

## What Did Jesus Say?

*“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

What do you think is the worst thing that Christians have ever done in history? You and I both know the facts: genocide, oppression, bigotry, humiliation. We would be hard pressed to find an area of the world where arguably well-intentioned Christians haven't hurt a lot of people in irrevocable ways. Even in looking at Christians here on campus, we could easily find ways that they have made life hard for others. Is that what Jesus would do? I would argue that none of these actions or their results is in keeping with the way that Jesus calls us as his followers to live, but they are illustrative of precisely why those of us who turn to him are in desperate need of a savior. More than that, they serve as a reminder to us of the kinds of lives we can and should be living as Christians.

In Mark, we see the kind of people that Jesus sought out as followers: “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?’”

That would have been pretty shocking. The Pharisees were the self-righteous, religious men of the day, the keepers of the law, so for them it was unbearable to see Jesus associate with those they saw as people so far from living good lives that sharing a meal with them wasn't even an option. When Jesus looked at these people, though, that wasn't what he saw: “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.’” When Jesus looked at the tax collectors, he saw people who were broken by the demands, difficulties, and delights of the world, and he knew that he had the answers that would heal them and give them God's gift of what the prophet Jeremiah called “hope and a future.”

If we were perfect, we wouldn't need God or His gifts. What He has to offer, we would already have – a way of life that is perfectly right, perfectly compassionate, perfectly humble, perfectly fulfilling, perfectly healthy. But that isn't true for me; I fall short in so many ways of the kind of person I should be. Each one of these failures could serve to pull me farther and farther from God and from living a loving, truth-filled life, especially if I thought that I needed to act perfectly by some strict set of standards. They don't, though, because of Jesus, who, having lived a perfect life, served as a sacrifice for the sins of mine that would condemn me to separation from God in order to promise me a new life of faith in him, in which I am freed from guilt in order to start again towards a more compassionate, honorable life every day. David writes in the Psalms that “blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him,” and I am learning what it means to live in that promise. Basically, it means that the same God who created the universe loves to get to know us, wants good things for us eventually and above all, and has created a way for us to become the forces of good that He wants us to be. Even better, we don't have to do anything to enter into this promise and relationship but accept His gift of forgiveness for our failures.

Jesus doesn't, however, call Christians to easy lives in which the ways we hurt those around us don't really matter because of that forgiveness. He asks us to live in his shadow of compassion, truth, and healing in a very dark world; when we as Christians fail to do that, we miss the point almost entirely. Jesus promises that those who turn away from their world-focused ambitions will find freedom from guilt about their tax-collecting pasts so that we can live lives abundant with the goodness and justice that God has planned for the world. We are offered lives free from the pride and pressure of adhering to strict laws and free from the meaningless pursuit of the empty dreams of greedy tax collectors, but that isn't all. Ultimately, we are offered lives that speak to Christ as the kind of person and deity who associated with the people that no one else would eat with because he had an answer to their pasts that could liberate them from any evil. He also knew that once liberated, they could carry out his vision for creation as a reflection of God's goodness, and we as Christians who understand the immensity of God's forgiveness for our failures should do the same.

We don't always live out that story well. When Gandhi said that he liked our Christ but not our Christians, he was probably articulating something similar to thoughts that cross God's mind every now and then. A God who is perfect couldn't possibly like the ways that we fall short of loving everyone around us as human beings of immense, unimaginable value. Furthermore, God must hate the ways that we have – historically and presently – actively harmed others in His name, not only misrepresenting Him but also driving creation as a whole away from the peace, compassion, and joy it is meant to hold. But though I'm sure He doesn't like us as we are, I know God loves us for who we are becoming: the people we were meant to be, people who love others and act mercifully, justly, and kindly.

So, we began with the worst ways Christians have failed to become what we were meant to be in the past and the present. These things shouldn't be forgotten, and they shouldn't be sources of perpetual guilt, but most of all, they shouldn't be the way we think about Jesus. Maybe the way we do think about following him, however, should start from the fact that he loved us, as hateful and flawed as we are, enough to die so that we could approach him and choose to live lives with the potential to have a much more beautiful collective legacy.

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