

Mark 2:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Analysis

Jesus responds to Pharisaic criticism with a powerful analogy revealing His mission's heart. The metaphor of physician and sick establishes that recognizing spiritual sickness is prerequisite to receiving Christ's healing. "They that are whole" (*οἱ ισχύοντες*, *hoi ischyontes*) refers to those who perceive themselves as healthy, not those who actually are—the Pharisees considered themselves righteous and thus had no sense of need for Jesus. "They that are sick" (*οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες*, *hoi kakōs echontes*) are those who recognize their spiritual disease—tax collectors, sinners, and outcasts knew their desperate need. The verb "have need" (*χρείαν ἔχουσιν*, *chreian echousin*) indicates absolute necessity—the sick cannot heal themselves but require external intervention. Jesus' statement "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (*οὐκ ἥλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἀμαρτωλούς*, *ouk ēlthon kalesai dikaious alla hamartolous*) reveals His mission: He seeks those who know they need salvation, not those who trust in their own righteousness. The irony is sharp—the "righteous" Pharisees were actually sinners who refused to acknowledge their condition, while acknowledged "sinners" who repented found salvation. Reformed theology emphasizes that the first work of the Spirit is conviction of sin (John 16:8)—until people recognize their spiritual death and inability to save themselves, they won't seek Christ the Physician.

Historical Context

This exchange occurred after Jesus called Levi (Matthew) the tax collector and dined at his house with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:14-15). Tax collectors were despised in first-century Judaism as collaborators with Rome and extortionists who enriched themselves by overtaxing fellow Jews. They were considered ritually unclean and excluded from synagogue worship. Pharisees maintained strict separation from such people to preserve ritual purity. Jesus' willingness to eat with tax collectors and sinners scandalized the religious establishment—table fellowship signified acceptance and intimacy. By dining with outcasts, Jesus demonstrated that God's kingdom welcomes those who repent, regardless of past sin or social status. The Pharisees' self-righteousness—trusting in their Torah observance, genealogy, and ritual purity—blinded them to their need for God's grace. This pattern repeated throughout Jesus' ministry: outcasts who knew their need found salvation (the tax collector in Luke 18:13-14), while the self-righteous remained in spiritual darkness (the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-12). The early church continued Jesus' mission to the marginalized, welcoming slaves, women, Gentiles, and the poor—those considered outcasts by Roman society.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does self-righteousness—whether religious performance, moral achievement, or cultural respectability—prevent people from seeking Christ the Physician?
2. In what ways does the modern church sometimes resemble the Pharisees in avoiding 'sinners' rather than following Jesus' example of pursuing the spiritually sick?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	ἀκούσας	ό	Ἰησοῦς	λέγει	αὐτοῖς	οὐκ	χρείαν
When	heard	G3588	Jesus	it he saith	unto them	no	need
G2532	G191		G2424	G3004	G846	G3756	G5532
ἔχοντες·	οἱ	ἰσχύοντες		ἰατροῦ	ἀλλὰ	οἱ	κακῶς
have	G3588	They that are whole		of the physician	but	G3588	sick
G2192		G2480		G2395	G235		G2560
ἔχοντες·	οὐκ	ἥλθον	καλέσαι	δικαίους	ἀλλὰ	ἀμαρτωλούς	
have	no	I came	to call	the righteous	but	sinners	
G2192	G3756	G2064	G2564	G1342	G235		G268
εἰς	μετάνοιαν						
to	repentance						
G1519	G3341						

Additional Cross-References

Luke 15:7 (Righteousness): I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repented, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

Luke 19:10 (Parallel theme): For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Isaiah 55:7 (Righteousness): Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Luke 15:10 (Sin): Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repented.

John 9:40 (Parallel theme): And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also?

Luke 15:29 (Parallel theme): And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

Isaiah 1:18 (Sin): Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

Titus 2:14 (Sin): Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.

Acts 20:21 (Repentance): Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 18:10 (Parallel theme): Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

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