



## LEAST LIKELY DRAFT PICKS

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I used to work in an office building that was notorious for having a terrible heating and cooling system. It was the worst. Not only was it hot in the summer and cold in the winter – each office was a different temperature. The duct work in the ceilings didn't seem to support any kind of consistent, even air temperatures. My office was usually cold because it had two walls of windows that were almost always in the shade. But my boss's office next to me was always stuffy and warm. The trouble was that the thermostat that controlled my office also controlled his.

So when he wasn't around, I would sneak in and crank up the heat. I would deliberately blast it as high as I could to get just a little of the warmer air to reach my office. I knew it wouldn't last long before my boss would react. He'd start to feel warm, then he would check the thermostat and say, "Who keeps turning this thing up?" And then he would readjust it back down somewhere below 85 degrees and we'd start all over again.

Usually he won and I was left on the chilly side. It finally got so bad that I brought in a space heater from home to make my office more bearable. I plugged it in and fired it up. It was so great to feel warm. For about five minutes. Then all of a sudden the power in the building went out and our computers crashed. My heater had overloaded a circuit and caused a major headache for my boss to restore the system. After that, I gave up and tried to bring bulky sweaters back into fashion.

Jesus is about to crank up the heat in the section of Mark we're looking at today. Temperatures and tempers rise over the actions that he takes. As we read it, you'll see that it's almost as if he is raising that thermostat on purpose, knowing it will provoke a reaction. And it works. His choices leave the religious leaders hot under the collar.

### **Mark 2:13-17**

*Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.*

*While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

*On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

We've said that Mark paints us a surprising portrait of Jesus, and nowhere is he more surprising than here. Jesus goes against all conventional wisdom in the way he handles himself and who he spends time with, and it mystifies people, particularly the Pharisees.

We've mentioned the teachers of the law before, but this is the first time Mark makes a special reference to those who were Pharisees. The Pharisees are often singled out as being opposed to Jesus. But who were they? What made them distinct from any other run of the mill religious teachers?

Do you remember when the SlimFast shakes first came out? Their tagline in all their advertising was "It's a way of life – the new SlimFast way of life." The makers of it didn't want it to be just another fad diet. They didn't want their shakes to be considered just one more option in protein drinks. They wanted SlimFast to become a lifestyle choice for people.

Pharisees wanted to see God's law become a way of life. Unlike some of their contemporaries, the Pharisees didn't want to just be teachers, conducting an academic exercise – they sincerely wanted to know what holy living should look like. So they came up with all these ways to interpret the law in various settings -- how people should dress, how far they could walk on the Sabbath, how they should cut their hair. Eventually those interpretations themselves became like law, defining in their minds what it meant to be a good Jew. But at the heart of things, they wanted to see God's commandments lived out on a practical level.

One of the ways they tried to maintain purity in their lives was to separate themselves from people who didn't share their values. They wanted to give sin as wide a berth as possible. It would be the equivalent of Amish communities or Hasidic Jewish communities today that separate themselves in an attempt to live more holy lives. In fact, the word Pharisee literally means "separate."

So in other words, these were not just a bunch of mean-spirited, crankpot old men who had it in for Jesus. They sincerely wanted to live up to God's standards and they voluntarily placed themselves under all kinds of strict guidelines to do so. When Jesus comes along, he takes a different path. It is bewildering to the Pharisees, and it makes them upset. Because if what Jesus is saying is true, what does it say about their chosen path?

That gives you some background on the Pharisees and what was going on in their minds. But to really understand their struggle with Jesus, you have to know the other players in the story as well. Mark is telling us about the calling of a man named Levi, who was a tax collector.

It's getting close to tax time around here, so maybe you can relate to the idea of not being too fond of the tax man. But feelings ran a little deeper in those days. Taxes came in a variety of forms, and the Roman government would contract out the job of collecting them to locals. The people who took those jobs could pretty much write their own ticket, and the trade was full of corruption. Jews who were tax collectors had sold their souls to Rome. They were viewed as traitors and thieves. Tax collectors were so despised that the rabbis decreed it was morally okay to lie to them.

Did you read the story in the news this week about the three car salesmen who stole tens of thousands of dollars from a mentally ill customer? They didn't just make him a bad deal – they literally robbed him. The man made the mistake of mentioning an inheritance he had received, and the sales guys went to his house and took the money. That's in addition to selling the guy a truck. Then after that, they got him to sign over the truck they had sold to him. They shamelessly took advantage of the man and his disability. They didn't care about anything but the money.

What kind of people would do that? Well, people like Levi. Tax collectors weren't considered to have any ethics at all. They took advantage of people. They were in business for the money.

So Levi would definitely not have been considered a prospective disciple by the Pharisees. He was not being scouted. Rabbis looked for students who showed great promise, who demonstrated their ability to study and their zeal for following the Law.

Levi hadn't even joined the crowd that was following Jesus around. Did you catch that? Everybody and his brother was starstruck by Jesus and was crowded around him to hear his teaching. Not Levi. He was all business – sitting in his toll booth, collecting taxes as usual, trying to make a buck. He had no plans of going back to school, especially not religious school. Yet Jesus sees him there, working away at taking people's money, and Jesus singles him out with the invitation "Come follow me." And Levi responds as quickly as Peter and the other disciples had.

In fact, it appears Levi was so excited about his new calling that he threw a party. He had Jesus over to his house for a special meal. And of course, Levi invited his own social circle, which was a bunch of people like him. Remember the old Garth Brooks song that said, "I got friends in low places?" Maybe Garth hung out in some of the same spots as Levi, because Mark makes it pretty clear that Levi ran with a rough crowd.

The words "tax collectors and sinners" could cover just about everybody. But in this case, the word sinner is being used to speak of those people beneath respectable society. They were the underbelly of culture – the prostitutes, the con men, the drunks. The Pharisees considered them the throwaways – filthy people to be avoided. Not only were they not worth spending time with – they were dangerous because they could corrupt your values and pull you into their world.

And here's Jesus – not just meeting them or saying “hi” to them in the street, but sitting down to dinner with them, engaging them in conversation as if they mattered, relating to them as peers. He chose his friends carefully and intentionally, and it is absolutely baffling to the Pharisees. How could somebody with such a command of the Scriptures keep the company he did and not see a problem with it? Jesus had just one answer for them:

*"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

That is a profound response. Jesus throws this huge rock in the water, making waves that ripple clear out to us today. It zeroes in on the very center of his ministry and purpose. What does Jesus' statement mean for us? I believe his response to the Pharisees affects us on at least four levels. First, it has an impact on

### **How I think of other people**

When I was in elementary school, we had a Dymo label maker. Remember those? They had the wheel you would turn to select each letter, then print out a little plastic strip that you could stick on something. I went around labeling everything. And that adhesive really stuck. To this day I have a music stand that has my Jeff D. Peabody label on the back.

The Pharisees were big into labeling people. “Tax collectors and sinners” was a harsh label that stuck. It was derogatory and judging. They classified people before they even knew who they were.

Then, once they had labeled a group or individual, they put some distance between them and the others. The labels became a line in the sand and they didn't cross over it.

I do that all the time with people. I see them, make assumptions, categorize them in my mind under a certain label. Then that label prevents me from further relationship. Once I've made up my mind that somebody is a certain way, it becomes more difficult for me to be open and find out the truth.

Jesus didn't think of people in terms of categories. He thought of them as individuals. He had much greater knowledge than the Pharisees of people's secret sins, but he still didn't allow that to become cause for separation. He stepped right into their lives and made connections rather than distancing himself from them.

The Pharisees looked at people and their immediate impulse was to look for what it was about them that God wouldn't like. They pointed out all the reasons someone would fall under God's judgment. So the Pharisees tended to see others as objects of God's wrath. And since the Pharisees didn't want to get struck by the lightning bolt themselves, they thought they would be better off steering clear of other people.

Jesus couldn't have had a more different view. When he looked at someone, he thought, "How great would it be if that person came to God? That would make my father so delighted. He would be thrilled."

That's why Jesus said to the Pharisees in Luke:

**Luke 15:7**

*I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*

Someone being called a "sinner" wasn't a reason for Jesus to dismiss them – it was a reason for him to pursue them, because he saw how much joy would come out of their being reconnected with God.

When Becky Pippert was working on college campuses back in the 1970s, she met a brilliant student named Bill at a school in Portland. This was the 1970s in Portland, and Bill always had messy hair and he never wore shoes, but he loved Jesus and wanted to go to church.

There was a big, middle class church near campus. This was the 1970s, back when church was church and you dressed up on Sunday morning. One week, Bill decided to go for a visit, but when he got there, the pews were all packed. So, he walked past all the suits and dresses down to the front row, where he squatted down on the floor in his T-shirt, jeans and bare feet.

Well this was a little uncomfortable for the congregation. You could feel the tension in the room as people processed Bill's entrance. Finally, an elderly, buttoned down gentleman got up from his seat. Everyone thought, "Okay, this is it. He's going to explain church to this kid."

Becky writes, "As the man kept walking slowly down the aisle, the church became utterly silent, all eyes were focused on him, you could not hear anyone breathe. When the man reached Bill, with some difficulty he lowered himself and sat down next to him on the carpet. He and Bill worshiped together on the floor that Sunday."

That's a picture of Jesus, isn't it? Not being afraid to get down on the floor with people who the rest of us ignore or judge. No labels. No distancing himself. If Christ didn't see himself as too good to associate with people, what does that say about my attitude toward others?

Initially, it seems that is the main lesson the Pharisees need to learn. But there's something almost more basic implied in Jesus' statement that has to do with

**How I think of myself**

It's one thing to grasp that other people are good enough for Jesus and I can't look down on them. But I have to reconsider how I view myself as well. Look at Jesus' words one more time.

*"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Here are the Pharisees – imagining a big divide between the righteous and the unrighteous folks, the good and the bad. In their minds the ones God is calling are the ones from the righteous group. Those would be his top picks.

So if Jesus wants me to have a different view of my neighbors, the natural thing to do would be to say, “Well I guess they're not so bad after all. I guess they can be on my side of the canyon. I'll start thinking of them as good people.”

But Jesus says, “I came for the bad people. I came for the ones who admit they have problems and need help. I'm doing my choosing from over here. If you're going to change your thinking, it's going to have to be about yourself. You'll have to see yourself on this side of the gap.”

Deep down, we want to believe that there is something especially charming about us that makes us stand out from the crowd. We can be willing to accept other people on more of a charity level. We see it as doing them a favor by accepting them, and it's almost patronizing.

The real revelation, though, is not to accept those we feel are beneath us but instead to realize they're not beneath us at all. We're in solidarity with them. When it comes to a relationship with Christ, we're all down on the ground floor, pushing the same elevator button.

I always come back to Karin's uncle, who said that when he was counseling alcoholics, his biggest “aha” moment came when he realized he was more like them than he was not like them. Paul wrote to the Romans and said,

**Romans 12:3**

*Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.*

When Paul talked about himself, he said, “I'm the biggest sinner ever.” Here's the most influential Christian of all time, putting himself squarely in the camp of the undeserving.

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic Priest who was a well-known author and professor at Ivy League schools. But he gave up all that prestige to go become the priest at a place called

Daybreak, which was a home for the mentally retarded. He writes about the change in settings and says,

*The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, they could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction.*

*This experience was, and in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self – the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things – and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.*

He continues, *I am telling you all this because I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self...The great message we have to carry is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life.*

The people Jesus calls are the vulnerable ones, the ones that don't pretend they have anything to offer to God, the ones who know they're needy. Are we willing to see ourselves on that side of the divide?

For the Pharisees and for us, Jesus' words give a reason to reevaluate how we view others, how we view ourselves, and also

### **How I think of righteousness**

You're probably saying to yourself, "Well I don't really think of righteousness at all." That's not everyday vocabulary for most of us. We may not use the word righteousness, but we think about the topic. We have plenty of thoughts all the time about what is the right and good thing to do. And Jesus challenges our assumptions about what's good and why.

Let's go back to the Pharisees. They have been working so hard to keep their lives pure. They're trying to be obedient and do the right thing. Jesus comes along and by his actions seems to suggest all that is for nothing. They've been working so hard to be good. Has it all been a big waste of time?

What makes somebody good? Why try to live by any standards if the people Jesus calls are the ones who don't care and who haven't been all that moral or ethical?

I think the secret lies in something Mark tells us in the story:

*As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.*

*While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.*

Nowhere in the book of Mark does it say the Pharisees followed Jesus. They were following rules – but they weren't following a person. When you're following rules, you're concerned about staying in the lines. When you're following a leader, you're concerned about keeping up. When you're following rules, you're consumed with boundaries. When you're following a leader, you've got a destination. When you're following rules, you're depending on your ability to follow them. When you're following a leader, you're depending on the leader's ability to lead.

Righteousness comes from following the right person, not the right rules. Granted, Jesus doesn't call sinners only to leave them still sinning – he calls them to follow him, to carve a new life pattern. But right living should be the natural byproduct of the relationship not the way to establish the relationship. .

For the Pharisees, obedience was what everything hinged on. It had nothing to do with a relationship, so it was all about them. They were trying to make it the source of their righteousness instead of the result. But in reality, it wasn't getting them any closer to God. In fact, Jesus himself would tell them,

### **Matthew 21:31-32**

*I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.*

Ouch. I don't want to miss the boat and get so caught up in following rules that I forget to follow Jesus. When I'm focused on him, everything else will fall in line.

There's one more simple truth I'd like to draw out for us, and that is that the statement Jesus made also affects

### **How I think of church**

Christ laid out pretty clearly where his priorities are. He came to call sinners. If the church is truly Christ's body, then our priorities will need to line up.

As churches grow and mature, needs become more and more acute. Money and programs begin to revolve around the people who are already part of the church. A lot of time and energy goes into helping people understand their faith more. There is significant work to be done inside every church.

But there can be a tendency for churches to enjoy their own company so much that they don't have anything left to focus outside the walls. If we're not careful, we can become insulated and ingrown.

The New Day board is reading a book by Kennon Callahan called *Effective Church Leadership*. Mr. Callahan hammers home the idea that churches must maintain the same priorities Christ demonstrated. He writes, *The hook is this: God is in the world. Whenever the church is in the world, God is in the church. Whenever the church is not in the world, God is in the world. God sent his only Son to save the world, not the church.*

When Jesus was on earth, the people who were most comfortable around him were the least religious. The down and outers flocked to him. You don't see a similar situation today. Very few people flock to the church to find help or acceptance. They expect the opposite there. Quite frankly, churches have often been afraid to engage people who haven't already been sanitized by some degree of religion. We all have a bit of the Pharisee in us that wants to put up a shield. We do it in the name of protecting the church, all the while moving further and further from what Jesus would have us do.

Several years ago, an older Christian couple we knew decided to try to reach out to their neighbors. Now, the Christian couple had been raised in an era when good Christians didn't play cards, because it was associated with gambling. But what their neighbors liked to do most was play bridge. So for years, this couple had never accepted an invitation to their neighbors for bridge because they didn't want to be seen doing something questionable.

But finally, one day they decided to take a risk and accept the invitation. They played bridge. And lo and behold, they had a great time. They discovered that their neighbors were nice people. And it was almost a painful revelation to them, because they realized how much they had missed out on in the relationship, simply because they were afraid of rules.

Jesus doesn't call us to sin or compromise our values. There are plenty of warnings in the Bible against rationalizing foolish choices. But he does call us to rub shoulders with people who would never set foot in a church. He calls us to love them in his name.

It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. That can be intimidating and messy. The world is one big MASH unit, with people desperately needing help. ***It is the mission of the church to engage the world with the healing power of Christ.*** He's calling the least likely draft picks for his team. Are we willing to go and find them, to take risks for the kingdom?

I'll leave you with three questions as we close. First,

What makes me unlikely? What is it about me that puts me on the sinner side of the divide? Where is my point of neediness? Maybe I'm out of touch with what needs

forgiving in my heart. Or maybe I'm all too aware. Take it all to Christ. Jesus said he who is forgiven much loves much. If that's the case, I want to bring as much of myself as I can to him for forgiveness. I want all of my life to be under grace – to see myself honestly and to allow myself to hear that he is in the business of calling sinners like me.

Secondly,

Who have I dismissed? It doesn't take much for someone to be ignored or overlooked by me, for me to assume that they're not worth my time and energy. Ask God to show you who you may be slighting, and ask him to help you view them differently.

Finally, how can I live out the mission of the church this week? Where would Jesus go if he were living in my world? Who would he be trying to reach out to? It's scary to think about sometimes, because some people we know are intimidating. But God gave us a great promise in Deuteronomy:

**Deuteronomy 30:11-14**

*Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.*

Come follow me, Jesus says. We're the least likely, and he chooses us anyway.  
Hallelujah.