

The King's Friends

Text: Mark 2:13-17

Big Idea: Jesus calls Levi, a despised tax collector, to follow him and shows the Pharisees that God's grace is for anyone who knows they need it.

Aim: To teach that Jesus came to call those who know they're not good enough to follow him.

The Story So Far

Lesson 1:

- John the Baptist announces that the Lord (Jesus), is coming.
- He tells the people that Jesus is greater than he is because Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit, not just water.
- He tells the people to prepare their hearts for the Lord by turning to God. They show this by being baptised.

Lesson 2:

- Jesus allows John to baptise him to show that he identifies with those he came to rescue.
- The Holy Spirit resting on Jesus in the form of a dove confirms that he will baptise with the Spirit.
- God's voice from heaven confirms that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Jesus overcomes the devil's temptation in the desert to prove that he has come to "crush the serpent's head".

Lesson 3:

- Jesus tells the people that God's kingdom is near.
- To get into the kingdom, people need to repent and believe – this is modelled by the fishermen who immediately leave their old lives to follow Jesus.

Lesson 4:

- Jesus' popularity as a healer increases massively.
- Jesus prays and then makes the decision to not heal some people in favour of telling others the good news.

Lesson 5:

- Jesus claims to have God's authority to forgive sins. He proves this by physically healing a paralytic.



Leader's Study Notes

Read Mark 2:13-17 noting the kind of person that Levi was and how he responded to Jesus.

Use the following notes to help you think about the passage in more detail.

In the previous lesson, Jesus claimed to have God's authority to forgive sin. He proved this by healing the paralytic he'd just forgiven. This next passage shows the extent of the forgiveness that Jesus offers – it even includes greedy, dishonest people who are despised by the rest of society.

2:13-14 — Capernaum is a town on the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee. Levi was at a customs post collecting taxes. Like many other tax collectors of that time he was probably greedy, corrupt (demanding bribes), and working for Herod, the despised local dictator. The Jewish people would have regarded him as a traitor and the religious leaders would have considered him ceremonially unclean because he spent so much time with Gentiles (non-Jewish people).

Mark does not elaborate on the content of Jesus' teaching. For him, the heart of Jesus' teaching was the good news of the kingdom of God.

"Follow me" – Jesus deliberately chose the most unlikely, despised and corrupt man he could to show that no-one is beyond his grace and forgiveness.

2:15 — To eat with someone was a public sign of intimate friendship. Jesus was enjoying a meal with Levi and his friends – people widely regarded as 'sinners' because of their immoral behaviour.

2:16 — The Pharisees were the religious leaders of Israel. They had very high moral standards, paying careful attention to God's laws. They had also made up many other laws which they kept very strictly.

They, therefore, struggled to understand why Jesus would deliberately choose to be friends with corrupt people like Levi and his friends. If Jesus were the Messiah (promised king), then surely he would not want to associate with these immoral traitors and risk being corrupted by them!

2:17 — In 1:38, Jesus said that the reason why he came was to preach. Now he makes it clear that his preaching was to 'call' sinners.

"Healthy" and "righteous" refers to the people who thought they were spiritually well and therefore didn't need help.

"Sick" and "sinners" refers to those who knew they needed help with their spiritual condition.

Just as a doctor can only help a person who knows that they are not well and are prepared to come to him to explain their symptoms, so Jesus can only help those who admit that they are sinners and need his forgiveness.

The Pharisees thought that they were healthy (righteous), but they were only self-righteous. Until they were prepared to admit their sin, Jesus was of no use to them. But people like Levi and his friends knew they were corrupt and wicked. They knew they needed Jesus and the complete forgiveness that he offers (even to someone like Levi).

Levi was also known as Matthew (cf. Matthew 9:9), and went on to write Matthew's Gospel – what a change meeting Jesus made to his life!

Reflect

- Would you regard yourself as 'healthy' or 'sick'? Do you understand your need for Jesus? What convinced you of this?
- How do you feel about people who are corrupt and despised? What is their greatest need? What part can you play in them being made 'healthy'?
- Give thanks to God that no-one (no matter how corrupt or wicked), is beyond the grace of God and the forgiveness that Jesus offers.



Review

Remind the children that the previous lesson was about a man who was brought to Jesus by four of his friends. Can the children answer the following questions:

- Why was the man brought to Jesus? [*He was paralysed* (Mark 2:3)]
- What did Jesus say to him? [*Your sins are forgiven* (Mark 2:5)]
- What else did Jesus do for him? [*Healed him* (Mark 2:12)]



Introductory Idea - Option 1

Party invitations. Print ten pictures depicting different characters (real or fictional), that the children will know. Half of these need to be villains or characters that would certainly not be at the top of any party list (e.g. Mr Greedy); the rest need to be the sort of people anyone would love to spend time with (e.g. a well-known football star or other celebrities). Use clothes pegs to peg these pictures to a length of string stretched across the front of

the class.

Invite two volunteers to come forward and ask them to imagine that you are planning a day of fun and they are allowed to each take three people with them. They need to choose three guests each from the ten on the line. You can let them choose one at a time each in turn. Once they have made their choices ask them why they chose the ones they did and why they did not choose the ones left on the line.

In today's true story from the Bible, Jesus chose to have dinner with someone that no-one expected him to. [Use the Bridge Questions below to create a link into the lesson.]



Introductory Idea - Option 2

Clean canvas. Prepare two sheets of white paper. On one use a white wax crayon or candle to write the word 'sin' in large letters on both sides of the page. On the other page, use a red wax crayon to write 'sin' in large letters on only one side. You will also need some watercolour paints, brushes and aprons to protect clothing.

Invite one volunteer to come and compete against the leader to see who can paint the best sunset picture. Have both sheets of paper on easels or boards (the one with 'sin' written in red needs to be faceup).

Say that you only have two sheets left and that one is a little used. Which one would the child like to use? They will most likely choose the one that appears to be blank. If not, mention that this is a significant competition which might encourage them to pick it!

Set a time limit on the activity of three minutes. Before the leader begins, he turns over the page and paints on the blank side. As the child starts to paint the word 'sin' will appear across their page and ruin the picture. They may try to turn it over, but that will reveal the same problem.

Explain that although the one sheet of paper looked clean, it had a serious problem. The one that looked dirty could be made clean and used.

In today's true story from the Bible, Jesus had dinner with someone that everyone could see was a sinner. [Use the Bridge Questions below to create a link into the lesson.]

Bridge Questions

- Who did Jesus have dinner with? [*Levi and other 'sinners'* (Mark 2:15)]
- Who was shocked by this? [*The Pharisees* (Mark 2:16)]
- Who did Jesus come to call? [*Sinners* (Mark 2:17)]



Teaching Plan

The Pharisees most deeply felt the shock in this passage, so it would be helpful to understand this story from their perspective. You will, therefore, need to spend some time setting the scene and adequately introducing the various characters. We generally view the Pharisees as the 'bad guys' in the Gospels, but in Jewish society, they were the 'good guys' – seen as morally respectable like the clergymen or pastors of today.

You could divide the class into two groups – Pharisees and tax collectors. Have them sit a distance apart. Begin by describing what each group was like using age-appropriate language. Tax collectors were dishonest, greedy traitors. The Pharisees were upright law keepers.

- Which group would make better friends? Why?
- Who would the children invite to their party? Why?

Build up to the climax in verse 16. Why were the Pharisees so shocked to see Jesus there? How would they have expected God's special king to behave? Who would they expect him to have as friends?

You may want to use a few pictures to help explain what Jesus meant in 2:17. Have pictures of a sick person, a healthy person and a doctor. Which person needs the doctor?

If the doctor were to ask the sick man what the problem was and the man said "Nothing, I'm fine", what could the doctor do to help him?

Help the children to understand that only when the man admits his problem can he be helped. It was easy to see that Levi and his friends were sinners, but not that easy to see that the Pharisees were sinners because they looked good on the outside. They always kept the rules, so they thought they were good enough and didn't need forgiveness. Jesus can only help people who know they need his help. He came to call people who know that they need him to follow him.



Game Idea - Option 1

For younger children – draft a list of ailments and write these on pieces of paper. Place them in a bowl or hat. These could include a sore throat; a broken leg; a broken arm, a grazed knee, a cut, etc. Also, add a few sins like 'being rude', 'not sharing', 'disobeying', etc. Have enough pieces of paper so that every child gets at least one. Have a range of medical items such as a throat lozenge box, bandages, splints, a sling, plasters, etc. suited to the ailments you have chosen. Include a cross or a crown to represent Jesus (this is the solution to all the sin problems).

Invite the children one at a time to draw a piece of paper from the hat. Read out what the problem is and ask the children to tell you the best way to fix the problem. You might want

to hold back on the sin problems and only include them halfway through the game.

It will be fun to apply bandages and splints, but be sure not to give the children any medication or even to model this with fake medicine. Only have the medicine boxes with you and say that a doctor or adult might give this medicine to help with the problem. The children must never take medication on their own.

Every time there is a 'sin problem' ask the children which of the medicines or bandages you should use. Tell them that the only one who can fix sin problems is King Jesus (hold up the crown or the cross). We need to ask Jesus to forgive our sins.



Game Idea - Option 2

Do you know it's you? The children line up facing a wall with their eyes closed and their hands against the wall.

Place a clothing peg on the back of each child. One child (the 'picker'), is chosen to walk down the line and to quietly and secretly remove one peg and run to the opposite wall before the 'pegless child' realises that their peg is missing. The pegless child has to work out when their peg has been removed and chase the child who took it. If they catch the picker, they become the picker for the next round. Any child who runs while they still have a peg on their back is out for one round.

Explain to the children that the game required them being able to work out if they were the one who needed to respond because they had lost their peg. How could they tell? The true story from the Bible today was about people who had to work out that they were sinners who needed Jesus to help them. Some, like Levi, knew they had a problem. Others, like the Pharisees, did not think they had a problem. Remind the children that we are all sinners and all need Jesus to forgive us.



Discuss and Apply

Think carefully about how you can help children familiar with church and Jesus to be struck again by the grace and forgiveness that Jesus offers to even terrible sinners.

There are likely to be two groups of children in your class – those who think they are 'healthy' and those who know they are 'sick'. **With younger children**, it will be confusing to use the terms 'healthy' and 'sick' when applying this lesson to them personally. They will also not readily admit their sin (the naughty things they do, think and say). They will need help understanding that we are all sinners. You may need to share (at an appropriate level), some of the struggles you face daily with sin in your own life.

Some older children can also be self-righteous; they need help understanding the condition of their hearts and their need for the forgiveness that Jesus offers.

Children who are conscious of their sin, perhaps because they are always in trouble, can be crushed by their sin. They need help to understand that Jesus offers forgiveness that is free and complete.

You know your children best. In your discussion, be sensitive to their individual needs. One way to do this would be to revisit the story and compare the two main groups – tax collectors and Pharisees. You can then make the following points in an age-appropriate way:

- We can't be friends with God because of sin.
- The Pharisees didn't think they were sinners. Most people don't.
- Levi and his friends knew they needed Jesus' help.
- Jesus came to forgive us – even the worst of us.
- Only Jesus has the power to forgive our sin and make us friends with God – this is why he came.
- Forgiven people obey and follow Jesus as their king, but they need the Holy Spirit to help them; it's a miracle!

With older children, you might also want to explore:

- Do you ever feel like you're 'healthy' on your own?
- Do you ever feel like you're too 'sick' for Jesus?
- What difference does it make to you that Jesus forgives you?
- How does this passage change your attitude towards those who are 'worse' sinners than you? Who are these people?



Prayer Idea

Write a list of sins that children in your group might struggle with. This could include jealousy; bad words; bad thoughts; disobedience; gossip, etc. Write these on a whiteboard or have pictures to represent these. If you are using pictures, you will need to explain what each picture represents.

Remind the children that we need to realise that we have a problem so that we can ask Jesus to help us. Ask the children to look at the list and choose the one they struggle with most. They may want to add to the list.

Encourage them to pray, thanking God that Jesus can forgive them and help them with that particular problem. They will probably not want to do this out loud.

You could conclude by inviting the children to each wipe one of the sins from the board and reminding them that Jesus is the only one who can give us a fresh start as he did for Levi.



Activity A

For younger children choose either this activity or Activity B.

From the Media section of this webpage print Activity A onto paper for each child.

The children colour in the picture. You can also provide them with yellow, gold or silver circles made using a hole-punch. These can be pasted in piles all over Levi's table to be the money he was greedily collecting.



Activity B

For younger children choose either this activity or Activity A.

From the Media section of this webpage print Activity B onto paper for each child.

The children colour in the pictures. To make the booklet they need to first fold the page outwards along the horizontal line and then fold the picture of Jesus dining with Levi inwards so that the picture of Jesus calling Levi forms the cover of the booklet.



Worksheets

For older children choose either Worksheet C or Worksheet D from the Media section of this webpage. Print whichever is appropriate onto paper for each child and use it to reinforce the lesson or as a discussion starter.



Memory Verse

Use one of the memory verse ideas in the Series Introduction to help the children memorise the following verse:

Mark 1:15 – *"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* [NIV]