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Sermon Summary #7

The Peril of Putting Jesus in a Box Mark 2:13-17

How do you react when Jesus doesn't live up to your expectations? Has he always answered every prayer in the way you thought he *should* have? Has he always orchestrated your life according to **your** schedule? Did he always teach the doctrines you thought he **should** have taught? Has he reacted to people in the gospel stories in precisely the way you thought would have been most appropriate? Jesus often times does things that shock and surprise us. He never does anything wrong, sinful, or unwise, but he many times does things that are utterly unexpected and contrary to what we believe either would happen or should happen.

There were people in the first century **to whose expectations Jesus rarely if ever measured up**. They wanted *a Messiah on a leash!* They wanted a savior and deliverer who would fetch and heel and sit at their command and according to their wishes. They wanted someone who would live by *their* rules.

But Jesus **will not be domesticated!** He will not dance to the tune of human expectations. Any attempt on the part of these people in the first century to set boundaries beyond which Jesus cannot go always proved fruitless. Any attempt on **our** part in the twenty-first century to create a mold into which we can stuff Jesus and make him conform, will likewise prove futile, if not fatal. **Jesus will not be put in a box. We must accept him on his terms, not ours.**

The Call of Matthew

Matthew was a tax collector (or a “publican”). Consider **the disdain, the utter disgust** in which people held tax collectors in the first century. They were: traitors, cheaters, liars, and ceremonially unclean.

Jesus “calls” Matthew to “follow” him without setting preconditions, qualifications, or demanding that he first get rid of all his “junk”. Stunning! What must have the other disciples been thinking? “Are you kidding me? Jesus, would you like to reconsider? You expect us to entrust ourselves to this guy? You want us to share our lives with him? Surely the gospel you’ve been proclaiming has limits. Surely there are some scruples you’ll observe. Please, not a tax collector! Not Levi!”

In **Luke 5:28**, it says, “And **leaving everything**, he rose and followed him.” **In view of what he knew he had gained** by following Jesus, Matthew felt as if he had lost nothing! Read **Philippians 3:7-8**. Did Matthew believe he had made a “sacrifice” to follow Jesus?

The Party

So what was **the first thing Matthew did** after following Jesus? How did he respond to the loss of a lucrative career? What did he do following the loss of power and position? **He threw a party!** He had a banquet in his home. Luke says he held “**a great feast**” (5:29).

The guest list is simply stunning: other tax collectors, the riffraff, the renegades, and the low-lives of society. If you were famous for your sin, Matthew opened his home to you. If you were an outcast to your family and the religious leadership, you were welcome in Matthew’s house. If you had a reputation as a scoundrel or a thief or a prostitute, Matthew and Jesus would like you to join them for dinner!

Contrast this with our approach as to who we let into our house and invite to our parties. We are careful not to invite anyone who might prove offensive or embarrass us or cause others not to invite us to their parties in return. We don’t want to jeopardize our standing in the social circles of our community.

The Protest

Many of the Pharisees, like many people today, feared that sin was communicable, almost like leprosy. Get too close to sinners and *their depravity will rub off on you*. The Pharisees feared being contaminated or infected by sinful people.

Do you only feel comfortable hanging out with people who look like you, dress like you, talk like you and avoid the same things you avoid? ***Do you find yourself at times wanting to be holier than Jesus?***

Are we to follow the example of Jesus, opening our homes to such people, going into their world and seeking them out and spending time in their presence? Yes! But be careful of your *motivation* for doing so.

There's no indication that Jesus put a **condition** on their attendance at dinner that night. Sinners do not need to first do something to clean up their act before they can be the objects of Christ's compassion and love. We do not make ourselves worthy of God's love or the attention of Jesus. Jesus utterly rejects making distinctions among people or classifying them or ranking them in order to determine who is the proper recipient of his attention and love.

Jesus was not there to take their advice, imitate their ways, legitimize their sin, or encourage them in their chosen lifestyle. Jesus was deeply offended by their behavior. He was saddened by their sin. He was angry with their rebellion. ***But he loved them!*** He felt compassion for them. His purpose in dining with them was to make it clear that **no one is beyond the redemptive reach of God's love and grace and mercy.**

Jesus didn't associate with these people because he condoned their actions or their lifestyle. Far less was it because he wanted to join with them in their wickedness. He kept company with them for the same reason a physician makes a house call: to bring health and a saving cure to the sickness of their souls. Jesus wasn't among them because he was like them, but in order to enable them to become like him!

The principle here is that **one cannot win people with whom one is not willing to eat.**

There is also a special word of **hope** in this story for those who have thought about following Jesus, have considered his claims and have pondered the gospel, but ***don't feel good enough***. "I could never be worthy of Jesus. I could never qualify as a follower or disciple." Well, that's true! The simple fact is that "if you feel good enough for Jesus, he does not want you" (Carson). ***There is no one who is too sinful to come to Jesus. But a lot of people are much too righteous! You can't be too evil for him, but you can be too good!***

What I mean is explained by our Lord's sarcasm in **v. 17**. He is not saying that the Pharisees **are** truly righteous, really righteous and thus without any need of him. He is saying:

"You Pharisees ***believe yourselves*** to be righteous and thus have no need of me. You are convinced that all is well with your souls, so what possible good can I be to you. You are confident of your own religious accomplishments. You are proud of your own moral achievements. You enjoy reading your own press clippings. You feel smug and safe and secure in your religious world. **You actually think you're different from and better than these tax collectors and thieves and shysters.**"

Using the analogy that Jesus employs, he's saying to them: "***Of what use is a physician to someone who is convinced he is in perfect health?*** Jesus to the Pharisees: "You think these people with whom I associate are sinners! I agree! Of course they are. But at least they know it. At least they have the awareness and conviction of how desperately wicked they are and how desperately they need me. You, on the other hand, are deluded by your religiosity and see no sickness in your souls."