read their hearts. But now it is no longer silent. Now the scribes and Pharisees are spying on Him, no doubt from outside the house. They wouldn’t have risked ceremonial contamination by going inside the house and getting close-up and personal to all those tax collectors and sinners. So they wait outside the house and when Jesus’ disciples come out, they collar them and they express their opposition and their hostility, not to the Lord Jesus, they don’t yet dare confront Him, but they do confront the disciples.

And the gist of what they say to the disciples in V16 is – with all of the things that this Master of yours could do, why on earth does he have to eat and drink and get so close to people like that.

We need to understand also that this is not a one sided battle. With Jesus acting in ignorance and then the Pharisees reacting against that, but they are the only ones who have an issue here, and that’s really their problem. We need to understand the bigger picture here. The Lord Jesus Himself increasingly tackles the Pharisees on this very point on the nature of God’s mercy and forgiveness of sins. This is a growing battle, an escalating battle, between Jesus and the Pharisees, and in some ways this is the central battle. This lies at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. And the Lord shows that in this case here, by drawing attention to His publicly sitting down and dining with tax collectors and sinners, but there are also other ways that the Lord Jesus increases His own explanation and attack on the Pharisees as time goes by. For the Pharisees’ view was generally this – that while they acknowledged that everybody was sinful but they believed that a good Jew could become righteous, he could be justified in God’s sight by his own doing of good deeds and obedience to the law. That is the view known as works righteousness. Though they probably had some idea that it was gracious of God to accept the works of the good Jew and to make them righteous on that basis, nevertheless it is works righteousness – works is the basis for their salvation.

On the other hand though, notorious sinners (as far as the Pharisees were concerned) those who were like the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the adulterers and so on, outside of the pail of Judaism. Those notorious sinners, who didn’t bother with the Old Testament law, and they didn’t bother too much with the Pharisees rules either, and they had been excommunicated – they could not be saved because their works were not good enough. They were on their way to hell – they were lost. And there was nothing that could be done about it. And so from their point of view you shouldn’t jeopardise your own purity by close contact with those who are lost anyway. Who are hopeless cases and you can’t help them, so why get yourself into trouble by trying to help someone who can’t be helped.

Jesus attacked this attitude vehemently again and again. He begins to attack it here by his public behaviour. Later as I mentioned, He attacks it verbally. Consider the parable of the prodigal son. Luke 15:11ff. In a chapter on God’s attitude to lost things. Very significant. God’s attitude to lost things.

Keep in mind the Pharisees regarded the tax collectors and sinners as hopelessly and irremediably lost. Nothing you could do about it. And then Jesus says in this parable of the Prodigal son that they, the Pharisees and other Jews like them, are really represented by the prodigal son’s older brother. The one who resented reconciliation between the father and his prodigal son because wasn’t’ the son the older brother, wasn’t he the one who was faithfully and obediently and righteously doing all the work his father wanted, and here’s this other son, who lives in an immoral way and he still gets the privileges back. And they refuse to join in the celebration. Just like the Pharisees with the other lost. Think also of Jesus contrast between the justified tax collector who begged for the mercy of God outside of the temple, and received it, over against the unjustified Pharisee who was busy inside the temple praying and thanking God that he wasn’t like all these sinners. Luke 18: 9-14. See what an indictment this is for the Lord Jesus against this Pharisaic view of forgiveness of sins.

This teaches us that there is another extreme to avoid. In addition to a free and unrestricted socialising with the wicked and rebellious simply for the sake of socialising – that’s one extreme. A true parallel to Jesus actions here is inviting the rebellious to hear the gospel again, but imagine you do so – you invite one of these rebellious sinners into your house to hear the gospel – perhaps someone excommunicated – you invite them into your house to hear the gospel again. And one of your brethren comes to you in the congregation and says you know you shouldn’t have done that. We have to shun such people. You shouldn’t have them in your house to hear the gospel. Well perhaps they don’t even bother coming to your face to say it – instead there is gossip. Guess who we saw going into so and so’s house the other day- you wouldn’t believe it.

Shunning is a clear Biblical teaching. And there are many verses on this. Psalm 26:5 is one example. It talks about not sitting with the wicked and there are many other verses of that kind. It is a clear Biblical teaching. But so is it a Biblical teaching of the need to remind the wicked and also those who are excommunicated to remind them of the gospel and to leave room also for the possibility, that by God’s grace they may actually repent.

After all, in our churches, we do have a form for the readmission of those excommunicated. And the existence of that form shows that as churches, we do accept the fact that by God’s grace even the most hardened sinners may repent. And that when they do, we have to accept them. We should want to accept them. But how does an excommunicated person repent? They do so by the work of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. They know the Word already, but the Lord also uses reminders of that Word and He uses His people to bring those reminders.

To be sure we do not need to keep casting pearls before swine. The Lord Jesus taught that too. And there is no evidence that the Lord Jesus kept on going back and back and back when the excommunicated persons in Israel were not in the least interested in hearing the gospel and He just went and socialised with them in order that somehow that might rub off and bring them back? We have no evidence that He kept on doing that or anything like that. But there is a place for reminding those who are excommunicated and those also who have never been part of the church but are hardened in their wickedness of reminding them of God’s demands upon them if they will listen. If they are open to listening.

The Lord’s answer to the Pharisees’ view in verse 17 about the sick needing a doctor, but how the healthy don’t need a doctor. How sinners need saving but the righteous do not need saving. We look at that in our third and final point – Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees.

The first thing to note about verse 17 is the need of the sick. A person who is sick needs a doctor. And a person who is sinful needs a saviour even more. Because spiritual sickness is far more serious than physical sickness. It has far worse consequences if it is untreated. Just as there are people who don’t like to go to the doctor, and don’t like to acknowledge that they are seriously ill even if they are. It is far worse to be like that in a spiritual sense, to need a Saviour and not to acknowledge it or admit it. Well the Pharisees saw that there were many in Israel who were very sick. They were spiritually in very very bad shape. They were notorious sinners. They had been excommunicated. They were having traitorous contact with the Romans and they were breaking God’s moral law, they were doing terrible immoral things and so on. But they abandoned these people as untouchable. They abandoned them as lost. They left them to suffer God’s judgement without any salvation. And Jesus did exactly the opposite – He drew near and saved the sick. And the reason He did so is because that was His Messianic mission. You see already in the Old Testament, God proclaimed Himself as Israel’s healer – as their doctor, as their Great Physician. I, the Lord, am your healer Exodus 15:26. And then on top of that, He proclaimed that the Messiah would be sent as the Great Physician, to bring that healing by means of His suffering. And we find that the Messiah comes as the healer that’s mentioned in Malachai 4:2, and that He comes to heal by His suffering, by being scourged and so on. We find in Isaiah 53:5.

And then on top of that, God also made clear that Israel’s response to that ought to be to delight in mercy. They received it from God, who was the merciful healer and they needed to learn to delight in that mercy and to delight in God’s mercy and compassion. Even more than delighting in the details of the ceremonial law. Which law, after all, only pointed to Christ’s healing. And that is the point of Hosea 6:6. Which is quoted in Matt 9:13 in answer to the scribes’ accusation that Jesus was eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, and the answer to that is Hosea 6:6 that God wants His people to delight in mercy more than in the sacrificial system and other aspects of the ceremonial law. Like the laws of ritual, ceremonial cleanliness. And it is quoted again, Hosea 6:6 in Matt. 12:7 which deals with the healing on the Sabbath issue.

You see this is Jesus’ Messianic mission. The great shepherd who comes for this very purpose to gather those who are lost. Rather than to abandon them. The great physician who comes to heal those who are sick rather than to abandon them. Whose very name means salvation. And He follows that through with the way He deals with those who need to be saved. Who shows the mercy and compassion of God rather than a harshly enforced Old Testament ceremonial separation. And that is why the Lord Jesus reclines with such people. Not to suggest a free association, socialising with the wicked for a social purpose, but in order to show the mercy of the gospel, the mercy of God.

And that is why we also with hardened sinners, and also those who are under discipline, or those who have been excommunicated, or those who have been excommunicated for many, many years and appear so stuck and hardened in their sins, that we shake our heads in despair and think to ourselves, it’s never going to change. And yet, with all such people we often say it, and it is true, while there is life there is hope. We say it with those who have, for many years of their life been hardened in their sins. Why do we say while there’s life there’s hope? Because God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the great physician who heals the sick and the Great Shepherd who goes out and seeks the lost.

There are also other implications in verse 17. Some think that Jesus accepting the Pharisees distinction between the good righteous law abiding Jews, and then all of those notorious sinners. Jesus doesn’t directly challenge that and some people think He agrees with it. There are those who go to the opposite extreme and say no, the whole thing here is ironic or even sarcastic that Jesus is really saying - well, I am here to heal the sick not those who are healthy and you Pharisees obviously think you are healthy, but really there aren’t really such people at all, and so that whole statement is very ironic. Those who want to associate freely with excommunicated and other wicked persons, generally take the second view and say, look there is no distinction between sinners at all, everybody needs the gospel, everybody is sinful so you can have any contact you like with any of those people – it doesn’t make any difference.

The truth is between those two extremes. The Bible does call those who are faithful to the Lord, the righteous. In contrast to those who are wicked. That is not to deny that everyone is sinful – including God’s people but the distinction is made between those who are faithfully serving God, for all their faults and those who are not. And those who are called the righteous because they serve God faithfully that is said in the sense that those who are made righteous by the Lord Jesus, by His death, by His imputed righteousness, and they are reflecting that in the way that they are striving to live. There is a distinction between such saved sinners and the unrepented wicked and the hardened excommunicant. And the Lord Jesus does not in any way deny that distinction. What He rejects is the Pharisaic view of that distinction that the righteous make themselves righteous in that context by their own good works and the rest are hopeless and we can’t do anything about that.

Therefore His statement that He came to heal the sick and save the sinners – that is a challenge to the Pharisees. It is a challenge to them to see that they lack the mercy and compassion of Hosea 6:6 and therefore to understand that they are actually indeed numbered with those who are sick and they definitely need a saviour as much as anybody else. While at the same time upholding the distinction between the faithful and those who are hardened in their wickedness.

As one writer puts it “His grace is for those who are made to realise they need it” and therefore verse 17 is a huge challenge to the works righteous Pharisee to realise that he needs that grace as much as anybody else. And an implication that he will not be saved as long as he clings to this interpretation that he is saving himself.

But it is also a challenge to us as well. It is a challenge to us as to how we view the wicked and how we view those who are excommunicated. Not to say that there is no distinction between the faithful and the wicked. Between those who are members in good standing and those who are excommunicated. Not to deny that there is a partial shunning of the rebellious and a separation from them because the scripture teaches that there is. But the challenge to us as to whether separation, the whole fact and idea of separation, somehow becomes more important to us than the mercy of God. That is where the problem occurs. And so I would sum it up by saying it this way – When we keep a degree of separation, as the scripture requires us to do, that must be done out of mercy. It must be done to show the sinner his sin, and his need of Christ. And when at times, we draw near to someone, in order to press the claims of the gospel upon them, it must be for the same reason – to show the mercy and compassion of God, as seen in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd and Physician and Saviour. AMEN

Let us pray

Heavenly Father we pray that You would give us the wisdom to know when contact with the wicked will compromise the gospel and when it will advance it. And Father, would You give us the courage to uphold both the churches’ discipline and Your wrath against sin by that measure of separation that You call us to, but also to uphold Your mercy and Your forgiveness. We thank You that even those who have been excommunicated may be shown mercy and may be readmitted to Your church and kingdom if they repent, there is hope while there is life because You are the healer of Israel and Your Son is the great physician. We pray this in His name, AMEN.