

The Guest List of Grace

Luke 5:27-35

A couple months ago, I got invited to a party at the Vietnamese embassy in Washington DC...

I still have no clue why...

I walked into a room filled with congressmen and senators, people who actually belong in rooms like that.

And there I was, sipping my bowl of Pho, trying to look like I do this kind of thing all the time...

Have I ever been to Vietnam...? No

Do I know anything about Vietnam...? No

Did I do anything to earn an invitation to that room? Absolutely not

But I was there...

And if you had walked up to me that night and asked,

“What are your credentials?

How’d you get into this party...?”

I would have had one answer...

**I would have pointed to the guy who brought me and said,
“I’m only here because of him...”**

Not my resume...

Not my connections...

Not my accomplishments...

Not anything I have done...

He invited me...

That’s the whole explanation....

And I had a great time! I got a free gift bag. I got to hang out with the Vietnamese Ambassador.

And that’s really the heart of Luke 5...

Jesus teaches us here that the kingdom of God is not about impressive people earning access to God. **It is about unqualified people being invited in by a great friend...**

The kingdom of God is pictured here like a feast...

A great party we had no business getting into...

And yet, every person at the table can point to Jesus and say the same thing, *“I’m only here because he invited me...”*

Pause

And that raises an important question for all of us...

When you think about God, or when you walk into church,
what do you feel?

Because for a lot of people, even church people, the dominant feeling is not joy. It's pressure...

Pressure to prove.

Pressure to perform.

Pressure to clean yourself up before you can belong.

Luke 5 explodes that picture....

**We have the worst sinner possible,
brought into the best party possible...**

Here is the central claim of the text.

When Jesus shows up, sinners are invited to the party, and joy replaces religious performance.

We see this in 3 movements:

- 1. Grace Invites (27–28)**
- 2. Grace Welcomes (29-32)**
- 3. Grace Rejoices (33-35)**

Let's start with the invitation...

1. Grace Invites (27–28)

27 After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, “Follow me.”

Luke 5:27 (ESV)

Luke begins with two words that matter: **After this**

That means this moment is connected to what just happened...

Jesus has just healed a paralyzed man and publicly declared forgiveness of sins.

The religious leaders are already tense.

The temperature of the room is rising.

And then Jesus walks out and locks eyes with a man named Levi...

Levi... **He had a problem with his genes....**

Thank you. They get better don't worry.

A tax collector.

There may be some tax people here. Jesus loves you.
The rest of us are still praying to love you like Jesus does...

Well, in the 1st century, it was even worse...

The Jewish people were living under Roman occupation.
Tax Collectors were the public face of that oppression.

Levi's job was to collect money from his own people for an enemy nation...

And it gets worse...

Tax collectors were notorious for taking more from than what was required... Skimming off the top. Padding their own pockets.

That's why earlier in Luke 3, when tax collectors asked John the Baptist what repentance should look like, he says,

“Collect no more than you are authorized to do.”

(On Screen)

¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.”

Luke 3:12–13 (ESV)

Because everyone knew their reputation...

Levi was an anti-Robin Hood...

Extorting the poor to make themselves rich...

To give you some perspective, one commentator says Levi was like a modern day member of the Mafia...

And to make it worse... Levi was a ***Jewish*** tax collector!

Which makes him a double traitor.

He profited off the suffering of his own people...

So if you were just starting a respectable religious movement...

If you wanted some momentum and credibility to your cause...

Levi is the last person you would recruit...

Pause

Levi is not spiritually curious.

He is not searching.

He is not seeking..

He is sitting at his tax booth, actively participating in injustice.

And Jesus walks up to him and says two words,
“Follow me.”

No conditions.

No probation period.

No cleanup plan.

**Jesus does not wait for repentance to call Levi.
The call creates repentance.**

Pause

Grace does not follow change.

Grace causes change.

Pause

This is how Jesus always works...

He moves toward sinners.

He befriends them.

And then He changes them...

Jesus did not just stay confined to religious spaces.

He went to tax booths, dinner tables, and broken homes.

Today, Jesus would've gone to the frat house, or to the bar, or to the Orioles game.

So that he could rub shoulders with people far from God.

Not endorsing sin, but present where sinners actually are...
Because that's where grace goes...

And notice the call itself...

That phrase **“Follow me”** means more than *“come to church.”*

It is a total claim...

- Join my life.
- Submit to my authority.
- Walk with me.

And Luke gives us Levi's response... Verse 28,
And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.
Luke 5:28 (ESV)

Luke is emphasizing the cost...

Levi does not add Jesus to his routine...
Levi does not squeeze Jesus into his schedule...
He leaves everything.

And here is the miracle many people miss...

The miracle is not simply that Levi walked away from money.

The miracle is that God showed Levi something better...

Grace does not just demand sacrifice

Grace creates a new desire.

Some of you think the Christian life is mainly Jesus asking you to give things up.

But in the Bible, what happens first,
is Jesus giving Himself to us...

And when Jesus becomes more valuable than what you cling to,
leaving becomes possible.

Pause

**The same power that lifted the paralytic off the mat,
is the same power that lifts Levi out of the tax booth.
And it's the same power that calls us forth to follow him.**

Pause

And here's where the story gets even better...

**If you keep reading the gospels,
you discover that Levi has another name...**

Matthew...

As in the guy who wrote the gospel of Matthew...

Pause

**The man Jesus calls from the tax booth becomes the man
entrusted with passing on the Word of God to every
generation of humanity...**

Jesus takes a thief, and turns him into a witness.
A traitor, is turned into an Apostle...
A sinner, entrusted with writing Scripture...

**If Jesus can do that with Levi,
*what do you think his grace can do with your life...?***

Please don't try and write Scripture....

But don't underestimate what His grace can do with your heart...

And for those of us who follow Jesus, this confronts us too:

If Jesus went to Levi... And we are following Jesus...

Then faithfulness cannot mean waiting for broken people to come to us....

It must mean going to ordinary places with gospel intentionality, loving people where they are, and inviting them into the same grace we received...

Because the guest list of grace has never been built on qualifications...

It has always been built on invitation....

1. Grace Invites (27–28)

And what I think is wild about this story is Levi, the evil tax collector, gets the same invitation Peter the fisherman got...

“Follow Me”

Since Levi was a tax collector in Galilee, a region by the sea, he likely was responsible for taxing the fisherman...

So Jesus makes disciples of the fisherman, like Peter, and the people that steal from the fisherman, like Levi.

What a picture of redemption. All are welcome to know Jesus...

And isn't that a picture of what church is supposed to be?

Pause

Levi had a lot of money, but he didn't have a lot of friends.
Peter had a lot of friends, but didn't have any money.

And in the church, Jesus provides financial support to Peter, and community for Levi. **And grace for both.**

And Jesus gives us an image of what his church is called to look like: **A party of grace...**

2. Grace Welcomes (29-32)

What happens next is just as shocking as the call itself...

Levi does not respond to grace by becoming quiet, cautious, somber, or withdrawn...

He responds by throwing a party.

Verse 29,

²⁹ And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

Luke 5:29 (ESV)

Levi's first instinct is not isolation. It's invitation.

He brings Jesus into his home, into his life, into his relationships, into his reputation. And he invites his people.

Luke tells us the guest list includes **tax collectors** and **others**...

I love that word... Luke calls them **Others**....

People who do not fit in.

People who don't normally get invited to parties.

In other words, *the whole crew*...

- The people society avoids.
- The people religion judges.

And Jesus reclines at table with them.

Now that detail matters...

This was more than a chip and dip affair...
In the ancient near east, a meal was a boundary marker....

A meal was where you crossed the boundary into friendship.
Intimacy. Into unity.

This was more than you and I grabbing bread bowls at Panera
during our lunch break.... This was a big deal.

And Levi is saying here:

“We are great sinners. But Christ is a greater savior.”

That’s what brings us together.
And he wants his friends to know the grace he has experienced.

And it’s here that the religious leaders begin to unravel...

One commentator puts it like this,

“Among the Jews (in particular) it was an unheard-of thing for a rabbi or any other religious leader to lower himself by staying at the house of a [sinner].”

- Norval Geldenhuys (NICNT)

For the Pharisees, eating with people who were unclean.
Meant you shared in their sin.

Eating with people who were unrespectable.
Meant you were unrespectable.

And they believed one of the ways you showed devotion to God was to avoid these kinds of people.

That's actually where the word Pharisee comes from.
A Hebrew word that means *separate one*.

And that's why they accuse him with this question, verse 30,
³⁰ And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'

Luke 5:30 (ESV)

Notice, they do not go to Jesus directly....
They grumble to his disciples.

**Because that's what religious pride does.
It loves indirect judgment. Gossip. Slander.**

And their question reveals their theology:
They assume holiness means separation from sinners.

Jesus answers with an image everyone understands in verse 31,

³¹ And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

Doctors do not avoid sick people.

Doctors move toward sick people.

Jesus is saying,

“My presence at this table is not compromise, it is my mission.”

Then he makes the point unmistakably clear, verse 32,

³² I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

That sentence is both tender and terrifying.

Tender, because Jesus is saying,

“I came for you. Not the cleaned up version of you. The real you.”

Terrifying, because it exposes the Pharisees, the self-righteous...

Jesus is not saying they are righteous.

He is saying they think they are...

And that is the danger....
Self righteousness makes you immune to grace.

If you think you are basically fine, then you will never run to a doctor.

Some people are far from God because of rebellion
Others are far from God because of religion.

And Jesus calls both to repentance.

And this is so important for those of you that grew up religious...

- Some folks, like Levi, need to repent of their evil deeds.
- But, some religious people need to repent still, of their good deeds...
 - The deeds they think can whitewash themselves into being deserving of heaven and just before a holy God...

Pause

That word **repentance** matters...

Because grace does not ignore sin.
Grace does not pretend sin is harmless.

Jesus does not say, "I came to affirm sinners."
He says, "I came to call sinners to repentance."

But notice the order...

Jesus sits at the table first...
Then he calls them to change.

We tend to reverse it...

We say, *"Change, then you can belong."*
Jesus says, *"Come near, and I will change you..."*

That's why so many people think church is only for the cleaned up...

I've heard so many people say,
"Oh you don't want me at your church. God would strike it down with lightning if I walked in...."

But they didn't learn that from Jesus...

Jesus did not require repentance in advance before associating with sinners. **And neither should we.**

Someone shouldn't have to stop cussing, or sleeping with someone, or taking drugs for you to welcome them into your life.

Jesus befriends people as they are, and they are slowly changed by his gospel.

May that be so of us.

I pray the partiers, prostitutes, gangsters, and drug dealers of Baltimore have friends like Jesus. Friends like you and me. That love them as they are. And tell them this wonderful news of a savior that forgives sin.

And this table in Luke 5 is a preview of a greater feast...

A foreshadowing of a greater table, filled with redeemed sinners from every nation and language. Where Levi, you, and I will gather around the savior who has welcomed us...

Pause

So when you open up your home for a barbecue, or a Super Bowl Party, or a roof top deck hangout...

When you invite someone far from God into your life....

You are acting out the coming reality of the Kingdom...

Sinners and a Savior, all at one table

Not because they earned it.

But because Jesus welcomed them...

2. Grace Welcomes (29-32)

3. Grace Rejoices (33-35)

Up to this point, the Pharisees have been offended by *who* is at the table.

Now the criticism shifts. Verse 33,

And they said to him, 'The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.'

Here, they aren't challenging Jesus' miracles..

They're not debating His theology...

They don't ask whether Levi's life is actually changing...

They are offended by joy.

Eating. Drinking. Laughing. Celebrating.

They're not just offended by the guest list at the table.

Now they are offended by the mood at the table...

And to be fair, fasting mattered in Israel.

It was a common, Biblical practice...

A voluntarily going without food as an expression of mourning, longing, and waiting for God to act.

In 2 Samuel 12, David fasted and wept when his child was dying.

In Jonah 3, Nineveh fasted when Jonah pronounced God's judgment on them.

One scholar defines fasting in the Old Testament as,

“An outward expression of the inward reality of a shattered heart.”

- Don Green

That's the feel of it...

Somber. Serious. Waiting. Pleading for God to act.

So the Pharisees are essentially saying,

“If God's people are fasting, if we fast twice a week, if even John the Baptist's disciples are fasting...

*Why are your disciples asking for seconds and thirds?
Having a party!?”*

In other words, *“Jesus, if you were really spiritual, wouldn't you look more miserable?”*

And Jesus responds with one of the most important images in the gospels...

Verse 34,

'Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?'

Jesus compares His presence to a wedding.

Because weddings are not the time for gloomy faces and heavy hearts. They are a time for joy...

Wedding invitations usually say something like,
"Please join us in a time of joyful celebration..."

Could you imagine getting a wedding invitation that said,
"Please join us in a spirit of contrition and brokenness as a new son in law enters our family."

No. We get down at weddings.

At weddings there is food, a DJ, dancing, laughter, speeches, gifts, and life!

Even Uncle Rufus is having a good time...
You turn on the right song and he's dancing...

And in the 1st century, weddings lasted for days...
Sometimes a full week!

At weddings you celebrate....

Jesus is saying, "You do not understand what time it is."

Fasting makes sense when you are longing for God to come.
Fasting makes sense when you are waiting for rescue.
Fasting makes sense when you are pleading for the Kingdom.

But if the One you were longing for has arrived,
why would you fast...?

And underneath that image is something even bigger...

In the Old Testament, God describes himself as the bridegroom of His people (Isaiah 62:5).

**So when Jesus calls Himself the bridegroom,
*He's making an identity claim.***

God is here.

Heaven has come down.

The reason for longing and fasting has arrived...
The party has started because the King is present.

That's why the Pharisees cannot handle the joy...

They can handle the rules
They can handle rituals
They can handle outward acts of piety.

What they cannot handle is the possibility that God is not offering them a spiritual ladder to climb, but a Savior to receive...

Pause

And this is still a problem today...

Christians should be the most joy filled people on earth!

- God has come near to us.
- Our sins have been forgiven!
- Our eternity is secure.

Yet, so many Christian environments I've been in feel like a 1st period High School History class...

Somber, boring, stale.

A lot of people, when they think of Christians, they think of Angela from “The Office”.

Stuck up, pretentious, hypocritical, never happy, obsessed with cats.

You can walk into a lot of churches today and you'll see very little joy and excitement.

The building is stuffy. No one is smiling.

And I think that's a theological issue...

Because when faith becomes mainly about what you need to do, rather than celebrating what Christ has already done...

You end up with a guilt-motivated, boring, judgemental, church that no one actually wants to be at...

But Jesus is saying, *“That's not what I came to bring!”*

The bridegroom has come.

The party has started!

I'm not offering what every other religion in the world is offering...
Empty religious duties, with the faint hope of heavenly acceptance....

I've come to secure for you what you could never have gotten on your own: A joyful relationship with the living God!"

Pause

You know there are a ton of parties in the Bible.

I think a lot of lost people would be shocked by that...

But, the gospels are full of feasts and celebrations.

And God is constantly telling the religious people to stop being so stuffy...

Stop standing outside the party with crossed arms...

**Jesus is telling the legalistic critics. Grab a drink.
Enter the party!**

Join the guest list of sinners saved by grace.

Some of you this morning have not entered the party.
You don't have the joy of God.

- Because the thing you want you don't yet have...
- Your deepest heart longings haven't been fulfilled
- And you're outside of the party, arms crossed, frustrated at life...

And Jesus says what are you moping about!?

- Your greatest problem, I've already solved.
- Your deepest desires are fulfilled in me.
- There is nothing you can worry about that isn't comforted by the resurrection I've secured for you!

So many people in church today act like they're at a funeral and not a wedding....

Especially men. *I've seen you get excited...*

Just watch the guys in this room watching the SuperBowl tonight... They're clapping. They're standing up. They're jumping up and down. He's shouting at the top of his lungs.

You get excited about what matters to you...

There's a reason we sing on Sundays.

There's a reason we show up every week with joy.

There's a reason we stand to read the Word.

There's a reason we laugh a lot.

There's a reason we have a gospel chill.

Jesus Christ has come. And the party has started! God's kingdom is breaking into this earth, pushing back against the decay of sin.

We have been brought into an exclusive wedding that we should not have been invited to! And this morning, we're celebrating together!

**If I could boil this point down to one sentence:
it's that Jesus looks more like DJ Khaled than Ebenezer
Scrooge.**

**"Another one!
God did!"**

Jesus came to bring a celebration, not a burden.

Then Jesus adds a sentence that changes everything, verse 35,
**The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from
them, and then they will fast in those days.**

That phrase, **taken away**, is not normal wedding language.
That is violent language.

Jesus is quietly forecasting the cross.

He is saying, this joy you see at this table now is going to cost me something.... The celebration of sinners you are watching will be purchased by my suffering.

The bridegroom will be taken away, not because he sinned...

But because Levi did...

And because we did....

He is taken away so outsiders can be brought in.

The feast is free because the cost is paid by Him.

Joy is possible because the bridegroom will lay down his life for his bride...

Pause

A lot of people think Christianity is primarily God calling you to do religious things, so that maybe He will accept you.

Jesus flips it.

Christianity is God coming to you, in the person of Jesus, to rescue you, so your life becomes joy-filled obedience, not fear-driven performance.

So if your version of Christianity feels like pressure, boredom, and constant spiritual anxiety... Jesus is confronting that here.

Religion says, prove yourself.

Jesus says, come celebrate grace.

Religion says, clean yourself up so you can come close.
Jesus says, come close so I can clean you up.

And the question Luke leaves hanging over the room is simple:
Do you know what time it is?

If the Bridegroom has come, then the appropriate response is not performative misery. It is repentance, faith, and a joy that finally makes sense.

The reason we can come to the Lord's Table this morning is not because we are worthy.

It is because the Bridegroom was taken away.

And we rejoice now because He will return again.

So yes, there is fasting in the Christian life...
But it is not the fasting of terrified slaves trying to earn approval.

It is the longing of loved children who already have the Father's smile, and who are waiting for the wedding day to fully arrive.

So stop auditioning. Start following

Enter into the joy Jesus paid for...

Will you enter the party God has thrown?

Stop trying to explain or defend yourself all the time.

Just point to the one who invited you, and enjoy the party...

Let's go to that table now...

Pray