

## **Dinner with Jesus: Sinners at the Table (Luke 5:27-32)**

Faith Manhattan Church | 2.18.24

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This morning we're going to begin a two week study that will draw our attention to one of the most common ministry practices of Jesus described in the New Testament.

Throughout the Gospels, we're told that Jesus was known for spending much of his time at the dinner table eating and drinking with others. He visits the homes of outcasts and breaks bread sinners. He accepts invitations to be the guest of honor at the parties of Pharisees and social elites. He miraculously provided thousands with food, filled fishermen's nets to bursting, and even enjoyed a picnic with his friends shortly after his resurrection.

Food, drink, and magnificent heavenly banquets also appear frequently in the stories he tells to teach people about the Kingdom of God. Jesus says that he is the living water and the bread of life, and that only he can satisfy the thirst, hunger, and longing of our souls.

There is something about food that speaks to all of us, that connects us, and makes things easier to understand. There is something about sitting at a table with someone that breaks down barriers, creates opportunity for understanding, and allows for blessings to be both given and received by all who gather to share a meal.

Jesus knew this, and used the dinner table as a tool throughout his ministry to gather the unlikeliest of people together, sit them down side by side, look them in the eye and say *"let me tell you something about the goodness of God, the greatness of his love, and the kind of life He wants you to live,"* all between bites of fresh baked bread and sips of good wine.

This week and next week, as we take a closer look at what it means to have dinner with Jesus, I hope we come away with lessons that profoundly change us, shape us, and make us more willing to think about whose tables we share, and who we invite to join us on our own.

Today, we'll begin doing just that by looking at what happened when Jesus spent time with and at the table of a man named Levi.

27 After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Luke 5

Our passage begins with Levi, a "tax collector", sitting in his booth, presumably going about his daily routine of collecting the money owed to the Roman Empire.

Rome's system for collecting taxes was both pretty clever, and corrupt. The Empire put out bids for the collection of taxes. Whoever won the bid would make their money not simply from collecting what was owed, but by increasing what must be paid in order to create a commission for themselves. Basically, this meant taxation was driven by greed and gathered through extortion. And there was no way to avoid it. There was no process for appeal and no way to check to make sure you were paying a fair rate. Whatever the tax official said you had to pay, you had to pay...and everyone knew more often than not, you were paying too much.

All of this led to the Jewish people having a deep hatred for tax collectors. The job was considered reprehensible, and anyone who worked as a tax collector was regarded as a traitor to the nation of Israel and a traitor to God himself. They were considered among the very worst of sinners. They had no honor, no respect, and found no love among the people of Israel.

So it must have been pretty shocking for Levi when one day Jesus – not just a Jew, but a Jewish rabbi, or teacher – walked up to Levi and said “Follow me.”

This sort of thing simply did not happen. Respectable rabbis did not wander around the city and pluck their followers from their daily jobs. Most of the time disciples of rabbis were carefully selected through a long process of theological training and intense testing. There were requirements that needed to be met to become a close student of a teacher. There were also firmly established social barriers meant to keep certain kinds of people – the sick, the foreigner, and most certainly the sinful traitorous tax collectors – away from such prestigious positions.

Jesus did not care about such things – or rather, he did care, so much so that he was committed to breaking down and doing away with the barriers he knew were wrong.

And so, here in Luke 5:27-28, Jesus sees an unwanted, excluded, enemy of his own people...and walks right up to him and says, “follow me.”

Why does Jesus do this? It's really pretty simple:

**Jesus came to be with sinners.**

Jesus came to be with sinners. To share life with people considered worthless, faithless, and reprehensible. Jesus came to spend time with the kind of people this world often overlooks, casts out, and tramples all over. Jesus came to get close to people who struggled to keep God's law, who didn't always choose to do the right thing, who had histories filled with bad decisions and plenty of disobedience still to come in their future.

Jesus came to be with broken, hurting, flawed, sinful people. That is who he loved, so much so that he desired to spend time with such people every single day. Jesus came to be with sinners, to walk right up to them, and say, “I want you to come follow me.”

Over this past week, as I considered what it meant that Jesus came to be with sinners, I became ***profoundly grateful***.

I am grateful that **Jesus came to be with sinners**, because it means that Jesus came to be with me. That this man who I believe to be the Son of God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, and the Savior of all people...sees me sitting in my own sin, and invites me to get up and follow him.

- I am a man who struggles with impatience, sometimes too quick to speak, too quick anger, and too slow to kindness.
- I am an imperfect husband, an imperfect father, an imperfect son, and an imperfect pastor, and sometimes those imperfections lead me to hurt rather than bless the people I want to love and the people I try to serve.
- I have been a follower of Jesus Christ for more than two decades, and yet still, somehow, even with all I know and all I have experienced, still I find ways to sin against God every single day.

And yet, praise God, I believe that Jesus came to be with sinners ***just like me***. I don't have the words to express the gratitude I have for a Savior like that.

If you, like me, feel the weight of your own sinfulness, then perhaps today you too can be glad and grateful: because Jesus came to be with a sinner just like you, too. He's not driving you away. He's not creating barriers to get away from you. He's coming right up to you, meeting you at this very moment, and saying *“come, follow me, come be with me, because I came here to be with you.”*

How can you express your gratitude for a Savior like this today? How might you respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him in your own life? Jesus came to be with sinners. He came to be with you. What would it look like for you to get up and go with him today?

We're told that Levi, after being called by Jesus, gets up and leaves everything behind. Which is pretty wild – most people probably don't leave a stable job with solid income and great security so they can follow some wandering preacher that just popped up. But that's exactly what Levi does. And then he goes one step further – he throws a big party and invites all his friends...who, of course, are traitorous tax collectors and sinners themselves:

29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

Luke 5

This was probably a great party. At least, until, the Pharisees crash it. Why are they so bent out of shape over the guest list? Why do they show up, probably uninvited, to question and complain about this gathering?

It's because at this time, and in this culture, sharing a meal with someone was relationally and spiritually significant. To gather with people at the table, to pass them food, to pour them wine, and to sit with them late into the night eating, drinking, laughing, and chatting – it was meant to create community with all in attendance. The dining room was a sacred space. You did not eat with people you hated. You did not sit with your enemies and offer seconds. You did not make your table a place of inclusion for the kind of people you thought weren't the right sort of people for you to be around.

But that is exactly what Jesus is doing in the home and at the table of Levi the tax collector.

Because Jesus is not only willing to be with sinners, to be seen with questionable people, or to spend time with those considered deplorable in his day.

**Jesus came to befriend sinners, too.**

Jesus didn't keep a safe distance. He got right into the messy lives of miserable people. He pulled up a chair, broke off some bread, and turned acquaintances into friends, and friends into followers, and followers into people passionate about His Gospel and the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' willingness to befriend sinners at the sacred space of the dinner table confused and even upset the scholarly Jewish elite. They used the table to set boundaries. They saw food as an opportunity to prove one's devotion to purity and loyalty to God. Their dining rooms had restricted access so only the right sort of people – Israel's best people – would be welcome.

Which is a shame, because a table of exclusion and self-made righteousness has never been part of God's plan. Look at what the prophet Isaiah said when he spoke about the heavenly banquet promised to all those who turn to the Lord:

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts *will make for all peoples* a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

Isaiah 25

God sets his table for all people who know him. There are no boundaries of merit or qualifiers connected to your history. You just need the invite of a friend – and that is exactly what Jesus offers to us all.

There is good news for those who wish to seek fellowship and friendship and forgiveness and more from the Lord – you are *welcome*. You are expected. You are wanted at God’s banquet. Come and find your seat at the table.

Even if you feel like you are an enemy of God, that you are too far gone in selfishness and sin and disobedience for God to want anything to do with you...friend, you are not. Because Jesus sits with sinners. Jesus eats with his enemies. The table is where he does some of his most magnificent, transformative work in our lives. So come, and follow him. Come, and sit with him.

And as you do...perhaps you, if you’re like me, also need to be convicted by his example. Because this week, as I thought about what it means that Jesus befriends sinners, my heart was deeply moved to examine my own life, and who gathers around my own tables.

The Pharisee’s couldn’t believe Jesus would share his life so intimately with the people they believed were the enemies of God. They couldn’t open their hearts to such a display of fellowship with those they thought ought to be rejected and avoided.

We all, if we’re being honest, probably have some people we’d classify as the “enemies of God” today, don’t we? People we think of as greedy. Neighbors we think of as nuisances. Members of one political party or another. Advocates for ways of life we deeply disagree with and barely understand. It can be so easy to create a long list of people we are so sure are the very worst of sinners.

But look at what Jesus is doing here, in this passage, in his ministry, with every breath of his life here on earth, and ask yourself: ***how many dinner tables have you shared with the people you judge to be the “enemies of God”?*** Who gets an invite into your home, or your Bible study, or your life group? Are the tables in our lives just echo chambers for the comfort of our own opinions? Or are they missions fields, bursting with the potential for a harvest of rich conversation and new faith?

Jesus came to befriend sinners. And if we’re going to claim to follow him, we must do the same. This is both good news and a tremendous responsibility. Look around the tables in your lives this week. Who is sitting there? What do you think about them? Do you sit back and complain about their lives, judging them in your heart? Or do you scoot your chair a little closer to better hear their story, and better understand how you might share Christ with them in a way that could change their lives forever?

Jesus has a beautiful answer to the judgment and complaint of the Pharisees: *“why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*

31 Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Luke 5

*I am a doctor, Jesus replies. Why would I avoid those who are sick? I am the Savior. Why would I stay away from the very people who need saving?*

V32 has always been a bit strange to me. What does Jesus mean when he said, *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”*? Why wouldn't Jesus want to call the righteous? Doesn't he like the people trying their best to do what God wants?

I don't think Jesus is trying to make the Pharisees the bad guys here. I don't think he's insulting their attempts to live according to their understanding of God's law. Jesus loves the Pharisees, too. Next week we'll look at a time when Jesus was at their table. He wants to be with, befriend, and save Israel's leaders just as much as he wants to save Israel's traitors.

V32, rather, is a brief but brilliant declaration of the Gospel. If Jesus had come to call the righteous, we'd all be doomed. Because in the end, all over this earth and throughout every age, there is one undeniable and tragic truth: ***there are no righteous to be called.*** No one is getting life right enough, living well enough, being obedient enough to make their own way into the presence of God. Our own sin makes that impossible.

But nothing is impossible for Jesus, the Son of God, **who came to save sinners by calling them to repentance.** Jesus says, *“Follow me. Only I can change your life, and change your heart. Only I can show you to your seat at God's table.”*

Look back at v28, where Levi responds to Jesus' invitation. We're told he got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. Levi understood this as a decisive moment. Jesus wanted to be with Levi, and he wanted Levi to be with him. But for this to be done, a sacrifice had to be made. Levi couldn't keep claim to his former life of lying and stealing to get what he wanted. So instead he accepted Christ's offer. He left everything in order to follow Jesus.

Levi, a sinner, was called to repentance, and he said *“yes.”*

All us here today receive this same call. Jesus speaks to us all, whether we've been a Christian for 50 years or have not yet made up our minds about him. Every day Jesus calls out: *“follow me.”* And every day we choose: stay and sit with our sin, or get up and leave it all behind to be with Christ?

What do you need to leave behind today? What is your “everything” that you need to abandon for the sake of following Jesus? Jesus came to be with sinners, to befriend sinners, and to call sinners to repentance. But it is up to the sinners – it is up to you and to me – whether or not we'll take up his invitation and be with him.