

Who is Forgiveness For?

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[0 : 00] Do you ever pay attention to mission statements? Something that in theory, neatly and clearly and helpfully summarizes or distills the purpose and vision of an organization?

To be completely honest, I don't pay especially close attention to them, but the reason I like them is because I often find the whole concept of mission statements quite hilarious.

Why? Because of the pointless amount of time and money and effort that organizations waste coming up with something usually quite vague and generic.

One of my former employers spent a ridiculous amount of money and time hiring a PR firm, surveying staff and distilling what our core values were so to produce a mission statement.

The result, why do we exist? To make Aberdeen a place where all people can prosper. That kind of sounds very nice, doesn't it?

[1 : 03] Or the full mission statement, if you'll allow me, to ensure the alignment of all strategies and plans to the local outcome improvement plans vision, a place where all people can prosper, as well as ensuring clear delivery plans for the council's own set of strategies and priorities.

Very catchy, isn't it? I wonder if I read some mission statements to you right now, if you can guess who they belong to.

It's a bit of a game you can play along in your head, or if you're tuning in from home, you can keep count with whoever's in the living room with you. So here's the first one. To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world.

Of course, Nike. And I'm sure many of you, I see some nods. How about this one? Our aim is to provide a fun and safe environment where our customers can enjoy good food made with quality ingredients at affordable prices.

I think that could be anyone. That's McDonald's, by the way. A fun and safe environment for all of us. How about this one? To refresh the world.

[2 : 12] To inspire moments of optimism and happiness. To create value and make a difference. Anyone? No? We're not into participation, really, in church, aren't we?

Coca-Cola. That's that one. How about this one? And I think this is an example of a good one. To give every student on campus the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I'm looking in that direction. Because, of course, that is the Christian Union's mission statement. Okay, just allow me two more. It is our mission to continue to authoritatively provide access to diverse services to stay relevant in tomorrow's world.

I made that one up. But you can get the picture. It's quite easy to do. And actually a lot of fun. I'd encourage you to do that. Last one. And I hope everyone will know where this comes from.

Glorify God. Be like Jesus. Change the world. Of course, all of you have memorized our website. So you know that that's Bon Accord Free Church's mission statement.

[3 : 23] Or some of it. But what about Jesus? What is his mission statement? Mark's gospel records a number of these mission statements from Jesus.

And our passage tonight arrives at one of them by asking a simple question. Who is the gospel message for? Who is forgiveness for?

Or who did Jesus come from? And the answer to these questions is found in verse 17. And it is our one big point for our time together.

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. We saw this morning that Jesus' priority is the forgiveness of sins.

And his priority is that because he has the authority to forgive sins. But who is that forgiveness for? But who is that forgiveness for? We're going to unpack Jesus' mission statement that he came to call sinners.

[4 : 24] As we consider the calling of the unlikely Levi. The unlikely fellowship that Jesus created. And what it means that he came for sinners, not the righteous.

So firstly, Jesus calls the unlikely Levi. Will you turn with me to verses 13 and 14 once more? 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. We are in the fast-paced narrative of Mark.

And the scene is the ordinary course of Jesus' ministry. As he went out again beside the lake. And what is Jesus doing? Well, if we'd been reading Mark from the start, we'd be able to guess at this point.

[5 : 32] We find him once again teaching. We saw this morning that Jesus came with a sermon, a message. Mark 1.38 is so clear and helpful.

And this is Jesus speaking. Let us go to the nearby villages so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come. And when we get to our section in chapter 2 this evening, Mark expects us to fill in the gaps as he increasingly writes in shorthand.

What is Jesus teaching? He's teaching the gospel. Repent and believe the good news. What good news? The good news that Jesus came to meet our greatest need.

The forgiveness of our sins. And in verse 14, all of a sudden, as Jesus passed by, he saw Levi at his tax collector's booth and said to him, Follow me.

Who is Levi? Levi? Well, Levi is Matthew, the author of the Gospel of Matthew. But in the context of our passage, Mark wants to draw our attention to the fact that Levi is undesirable company.

[6 : 48] Tax collectors, I'm sure as you well know, in Jesus' day were notoriously corrupt, in bed with the Romans and universally despised. Why?

Why? Well, because Levi's job was a simple one. He was to collect taxes from his fellow Jews to give to the Romans. However, what made matters worse was that Levi was in charge, or he was the one in charge, of setting the tariffs.

He could charge however much he wanted and essentially meet his quota as quickly as he wanted to or was able to. Any surplus would go directly into his bank account.

But I think we need to understand how much of a problem Levi would have been to the original audience. It's easy, I think, to think of Levi, the tax collector, at best, as dabbling in a bit of white-collar crime, deserving of a sentence to a minimum security prison.

Or at worst, we think of him as this evil cheat defrauding the vulnerable, robbing grannies of their pensions, the sick from any chance of being able to afford the medicine they need, and keeping the poor perpetually in poverty by denying them the chance to better themselves.

[8 : 09] I do think that the latter is the more accurate of the two, but it's so much more than his financial crimes. Levi was a traitor, guilty of treason, but protected by the very Romans he worked for.

To help us, I wonder if you can imagine this with me. There's a woman called Stella Goldschlag. She was a German-Jewish woman who collaborated with the Gestapo by exposing Berlin's underground Jews.

Or Vital Hassan, a Greek Jew, leader of the Jewish police in Thessalonica, who sent families and his own relatives to Auschwitz.

Levi was colluding with the enemy, the pagan occupying force that was anti-Jewish and anti-the God of the Jews.

And so consequently, Levi and the tax collectors were excommunicated from the synagogue, had to give up their Jewish identity, and were seen as disgraced in the eyes of their families.

[9 : 19] They were the lowest of the low. And it is to this man that Jesus turns his gaze and says, follow me.

A chapter ago, Jesus recruited some upstanding fishermen with the same words, but now he addresses those words to a traitor, and to this obvious to everyone sinner.

I do wonder what Peter and Andrew and James and John, who were called to follow Jesus just in the previous chapter, would have made of the newest member of the team.

I wonder if Levi had ever lined his pockets by overcharging his fellow disciples. I hope we're starting to see why it was unthinkable that Jesus would call a tax collector to be part of his disciples.

Why Levi is such an unlikely choice to be his friend. Mark's point is that Levi is an obvious sinner, and we are meant to be thinking, if Jesus is willing to call even Levi, then he would be willing to call me as well.

[10:36] But what does it mean that Jesus says to him, follow me? Let me suggest three quick things from our passage. Following is relationship.

Levi was called to accompany Jesus, but more than that, to companionship with Jesus. Jesus doesn't give Levi a manifesto or a manual to follow.

It's a call to relationship. Follow me. Second, following is imitation. To follow Jesus is to go where Jesus goes and do as Jesus does.

The fishermen in the previous chapter were called to become fishers of men, to get on board with Jesus' mission, to share the gospel with all kinds of people.

And so was Levi. We know Levi became a fisher of men. Not only was he a faithful disciple, but countless people throughout history have benefited from the biography of Jesus he wrote down.

[11:39] But thirdly, following is transformation. How did Levi respond to Jesus' call? Well, verse 14 tells us, And he rose and followed him.

This isn't normal. And I think it's okay for us to admit that. It isn't normal to drop everything and follow someone you've just met.

However, Levi didn't go back to the tax booth. Why? Because the spark that lights the change in Levi's heart was Jesus' own authoritative words.

No one is beyond Jesus' authoritative words. To follow Jesus is to be transformed from indifference to faith supernaturally.

Levi abandoned life without Jesus for life with Jesus. And Mark will go on to expand on what it means to follow Jesus.

[12:44] In Mark chapter 8 verse 34, he says so clearly, and this is Jesus speaking, For Levi, following Jesus would involve sacrifice and expectation that it will be incredibly difficult and costly, and even having a willingness to give it all up for the one who loved him and gave his life as a ransom for Levi, even if it meant sharing in the same fate as Jesus.

But what about for us? We're not Levi. We don't physically follow in the steps of Jesus. He doesn't look us in the eye in that very practical way and tell us to follow him.

But we are also unlikely sinners being called by the Lord Jesus. This morning we were reminded that sin is our biggest problem and that the forgiveness of sins is our greatest need.

For us then, the starting point in following Jesus is recognizing that we also are sinners in need of repentance. Following Jesus means to repent.

And we all need to repent. We may not think we're as bad as Levi, and on one level we're probably not. But we're not as good as God.

[14:19] And that's what really matters. God tells us to love him with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And we fail. All of us. And our sin is serious. It's my greatest need. It separates me from God completely.

So praise God that Jesus calls unlikely sinners like Levi and us. If you're not a Christian, Jesus directs the same words he directed to Levi to you.

Jesus doesn't call you today because you're good enough. He calls you and me because we're sinners. The question isn't whether you're good enough. It's whether you're willing to admit how sinful you are.

And we all are. Jesus is saying, if Levi can be my friend, anyone can be my friend. My friend forever. And he extends that invitation to you also.

[15:32] There is a big implication for us who are believers concerning our discipleship, but we'll look at that at the end. For now, let's move on to our second subheading within our big point that Jesus came to save sinners.

Secondly, Jesus creates an unlikely fellowship. Let's read together verses 15 and 16 once more. 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?

Some turnaround, isn't it? From social outcast to dinner party host. But more than that, we're told that Levi, as well as others, was now following Jesus.

[16:37] He has repented and believes the good news that Jesus has the authority to deal with his sin problem. And what does that lead to?

Restored relationship with God and fellowship with fellow forgiven sinners. Does it strike you as an odd grouping, as odd a grouping as the Pharisees thought it was?

A carpenter from a backwater town with a growing reputation as a public speaker. A seemingly reformed thief and traitor. A whole bunch of other crooks.

Four unemployed fishermen and the rest of Jesus' disciples. This unlikely fellowship reminds me of a time shortly after I became a Christian.

I was 20 or 21, I can't remember. And there was about 30 of us gathered after the evening service here at Bon Accord, a student's flat to sing. You can ask me later whose flat it was.

[17:37] And people would request hymns and psalms and we would sing through the night. I was playing the guitar and between songs as people were discussing what song to pick next.

I was reflecting on all that God had done for me and how I'd ended up in this flat. And it was genuinely an out-of-body experience. Now I can't explain how or why I was moved to say what I said next.

But please do understand that I was trying to be sincere. As I looked at the random collection of fellow forgiven sinners, my new family, I did say out loud, Guys, isn't it wonderful that Jesus has brought us all together?

It's amazing. Because if it weren't for Jesus, I don't think I'd be friends with any of you. Now, my poor choice of words aside, they illustrate what we have in verse 15.

That Jesus came to call sinners and bring them together. And so creating an unlikely fellowship. Jesus' mission statement in verse 17 is in the plural.

[18:54] Levi was surrounded by fellow forgiven sinners who were united in Jesus with a common identity and purpose and now eternal destiny.

Look around this building right now. The family of God. The family of God. Fellow forgiven sinners. United by the fact that Jesus has met our greatest need.

When God calls sinners to follow him, he calls us to be part of a community. Following Jesus also looks like an unlikely fellowship made up of people who, to the outside world, are very different from each other.

This is one of the wonderful joys of Jesus calling sinners. He creates an unlikely fellowship, an unlikely family. And I guess what's more is that this kind of fellowship doesn't happen anywhere else.

What other unifying force brings or creates such an unlikely gathering like ours? This church family called Bonacord Free Church has been supernaturally created by God.

[20:10] And Jesus is here in the midst of the unrighteous who have been made righteous. I am so grateful to have belonged to this expression of God's people, to this unlikely family.

And not that this is what it's all about, but I have lost count of how many times I've also reclined at table and shared a meal with you and shared life with you.

Would you like to be in a family like the one Jesus creates in this passage? To find the love of a church family? To find the joy of praying with someone and sharing your deepest worries and sadnesses as we bear one another up?

We're not a perfect family by no means, but we are a collection of fellow forgiven sinners who want to live lives following Jesus, sacrificially loving one another.

Jesus calls sinners to be his friends. He calls sinners to belong to a family. But why does he call sinners? Surely it would make far more sense to go to people who are good, who have got their lives together.

[21:30] And this leads to our final subheading, which is Jesus' mission statement, an unlikely mission statement itself. Jesus came not for the righteous, but for sinners.

And let me read verse 17 once more. On hearing this, Jesus said to them, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. We might reinterpret the question of verse 16, the question that the Pharisees asked as, why doesn't he go to people who have got their life together?

Altogether, okay, decent, moral people. Why does he spend his time with this bunch of wrong-uns and ne'er-do-wells? Why is Jesus with people like Levi?

And Jesus' answer, his mission statement of verse 17 asks that, or answers that, sorry. In other words, because they are precisely the people I have come for.

[22 : 38] What does it mean to be righteous in this passage and in this context? Jesus can't mean sinless people because they don't exist. So I think Jesus means the self-righteous, people who don't think they need forgiven.

And Jesus helpfully illustrates this by speaking about doctors. Essentially, he's asking, what good is a doctor who spends all their time with healthy people? So I'd love you to imagine the picture. Imagine someone walking into a doctor's surgery, and they say, doctor, I want you to know that I am in superb health. My blood pressure is perfect, my body fat is ideal, and my health couldn't be better.

There are a lot of sick people in your waiting room, though, but you should know that I am not one of them. And yet, all the while, there's a lump the size of a golf ball growing on his brain. He's dreadfully sick, but he can't see it. There's a lot of people like that spiritually. The problem with the Pharisees and with many today is that not everyone who is sin-sick and needs a spiritual heart surgeon actually realizes that they do.

[24 : 02] The Pharisees, when they think of God, they pat themselves on the back for being so good. I know I'm not perfect, but the good things I do clearly outweigh the bad stuff I do.

So surely I'm good enough for God. Sin-sickness is our biggest problem. Forgiveness in Jesus is the antidote, and Jesus is the only one with the cure, the God-given authority to heal and forgive and save you and I from a disease with eternal complications.

And how do we know that the antidote works? Because Jesus died on the cross bearing the weight of all our sins, and three days later, he rose from the dead to live forever.

He went before us, and his resurrection is the evidence that we unlikely sinners, once forgiven, are called to eternal life, to friendship with Jesus forever.

I want to suggest two implications for us as we reflect off the back of the story of the calling of Levi. And first, in terms of our discipleship, for those of us who have at one point responded to the call made by Jesus, follow me, what are we to do?

[25 : 41] Well, like Levi, we are called to follow also. Levi got up and followed. He threw his lot in with Jesus. When Jesus calls someone to follow him, Jesus changes our priorities and desires and purpose in life, from apathy to zeal, from rejection to devotion.

And Levi gave up a lot of stuff for Jesus. And I guess it's so easy, even for good things, like family and friends and fitness and fun, to become more important to us than Jesus.

Is that a danger for you at the moment? I looked through Mark and saw some of the things that can get in the way of someone following Jesus wholeheartedly.

And here are some of them. Cares of this world, the deceitfulness of wealth, the desire for other things, pride, love of money, desire for popularity.

I can think of so many people I've known over the years for whom some of these things have become so important to them that they've gradually squeezed Jesus out of the picture.

[27 : 06] And I can think of times in my own life when I've allowed some of these to choke my own spiritual hunger and when they've stopped me being fruitful. So the question for us is, how are you following Jesus?

If you have responded to his call, is Jesus at the center, as Lord, governing over every aspect of your life?

Follow me is the essence of what it is to be a Christian. And I came across this quotation from Steve Lawson this week, and I'm going to read it to you because I think it captures so much of what I'm trying to say.

The height of the Christian life is adoring Christ, the depth of it loving him, the breadth of it obeying him, and the length of it following him.

Everything in the Christian life revolves around Jesus Christ. Simply put, Christianity is Christ. But a second implication, and it has to do with our mission as believers, as individuals, as a church community, as a group of unlikely fellow sinners.

[28 : 26] I think this story should really shape and reshape and continue to reshape our worldview because to follow Jesus is to share in his mission for the world, to share the message of repentance

and restoration.

And part of this church's mission statement is to change the world. So what do you expect that to look like? What is our part to play?

I think in order to do that well, in order to love the Levi's of the world, in order to see everyone, every person we come into contact with as desperately in need of their sins being forgiven, we have to be persuaded, like Jesus, that no one is beyond saving.

Just like Levi, the traitor, no one is beyond saving. So what might it do to our evangelism to remember that Jesus saved and continues to save the unlikeliest of sinners?

For us here at BA, some of the unlikeliest have walked through our doors. So what's our default response? To love and reach out like Jesus did with Levi, or to shy away because it's a tad inconvenient?

[30 : 00] Today, praise God, is two years since Simon joined our church and came to know and love Jesus. Why? Because no one is beyond saving.

Every time someone comes through those doors for a cup of tea or some shelter from the atrocious weather, they are not beyond saving. And what about in your own life with your ones and twos? Who do you know that you think is just too far away from ever considering Christianity? Let alone repenting of their sins. I'd love for you to just visualize them for a second.

And if no one comes to mind, then maybe some deeper reflection is needed. I had a friend a couple of weeks ago tell me, John, I will never become a Christian.

Our passage tonight stands in direct contradiction to what my friend said to me. Jesus came to call the unlikeliest of sinners.

[31 : 04] That is why he came, for the unlikely like you and me. So let's pray for God's help in our discipleship and in our mission as believers.

Let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that the Lord Jesus came not for the righteous, but for sinners.

We thank you that the story of Levi illustrates this so clearly and helpfully. We thank you that if we are trusting in Jesus, does our own lives also illustrate Jesus' compassion and the fact that he reached out to us to save us also.

Heavenly Father, please help us, even as we leave this building tonight and into the next week, to have a worldview and a vision like Jesus'.

To think of everyone as a sinner desperately in need of forgiveness. And dear Heavenly Father, help us to remove anything that gets in the way from us following you the way you would have us.

[32 : 23] We pray for your help in all these things. In Jesus' name. Amen.