

JESUS: THE SERVANT AT WORK

VOLUME ONE

STUDY EIGHT

Look Who Jesus Hung Out With!

Mark 2:13–17

Legalism isn't a well-meaning but misguided friend, but rather an aggressive opponent to the life of joy and faith and liberty in Christ.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WE scream when thieves attempt to steal what is rightfully ours. We stand against bullies who want to intimidate those who don't know how to defend themselves. And we have a zero-tolerance policy for those who want to take away our freedom or turn us into puppets on a string!

We should have the same responses toward legalists.

Legalists sneak into our churches trying to steal from us our liberty and spontaneous joy. They tell us what to do and what not to do. What to wear and what not to wear. They even tell us with whom we should hang out. Too often, we fall in line fearing these ever-watching judges. We quickly comply lest we experience shame and condemnation. We dance to their tune as these puppeteers pull our strings.

Legalism has always been an enemy of the spiritual growth of God's church. In his commentary, *Insights on Mark*, Pastor Chuck Swindoll defines legalism as:

an attitude of authoritarianism. It is a desire to control other people by enforcing an exhaustive list of dos and don'ts that attempts to define which external behavior should be considered acceptable by the circle of legalists.¹

Legalism takes advantage of our insecurity and ignorance of the Scriptures. It gains territory when no one confronts its manipulation or fights for freedom. It reigns when people are crippled by fear and intimidated by those in authority.



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SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES
BIBLE STUDIES

Look Who Jesus Hung Out With!

Mark 2:13–17

This spiritual bully goes all the way back to the first century. Though many hesitated to confront its tyranny, Jesus did! He embodied grace and truth. He refused to let the legalists—the power-grabbing scribes and Pharisees—pull His strings. He called them “Hypocrites!” He said they were like “whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity” (Matthew 23:27).

In the passage for this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, we’ll watch Jesus confront a group of Pharisees who looked down their noses at Him because of who He hung out with. We’ll learn from Jesus how we can deal with modern-day legalism as we walk in His grace and freedom.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

The psalmist looked to God alone to show him the right way:

*You will show me the way of life,
granting me the joy of your presence
and the pleasures of living with you forever.* (Psalm 16:11)

Express your profound trust in God’s direction as you seek Jesus’ way of life. Thank Him for the joy of His presence. Cherish the deep inner peace of walking with our great God and Savior.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The Lord called His covenant people, Israel, to be “a light to guide the nations,” to “open the eyes of the blind,” and to “free the captives from prison” (Isaiah 42:6–7; 49:6). Obeying God’s ancient call, Jesus shone His light of love to the lost and led them into a saving relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the religious experts sneered, “Look who He is with!”

Previously, Jesus had exposed the scribes who scowled at Him when He told the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:1–12)—something they said only God could do. Exactly! He was God! To prove He was who He claimed to be, “the Son of Man [who] has the authority on earth to forgive sins” (2:10), Jesus healed the man. That was the day the paraplegic walked home, whole in body and soul.

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In the next scene in Mark, we find Jesus by the Sea of Galilee, teaching about God's kingdom in which *all* are welcome through faith in Him. Jesus was setting captives free with His message of grace—which infuriated the legalists who were losing their hold on the people. Let's follow His footsteps as He walked in true freedom and taught us to do the same.



Observation: Jesus Shakes Up the Neighborhood

In observation, the first step of the *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, place yourself in the story, in the context of when and where it was written, so that you can find out what it says.² Walk in Jesus' sandals as you read [Mark 2:13–17](#) in various translations.

He Calls a Hated Tax Collector—Mark 2:13–14

According to Mark 2:13–14, what was Jesus doing by the seashore? Whom did He see and what did He say to him? Why would the average Jew in Jesus' day be shocked by this?

Tax collectors were despised, despicable, scum-of-the-earth people. Jesus walked into the tax booth and said to Matthew [Levi in the NLT], “Follow Me.” To make matters even more amazing, Matthew closed up his shop, closed up his books, wrote off all of the stuff he'd been doing, and he followed Jesus.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

He Spends Time with Lost Sinners—Mark 2:15

What happened in the scene in Mark 2:15? Note the kind of people Jesus spent time with.

They were following Him. They—tax collectors and sinners—were following Jesus. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Mark 2:13–17

He Dialogues with Judgmental Legalists—Mark 2:16–17

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, to whom did they speak and what did they say? How did Jesus confront them?

He called them to task. “What is this you’re saying? You think the sinners don’t need the message? Why do you think I came?” —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Jesus Hung Out with Sinners

We saw that Jesus called Levi, also named Matthew, who was sitting at the tax booth to follow Him as His disciple. Reread [Mark 2:13–14](#) in the Amplified and NET translations. Explore the article “[Tax Collector](#)” in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible* at [biblegateway.com](#). Why were the tax collectors hated by their fellow Jews? What message did Jesus communicate by calling Matthew to follow Him?

There wasn’t a legalist on the planet who would have ever given Matthew the time of day. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Read [Mark 2:15](#) in the MSG and the J. B. Phillips translations. Why do you think so many people who were shunned and despised by religious Jews were among Jesus’ followers?

*They were curious. You know what else? They were accepted. Their lives hadn’t been transformed yet, but there’s something about Him.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

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The Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does he eat with such scum?" (Mark 2:16). Jesus answered their question by stating His mission:

"I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." (2:17)

Review the article "[Who Were the Pharisees?](#)" at [gotquestions.org](#). Why would they be alarmed by Jesus' mission to save sinners? Explain why Jesus confronted them.

Jesus confronts them and their proud, super-critical, super-spiritual, squint-eyed stare as if they were righteous. What they were is self-righteous. Jesus sitting among them, ministering to those who would not otherwise have heard, is in this magnificent place of opportunity. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: God Loves Sinners

After Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden and hid themselves, the next steps belonged to the Holy God (Genesis 3:10). In His great love, however, God moved toward them in their shame, calling out, "Where are you?" And then, in His abundant mercy, He made clothing to cover their nakedness ([3:1–21](#)). God loves sinners!

What does this account from Genesis along with [Mark 2:13–17](#); [Romans 5:6–11](#); and [2 Corinthians 5:20–21](#) teach us about God's love for us? How would you describe God's heart in His pursuit of the lost?

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What similarities can you find between our passage and [Luke 19:1–10](#) in terms of the people that Jesus called and the reaction of the legalists? How do both passages accentuate Jesus' mission? How does Jesus' way of life transform our lives, giving us abundant joy and true freedom?

Sinners don't like all those rules and regulations. And Jesus loves people like that because He knows that there is down deep within them the ability to be taught and to be transformed. Never forget when Jesus calls His followers, He calls us not because of what we are but for what we are to become.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Jesus called us to walk in freedom. What wisdom can we gain from passages such as [Galatians 5:1–16](#) and [Colossians 2:8–23](#) to deal with legalism?

You're able to think. You make your own decision about what to wear. Where you work is pretty much your choice. The way you work, your attitude is up to you, your response to people, your choice of friends. If it isn't found in the Scriptures, you will never hear me emphasizing it as a rule of life.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Walk in Freedom

When we use the Scriptures as our guide, we learn how to think on our own and walk in freedom. Pastor Chuck shares with us some practical ways to deal with modern-day legalists. First, *be aware of them*. Second, *refuse to pick up the habit of becoming other people's conscience*. Third, *deliberately stand against legalism*. And fourth, *enjoy your freedom despite legalists' attempts to steal it*.

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Which of the four guidelines do you find most challenging? Why not request God's help with this area?

What has the Holy Spirit pinpointed to you in this passage that touched an area of your life in a transforming way? Note it below and thank Him for His companionship, guidance, and abundant joy. Close your study in prayer praising God for seeking you and never stopping until He found you.

It was a great day in my ministry when I decided I would not be a doormat for the whims of people. That is not my task. My task is to answer to God, to live a life that honors Him in which I carry out my responsibilities for His glory and under His power. If we live like that, we'll be transformed people.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Thank You, heavenly Father, for loving me just like I am. Thank You for sending Your Son to seek and save me. What a joy to know that nothing can separate me from Your love! What great freedom I have because of Jesus' great sacrifice! May the strings of my heart stay connected to Yours, so that I might know abundant joy and experience true freedom. In the name of Jesus, I ask this. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Mark*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 2 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 63.
2. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page "[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](https://www.insight.org/how-does-pastor-chuck-swindoll-study-the-bible)" at [insight.org](https://www.insight.org).

For the 2026 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Mirlenda Noëlliste in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2010, 2026 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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