

**Manteca Presbyterian Church**

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**“Do I Have to Love That Neighbor?”**

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*Mark 2:14-17*

*14 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. 15 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. 16 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?"*

*17 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."*

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**Introduction**

Our story today is about a party crasher named Levi. In Mark 2:14 we read *“As he walked along Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.”*

Levi was the kind of guy a good Jew never, ever invited to his party. Ever. Why? Because he was a tax collector. Here in America we don't put faces or names to our tax collectors for good reasons. In a few weeks I will send a check painfully written to some nameless IRS office in Fresno. Fresno. I don't even know the name of the person who will open that envelope. The IRS is just this big, impersonal, scary government entity that wants my money every quarter. I've learned to do whatever I have to do to please them. I even hire a competent tax

preparer who promises to go to court for me the IRS ever perceives I haven't done something right.

But the tax collectors in Jesus' day had real names, Jewish names that Jewish people knew. What made paying taxes especially painful for Israel is that the taxes weren't even being collected for Jews. No, they were collecting money for the hated Roman governor who ruled them. That made Jewish tax collectors especially hated among Jews. They were seen as traitors to their country and since the Jews thought of their country as God's country, they were seen in essence as traitors to God. Most thought traitors should never be invited to their party.

Yet here was Jesus handing out an invitation to this hated Jewish traitor to join his party. Of all the people he could have invited, couldn't he have found a quiet, faithful, loving, devout Jew instead of a traitor tax collector? I mean out of the thousands of people who would go out to hear him preach, there must have been a more appropriate guy to include than this tax collector. What was he thinking?

Continuing in Mark 2 at verse 15 we read: *"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. 16 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?'"*

Good question. Why does he? I think there's one fairly obvious answer as to why Jesus ate with sinners: the Jesus Creed. That's been our subject during this Lenten season and it really helps explain Jesus' behavior. Jesus took Deuteronomy 6:4-9 that every good Jewish young man of his time would recite: *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'* Then he added to it Leviticus 19:18 *"The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* This little creed, the Jesus Creed, is what shaped Jesus' life. Everything Jesus did came from living out the Jesus Creed.

## **Loving God with Our Heart**

As we studied the Jesus Creed in previous weeks, we saw how loving God with our heart means to be passionately in love with God. If you've ever been in love you know what passion is. You can't stop thinking about the one you love. But then after a while that passion can wane. Couples whose passion for each other wanes need to get away and rekindle their relationship. They need to court one another again, perhaps as they did at the beginning of their relationship. In the same way if our passion toward God has waned we need to get away alone with the Lord for an extended time, maybe a day and rekindle that relationship. **So on a scale of one to ten how is your passion toward God right now and what can you do about it?**

## **Loving God with Our Soul**

In the culture of Israel the heart (levav), not your brain, was thought to be the place of your consciousness or your thinking. The word translated as "soul" is "nefesh." It refers to the life that is within us, so it should be regarded as a description of what makes us a conscious living being.

Loving God with our soul means to have no other gods or allegiances in our life. God is a jealous God who doesn't want to share us with anyone. Yet we put all kinds of things and pursuits before God. If there's anything we're pursuing first before God means we are not loving God with our soul. Maybe you've heard the phrase "he sold his soul to the devil." That means we've put our self in a place where we'll be thinking about someone or something more than God. **What do you think about most of the time? Is that what you want your thoughts to dwell on? What can you do about it?**

## **Loving God with Our Mind**

Jesus added loving God with our mind when he modified the original Jewish Shema prayer in Deuteronomy. Why? Deuteronomy and the whole Old Testament was translated from Hebrew to Greek over a century before the time

of Jesus. The 72 Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew into Greek chose words that reflected a Greek understanding in that day. Because of advances in science, the Greeks had determined that the brain, not the heart, was the place of thinking, and they referred to it as the “mind” (dianoia). Like its Hebrew counterpart, the Septuagint used the Greek term for the soul (psuche) plus a term giving emphasis (dunamis, meaning “power”). So the Septuagint didn’t change the basic meaning of the Hebrew text. It still conveyed wholeness and loving God with all that we are.

When Jesus came along about 150 years later, both the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament were well known. Jesus blended the terms from both the Hebrew manuscript and the Greek translation, using the Hebraic concept of the thinking in the heart, the shared concept of the soul, and the Greek concept of thinking in the mind. That’s why loving God with our mind is added to the Old Testament prayer that Jesus adopted.

In a general sense, Jesus was just being true to the Hebraic way of communication through repetition, similar to Hebrew poetry where phrases are repeated with slight variations but are simply used to give emphasis to a single concept. But it’s also reasonable to conclude that Jesus was trying to show that it doesn’t matter if you think in the manner of Jews or Gentiles, which oftentimes is very different, we all need to love God with our thoughts. All the while, He still retained the fundamental concept of loving God with all that we are. Jesus, like Moses before Him, called for a total, not partial, commitment to loving God. That’s the kind of love that remains our calling today.

Now in Mark 2 Jesus gives us a demonstration of what he meant by loving God with our mind. To invite a tax collector, someone you despise, to your table or your party means you have to change your mind set that says tax collector types or whatever types you can't stand aren't welcome here.

After WWII some American veterans who served in the Pacific theater had a hard time loving or even accepting the Japanese. I’ve known a few of these men. Whenever they would see a Japanese person it would remind them of the death of their friends in war at the hands of the Japanese. One such veteran was

a Pearl Harbor survivor named Alec Boatman, who was a member of my church in Hemet.

Alec had a difficult time saying he loved God while he had so much hatred toward the Japanese following the war. So he set out to write a book about his experience in the hopes of finding some kind of relief. In the process of writing the book, God used someone to challenge Alec to interview a Japanese soldier who had fought against him in the war. In the process of researching the book he discovered that his Japanese counterpart really wasn't much different than himself. The two reconciled and Alec was able to move on in his love for God. His book *The Pacific Appointment – Two Lives that Met at Pearl Harbor* describes the lives of the men as they grew up in their respective countries, fought against each other and what happened to them after the war. As a result of writing the book and choosing to interact with his Japanese counterpart he overcame his prejudice. That's one example of loving God with your mind.

But of all the examples Jesus could have used, he used one of the most difficult to love, the tax collector. In Jesus' day the tax collector collected money for the occupying Romans but then added an overcharge that went to the tax collector. So paying your taxes meant supporting a foreign government and supporting the lifestyle of a traitor. To invite someone like that to your party required gaining control of your mind and overcoming all that built up hatred.

But for Jesus, inviting someone like a tax collector to his party also meant jeopardizing his reputation among the Jewish leaders, people he would like to reach. It's like the time a father took his son out of my youth group in a previous church because he didn't want his son associating with the kind of kids who came to my youth group. Good, upstanding Jewish teachers of the law aren't going to dirty themselves eating at a table with tax collectors. Tax collectors were party crushers. The Jewish leaders were certain that if Jesus was a genuine Jew they'd be invited to his table, not the tax collectors. They were invited but they didn't want to come partially because they couldn't change their mind about the tax collectors. **Who is it that you need to change your mind about?**

## Who are my Neighbors?

In Jesus' mind we love God and show that love by loving our neighbor. But some will ask is the tax collector really our neighbor? You know he lives in a different neighborhood. But we have all kinds of neighbors. We have **waving neighbors**. These are the folks you wave to as you're accelerating your car heading to your next destination. You may not know their name, where they're from or how long they've lived there because our only interaction with them is just a wave.

Occasionally and unfortunately you may get **the cursing neighbors**. Those are the people who lay in wait until you return home so they can curse you for bringing a cat into the neighborhood that now walks on top of the fence between your houses. Or the same neighbor who cursed me for washing my car in my own driveway because she said the water runoff was killing her lawn even though I only use water. Cursing neighbors.

Then there are **the nosy neighbors** who every time you get out of your car, or walk to your mailbox or mow your lawn come out the door wanting to talk. "I see you have another car, is somebody living with you?" Every time you drive up to your house you know they're watching your house. That can be an advantage if someone tries to break in. I'd rather rely on my dog.

Sometimes the nosy neighbor can become **the obnoxious neighbor** who always has advice for you on how you should mow your lawn, wash your car, what flowers to plant, and whatever other information he feels necessary to share with you whether you ask for it or not. Or the neighbor who has the dog that begins barking at 11:00 each night and continues until 5:00 in the morning despite your many requests asking him to quiet his dog. Obnoxious neighbors.

Sometimes we get a **best friend neighbor**. We had one the last time we lived in San Jose and we're still friends. Our boys played together and she and her husband would come over to visit until he left her for one of the guys in the neighborhood but then she continued coming over alone.

There's also **the mysterious neighbor** where the guy never seems to leave his house, ever. Weeds get taller. Open cat food cans lay littered across his walkway, a broken down hot tub sits in his front courtyard, a broken down car or two covers his driveway and old newspapers yellow in the sun. He's the mysterious neighbor.

Over the years we've had the big time drug dealer, ex cop neighbor whose house was invaded by a SWAT team. We've had the party to 3:00 am on a Saturday night neighbor that we've had to call the cops on numerous times. There's the drunk neighbor. The needy neighbor. The dangerous neighbor. The sick neighbor. The lonely neighbor. The quiet neighbor.

**A neighbor can be anyone we have contact with**, in the stores, on the streets, in the schools, in the houses around us, anyone. The Jesus Creed tells us to love God with our whole being including our mind and those neighbors as ourselves. But what if we really can't stand our neighbors? We don't like their music. We don't like their friends. We don't like their lifestyle. We just don't like them.

### **Why God Brings Those Neighbors into Our Lives**

We have a couple of choices with people we don't like. We can write them off and ignore them unless they become like us. Or we can ask ourselves "Why did God bring that person into my life?" Maybe God brought that obnoxious neighbor into our life to increase our love for God.

If that sounds backwards to you it is. In the Jesus Creed loving your neighbor is proof that you have love for God. As long as we only consider our friends whom we like as our neighbors then it's quite easy to love our neighbors. "See God, I do love you, I really do love my neighbors." We love our friends because our friends give us something in return that we like, friendship. But obnoxious neighbors also give us something; headaches.

So how does an obnoxious neighbor increase our love for God? The more you love God the more you will love yourself. The more you love yourself, the more you will love your neighbor. Then you will see your neighbor, the person

driving by with the booming radio on, the person pushing the shopping cart with ten body piercings, the elderly person slowing you down ahead of you at the bank, you will see those neighbors more the way Jesus sees those neighbors. In Mark 2:17 we read how Jesus saw those neighbors: *“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.”*

Loving God with all your mind means you have to do something about all those prejudices that have crept in during your lifetime. We have to do something about those stereotypes we have of people we don't like. We have to reprogram the mind. Not everyone we meet has to be our friend but they don't have to be excluded from our life. The way we reprogram our mind is to see people like God sees people, sinners in need of God's help.

### **Praying Daily for Your Neighbors**

So check your mind and see who it is you don't like. Make a list of those people. Maybe they've hurt you. Maybe they're repulsive to you. Maybe they're dangerous for you. You know who they are. This week try to pray for them every day. Pray that they will come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior. Pray that God will somehow reveal himself to them in a new and fresh way. It may be someone that you see in the store or on the street. Pray for that person each day this week and see what happens to your mind. If you refuse to pray for them because your hatred or disgust for them is too great then ask God to draw you closer to him.

Jesus died on the cross for each one of us including your obnoxious neighbor. With open arms Jesus welcomes all of us to his table of salvation. All you have to do is open your heart and invite him in. If you haven't already done so, this is the day to love God with your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength but especially your mind to accept him as your Savior. Come Lord Jesus, I give you my life.

## **Small Group Ice Breaker Questions**

1. Guess the favorite food of the person sitting next to you (unless that person is your spouse or best friend)
2. Describe the most unusual neighbor you've ever had.

**Recite the Jesus Creed as a Group** - 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph, page 3

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Why were tax collectors especially disliked in Jesus' day? Who are their counterparts today?
2. What does it mean to love God with our heart?
3. What does it mean to love God with our soul?
4. Loving God with our mind was not part of the original Hebrew Shema prayer that Jesus adapted. Why did he add it?
5. What does it mean to love God with our mind?
6. Why do you think Jesus used such a despised person as a tax collector for an example of a neighbor?
7. How would praying for your neighbors help change your mind about what you thought of them?

## **TO LEARN MORE**

**Join a Small Group – call the church office for times and location  
209/239-3159**

**To learn and encourage one another**

## **IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH**

- 1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal  
Romans 3:23-24**
- 2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death  
Romans 6:23**
- 3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us  
Romans 5:8**
- 4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow  
Him to become the master of our life  
Romans 10:13**

**Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...**

*"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."*