

[R4986 : page 84]

THE GOSPEL ONLY FOR SINNERS

– MARK 2:13-22. – MARCH 24. –

Text: – "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." – Verse 17.

THE TERM "Publican" in Jesus' day was applied to Jews who served the Roman Government as tax collectors in Palestine. The name was a reproach because the Jews held to the Abrahamic promise that the whole world should be blessed by them as God's peculiar people. They held that this meant that they should not only be free from all other governments, but that they should be the masters of the world. And if so, all other nations should be paying them tribute and they should pay tribute to none. The most public-spirited Jews, therefore, declined to be the agents of the Roman Government in the matter of collecting tribute or taxes, and the tribute-takers or publicans were looked upon with disdain as being unfaithful to their religion and to their nation.

The term "sinner," as frequently used in this study and elsewhere in the Gospels, was applied to all Jews who were careless in respect to the orthodoxy of their day, for the orthodox Jew of that time (and today) took pride in his religion and boasted of his holiness – as, for instance, the word "Pharisee" signifies "holy person" – one scrupulously careful in observing the smallest details of the Law. There was a wide breach between these zealous followers of Moses' Law and the mass of the nation who, because of not making special profession, were altogether classed as "sinners," or persons not up to the orthodox standard of carefulness of form, ceremonies, etc.

The Pharisees would tolerate and eat with the Sadducees, although the latter were practically unbelievers, because they were of the wealthier and therefore more respectable class; but they entirely ignored and would not eat with their less particular brethren, whom

they in general styled "sinners," regardless of their having true moral status.

Our Lord's disciples were nearly all gathered from this lower or less orthodox and less educated class of Jews. Because of our Lord's talents the Pharisees would have been glad to have Him as one of their number, provided, of course, that He would side with them and uphold them in their more or less hypocritical pretensions of perfection and holiness. But Jesus denounced the claims of the Pharisees as hypocritical, and told the common people plainly that there were "none righteous, no, not one" – that all needed Divine mercy, and that really the humble and contrite would be much more acceptable to God than the boastful, the proud, the self-conceited.

MATTHEW THE PUBLICAN

Today's study tells of the call of Matthew to be one of the twelve Apostles. His original name was Levi, just as Peter's original name was Simon. He belonged to the Levitical tribe, but his acceptance of service under the Romans as a tax collector socially degraded him and classed him as a "Publican." Perhaps the quality of independence and humble-mindedness which influenced this man to become a tax collector and to brave the scorn of his fellow-countrymen were qualities which really favored him in respect to the Divine invitation to become a disciple of Jesus. We may be sure this was true from the **[R4987 : page 84]** fact that Jesus gave him a special invitation to become His disciple, and from the fact that he was in the heart condition to forsake all of his earthly goods that he might be a member of the Messianic class. We cannot suppose that the Master would call to discipleship any but a noble character, nor can we suppose that any others would have accepted the call as did Matthew.

Matthew was a householder and promptly invited Jesus and His followers to dinner. He invited in also numbers of his friends, and these, like himself, were of the ostracized class – publicans and sinners. The scribes and Pharisees watched Jesus closely, and when

they perceived that He ate and mingled with the less respectable and less orthodox, they disesteemed Him, also, and put the question squarely to Jesus' disciples: "How is it that your Master eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners, and yet claims to be holy?"

This afforded Jesus the opportunity which He desired of giving a great lesson in a few words. He replied to them, "They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick; I came to call, not the righteous, but sinners." Here we have the key to much of the misunderstanding of the Gospel in that day and now. The **[R4987 : page 85]** first lesson that all must learn is that all sin is condemned of God – the little and the large – and that all unrighteousness is sin, and that there is "none righteous, no, not one."

In other words, each must learn that he himself is a sinner, and under Divine sentence and needing forgiveness, before he can come into fellowship with God or become partaker of God's provision for eternal life. The publicans and sinners were indeed condemned of God, and the scribes and Pharisees, members of the same imperfect race, were also under Divine sentence; but the latter did not admit their sinfulness and imperfection nor seek Divine forgiveness, while the former, admitting their sins, were the more ready to accept forgiveness. Jesus illustrated this matter in one of His parables saying, A certain Pharisee went to the temple to pray and, full of self-confidence, thanked God that he was not as other men, nor even like the poor Publican near him. The Publican also prayed; but in humility, feeling that he was a sinner, besought Divine forgiveness. Jesus declared that the less moral man, the less scrupulously careful man, the Publican, was nearer to Divine Justice than the more careful, more upright, more orthodox Pharisee, because the latter failed to acknowledge his sins, his imperfections, which could be forgiven only through their acknowledgment. Hence the declaration of Jesus that He "came not to call the righteous, but sinners." There were none righteous to call, for all are sinners, and those who thought themselves

righteous had a barrier before them which hindered their coming to the Lord under the call of this Age.

"THY DISCIPLES FAST NOT"

About that time a fasting season was observed by the Pharisees, and also by those who had accepted the teachings of John the Baptist; but Jesus had said nothing to His disciples about fasting up to that time. Now the question arose, Why was this? The Savior's explanation was that while He was with them it should properly be considered a time of rejoicing and feasting rather than a time of fasting and sorrow. Would a betrothed woman sorrow and weep and fast while her betrothed was present? Nay. Yet, in subsequent days, after his departure, in her loneliness, and especially if she thought of the long delay in his coming to receive her to become his wife, she would sorrow. So Jesus intimated it would be with His followers. They would have plenty of opportunity to weep and fast after He would be gone and while waiting for His return.

Fasting should not be considered a matter of obligation or command, but rather a voluntary sacrifice of present and temporal good things that the mind and heart might go out the more earnestly after the things not seen as yet, but hoped for. Thus for eighteen centuries God's people have been fasting and praying and waiting and longing for the Bridegroom's return. But in the time of His presence, their fellowship with Him, their joy in the realization of the completed promise, will wipe away their tears and "give them beauty for ashes, and the oil of joy for...the spirit of heaviness."

THE CHURCH A NEW CREATION

It was difficult for the Savior's hearers to get a proper focus upon His teachings. They could understand John the Baptist's preaching of repentance and reformation; but when Jesus declared, "The Law and the Prophets were until John, and since then the Kingdom of Heaven is preached" – this was so radical a proposition as to be difficult for

the masses to grasp. What could be higher than the Law and the Prophets? What door could be opened to the followers of Jesus which had not been open to their forefathers? Was not their Jewish nation God's Kingdom? Did not King David sit "upon the throne of the Lord"? Was it not promised that Messiah should sit upon David's throne?

Sympathetically we must concede that it was difficult for the Jews to understand that before the blessing could come to natural Israel, another, spiritual Israel, must be selected. By way of emphasizing this thought, our Lord gave two parabolical illustrations, saying, No man sews a piece of unshrunk cloth upon an old garment, because the shrinking of the new cloth would pull away the old and increase the difficulty. Likewise, no one would think of putting new wine which had not yet finished its fermentation into old wineskins, whose elasticity had been exhausted, for the old wineskins would be burst by the fermentation of the new wine.

These illustrations show that the Gospel teaching is not a patch upon the Jewish Law, but is a new proposition. And the new wine of the Gospel Dispensation must be put into new wineskins that will be able to stand the stress of the fermentation sure to come. Thus our Lord did not attempt to engraft His teachings upon the Jews, but called out of Judaism a special class, which the Scriptures denote as "New Creatures in Christ." It is to these that the new wine of the Gospel Message is committed, and these are to experience the fermentation incidental to the preparation for the Kingdom – trials, disciplines and testings.

