

Welcomed at the Table

Luke 5:27-32

INTRO

I've loved these advent videos and hearing about various peoples' stories about how they came to Christ and all that they've learned in their walk with him. Stories are powerful and this morning we are going to see the story of yet someone else in our text that encountered Jesus, the story of a guy named Levi...

v. 27-28 LEVI THE TAX COLLECTOR

Luke 5:27-28

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." **28** And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

So Jesus is out for another day of ministry and that day he sees a man named Levi. Other accounts has his name Matthew, and Levi is a tax collector. And understanding who tax collectors were is key to understanding this passage.

So, they are under Roman rule and Rome wants to get taxes from the people they rule over but they would subcontract the collection of taxes to other people. What would happen is people would make a bid to the authorities to try and get the job of collection taxes in their certain area. If they were hired to collect taxes they would collect enough to cover their bid but then they would often take more than that for their own salaries. As you can imagine, this became big business. The greediness of man and the power to take other people's money often led tax collectors to become pretty rich. Oftentimes, when someone becomes wealthy by shady means, we might call them "filthy rich." It is likely that Levi was "filthy rich." So, needless to say, tax collectors were not well-liked people. They were looked at as thieves.

Plus, if they were Jewish, they were seen as traitors, because they are working for Rome. They sold out and are now leveraging Rome's rule over their own people for their own gain.

So, again, they were seen as thieves and traitors. But they were also seen as unclean because of how much contact with Gentiles they encountered. Some rabbis even taught that if a tax collector set foot in someone's home everything and everyone in the home became impure.¹

¹ Philip Ryken, *Luke*, 228.

So, tax collectors were viewed as thieves, traitors, and unclean. They were hated in society.

And Jesus comes to a “tax booth” and most believe that it was like a toll booth that Levi would sit at and stop people transporting goods in and out of the area to tax them. Jesus walks up to the tax booth, looks at Levi, and the only part of the conversation between the two that we have in Luke’s account is the words of Jesus saying, “Follow me.”

Immediately we should see the grace of Jesus in this story. Of all the people for him to approach and call to himself, he calls the despicable, hated tax collector in town. Now, one of the principles of interpretation when reading through the gospels is look carefully at how they arrange the various accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. In other words, in their written collection of stories how have they grouped them, because in so doing, they are trying to point out something about Jesus. So, what has Luke just talked about right before this? Last week we looked at the previous stories, one about how Jesus touches a leper, a person who is unclean, and heals and forgives a paralyzed man. In those stories our attention is pointed to the truth that Jesus associates with the physical outcasts of society, but here, with Levi, we see Jesus associating with a moral outcast in society.

So, Luke tells us that Levi gets up, leaves everything and follows Jesus. He repents and leaves his old life behind. This isn’t the only time this happens with Jesus and a tax collector. We will see the story of Zaccheus who does the same thing...in Luke 19...so we will probably get there in 3 years or so...

Why immediately leave to follow Jesus? What changed in the heart and mind of Levi to make him leave it all to follow Jesus.

-Perhaps he was so fed up with his lifestyle that any alternative seemed like an upgrade. “I’ll try anything.”

-Perhaps he recognized the miserable state of his life (sin, outcast) and, having heard of this Jesus, is thrilled that he would come and speak to him of all people. And not only speak to him but call him to himself. So he gladly leaves his old life and follows Jesus.

By the way, there is a great grammatical gem in this verse as well. The verb Luke uses for “followed” in the original language is in the imperfect, which is a verb that describes something that happened in the past but it happened continually. In other words, Levi rose, that was a one time action, he stood up, but Luke now looking back with the help of eyewitnesses would say Levi not only followed Jesus that day, he continued to follow him throughout his life...

So Levi repents, follows Jesus, and immediately has a desire to introduce others to Jesus. Look at verse 29 we move from the tax booth to the table...

v. 29 AT THE TABLE

Luke 5:29

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.

Again, Levi is wealthy, so he throws this great feast. And he invites Jesus to it but he also invites his colleagues, other traitors, thieves, and outcasts. He wants them to meet Jesus.

Just as those who had been physically healed ran to others in need of physical healing to say, “We don’t have to live like this,” Levi runs to others in need of spiritual healing to say, “We don’t have to live like this.” Some of the very best evangelists are those who are new to the faith. Their conversion is fresh, they aren’t far removed from what they were saved from.

[ILLUSTRATION]

David S. - “Mom doesn’t want me to speak at her funeral, she’s afraid I’ll just preach about Jesus.”

v. 30-32 PHARISEES GRUMBLE

Luke 5:30-32

30 And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” **31** And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. **32** I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

The Pharisees, the religious leaders, those whose names literally means “separation” are disgusted that Jesus, the holy and revered teacher, would be at a table with tax collectors. The reason for their disgust has to do with the social customs of the day.

Table fellowship meant a lot in the ancient world. It meant that you accepted those people with whom you dined. And a lot of it revolved around social class, so you are saying we are at equal levels. I accept you into my sphere, symbolized by sharing a meal together.

So, there were sharp distinctions between groups of people, which were reinforced at the table of fellowship. In fact, there are ancient Roman sources that showed even if people from different classes were invited into common banquet or feast, there were different tables or rooms where they would be placed to eat with those in the same class.

We’ve flown a lot as a family, especially between Europe and America, but unfortunately I have never flown first class on an international flight. It is on my bucket list now, that some day I will get to experience first class. But if you’ve ever flown internationally you know there is that moment when you are boarding, the flight attendant asks you where your seat is and at that moment if you go left there is first class, with the seats that have tons of space and even lie down completely flat, but instead of going left to your seat you have to go right to where the peasants sit in economy. Or even worse sometimes you have to walk through first-class to find your seat in the back. And then,

after take-off the flight attendants, to make the distinction even clearer they pull these curtains to close off the sections from one another. You sit there for 8 hours and they slide in front of you a microwaved meal while everyone else is sipping champagne, eating filet mignon with their gold-plated forks and knives...again, I've never flown first-class, so I don't know if that is what really happens, but that's how I imagine it...

Obviously, sitting in economy on a flight is not really that big of a deal but you can imagine the real humiliation that people felt as they were kept on the outside, not allowed to the dinner parties of the socially important people, and if they were, they forced to sit somewhere else with people of their kind. Again, they kept really sharp distinctions about who was invited to their table, because you were associated with those people you ate with.

But notice Jesus' response, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." It's like he's saying, "Of course, I am spending time with sinners. Who else would a Savior spend time with?" And note Jesus isn't saying here, "Well there are some people who don't need me, because they are actually righteous." He is saying, "There are some who don't see their need for me, like you Pharisees, but there really are others who see they have no righteousness of their own and are ready for Savior. Those are the people I've come to be with. Those are the ones to whom I'm giving my attention."

So, we can imagine it was a powerful scene for all those involved: Levi (the new follower of Jesus), the other outcasts, the disciples, and the Pharisees. Now, there is a lot to learn from this event, here are just a few lessons for us this morning...

LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH

1. JESUS WELCOMES ALL TO THE TABLE

The table, here, is a metaphor for the gospel, a right relationship with God in Christ... Jesus welcomes anyone to be reconciled to God through their repentance and faith.

The invitation really is for anyone. Jesus is not afraid to associate with the outcasts of society. Those deemed unworthy, gross, despicable, unredeemable, or simply unimportant.

Jesus speaking with a Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), is an example of his concern for women, who really didn't hold important positions in the fabric of society, as well as his compassion toward someone racially different from himself as a Samaritan.

Jesus showed compassion and concern for the poor, though they had nothing to offer him in return.

Jesus regularly welcomed children.

Jesus, as we saw last week, would touch the "unclean" in society; lepers, those demon-possessed, others physically impaired.

Jesus would speak words of comfort and grace to sinful people, though they were cast at his feet while others called for their execution.

Jesus, would call both blue-collar workers and the wealthy to follow him.

Jesus cared for those who would have been viewed as oppressors, like Levi and other tax collectors, or even Roman centurions who cried out for his help.

Jesus isn't afraid or reluctant to welcome anyone to the table. And by the way, Jesus isn't afraid to dine with the uber-religious. In fact, in chapter 7 we see a different scene this time Jesus eating with Pharisees.

In the gospel, all are welcome. Regardless of social class, regardless of popularity, regardless of past or present sin, Jesus invites you to the table if you will see your need for him.

2. Because Jesus welcomes all to the table, FOLLOWERS OF JESUS SHOULD WELCOME ALL TO THE TABLE TOO.

Christians, we don't always do this well. We might readily welcome certain people who profess faith, but there are others that maybe are harder to accept, like we have almost different categories for those who we consider redeemable or worthy.

But we want to be like Jesus, certainly, but also like Levi. We want to say to those around us, "Our house is open." We want to say to anyone who is hungry to feast on the gospel, you are welcome here. There is a place at the table for you.

But we want to take some cues from the disciples of Jesus that day as well. Think about what that meal meant for them that day. Again, these are blue-collar workers who, no doubt, had been taxed unfairly, if not from Levi himself, maybe from someone else that was there. To follow their Master and sit at the table together, they had to offer forgiveness to those who had previously wronged them. So, like Levi, we want to say, "Our house is open," but like the disciples, we want to say, "Our arms are open, too." We have to be ready to forgive and celebrate the grace that united people both to God but also to each other.

The love of God, as displayed in the coming of Christ and the ministry of Christ, is not only a truth for us to celebrate, it is also an example for us to imitate. Just as God, through Christ, offers grace and forgiveness to people who have sinned against him and are deserving of judgment, we are to offer grace and forgiveness too.

This interaction between Jesus and the tax collectors is meant to teach us about his grace, but the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees is meant to teach us about self-righteousness.

That is, the belief that we have in us some kind of righteousness that deserves to be acknowledged and even celebrated. That we are, in ourselves by our own efforts and work, holy and godly. It is a belief that we all, in our fallen nature, deal with.

3. SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL KEEP YOU FROM THE TABLE

This is true of the Pharisees here. Rather than sitting down and enjoying the fellowship of Jesus and others, they stay outside, grumbling as they looked in.

Matthew 22:1-10 - Parable of the wedding feast

1 And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, **2** “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, **3** and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. **4** Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”’ **5** But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, **6** while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. **7** The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. **8** Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. **9** Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ **10** And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

Notice those who were invited but did not come. They made excuses for not coming to the feast, and their excuses revolved around their own work. One ignores the invitation to tend to his own farm and another to tend to his business. Those invited to the feast ignored the fact that the feast was already prepared, the oxen and calves already slaughtered for the feast. There was no more work that needed to be done. The king already prepared everything. Yet, they decline the invitation to pursue their own interests and work.

This is what self-righteousness does. It keeps you thinking that you have more work to do. That the time of feasting is not here yet, that it all depends on you. However, the good news of the gospel is that the king has already prepared the feast, not through the death of oxen or calves, but through the death of his own Son. Everything has been prepared for you, but you will continue to decline the invitation as long as you see your own personal work as necessary.

What you need to see is that the Pharisees were just as needy for the grace of God as the tax collectors. Any sin in our lives, is a sin against a perfectly holy God, and is deserving of judgment. And nothing you do will correct that. Nothing you do will make you righteous before a holy God. You are desperately in need of God’s grace. And in Jesus, God offers it. The Bible promises that those who turn from their sin in repentance and turn to God with faith in the finished work of Christ will have the perfect righteousness of Christ credited to their account. And you can then stand before God with a righteousness, not of your own doing, but one graciously given to you.

If you still believe that God will accept you because you think you are good or you at least try to be and do good, you are clinging to self-righteousness. But if you are trying to cling to self-righteousness, you will stand before God with empty hands. See your need for Christ today and turn to him.

4. Not only will self-righteousness keep you from the table, SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL KEEP YOU FROM *ENJOYING* THE TABLE

For those of us who have at one time, seen our need for God's grace, seen that we don't have our own righteousness that is sufficient to stand before a holy God, and called out to God for forgiveness and salvation in repentance, there is always a tendency to drift back to self-righteousness. If we are not careful we may begin to think that we've outgrown the gospel, that we no longer are daily in need of God's grace. That maybe before we were much more sinful so it really did take God extending grace to save us but now we've grown since then. And hopefully that is true. We should all be walking in holiness and godliness more today than we did in the past. But to think that you no longer need God's grace is simply not true. We are as undeserving today of our salvation as the day we first turned to Christ. And forgetting this will have a massive impact on your walk with Christ and your walk with others.

In fact, one way to gauge if there is any trace of self-righteousness in your heart is how you respond to others coming to Christ. That is what we see in this passage with the Pharisees. Self-righteousness renders you joyless in the gospel, not only for yourself but for others. Because, you can not celebrate grace when you don't think you need any.

And if you aren't careful you will be like Jonah, upset at God because he is gracious with people you don't think deserve it, rather than rejoicing that an entire city has repented.

You will be like the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who thinks you deserve a party and recognition because you haven't been as sinful as someone else, rather than celebrating the fact that your brother has returned home.

So, if you are unaffected by stories of God's grace, much like the ones we've heard in these advent videos, then you may have traces of self-righteousness in your heart. If you are not excited by the work of God when you see people baptized, if you are bothered by someone whose past has been covered by the blood of Christ now joyfully serving the church body, then you may have traces of self-righteousness in your heart.

If you do not identify that and repent of it, you will not enjoy the table very much.

We shouldn't be confused, surprised, or frustrated as people with broken lives and checkered pasts come looking for hope in the gospel. These are the very ones for whom the gospel is extended. And by the way, that includes all of us. Many of us live with microscopes on others' lives when what we really need is a mirror. We should think much more about the sin in our own hearts before condemning someone else for

theirs. We need to regularly recognize our own sinfulness, our own need for repentance, and when we do we will be much more prone to offer grace to others as well as celebrate the grace others have received in the gospel.

CONCLUSION - A FEAST FORESHADOWED

The use of a feast as a picture of salvation and fellowship with God is used a lot in Scripture. That day, in the house of Levi, was just a taste of the bigger work God was doing through Jesus.

1. Prophesied by the prophets - Isaiah 25:6-9

Isaiah 25:6-9

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. **7** And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. **8** He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. **9** It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

In the midst of judgment and despair, hope was offered that there would be a coming day when God's people would sit together and feast before their God. And following the storyline of the Bible to its end, we see this promise fully realized.

2. Fulfilled in Marriage Supper of the Lamb - Rev. 19:6-9

Revelation 19:6-9

6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. **7** Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; **8** it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. **9** And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."

There is coming another great feast. When Christ returns and gathers his people together, puts a permanent end to Satan, sin, and death, and makes all things new, the permanent unification of Christ and His bride, the Church, is described as a wedding feast. And around that table will be people from every nation and tribe, every social class, those that were popular in this life and those who were cast aside. And everyone of us will eat together to the glory of God who has graciously invited us to be with him.

That day, in Levi's house, those people got a small taste of the big picture of the work of God in the gospel.

If you've never responded in faith to the invitation to taste and see that the Lord is good, we urge you to do that today. Christ welcomes all to the table, who are ready to repent of their sins and self-righteousness, that is turn away from their sin and self-righteousness, and turn to him. You are not beyond the reach of God's grace. There is a place at the table for you.

For those of us who have responded in faith to the gracious invitation of God, let's not grow weary of inviting others and let's guard our hearts from self-righteousness that keeps us from rejoicing when others join us at the table.

VERSES

Luke 5:27-28

Luke 5:29

Luke 5:30-32

Matthew 22:1-10

Isaiah 25:6-9

Revelation 19:6-9

OUTLINE

- I. Jesus welcomes all to the table.
 - II. Followers of Jesus should welcome all to the table as well.
 - III. Self-righteousness will keep you from the table.
 - IV. Self-righteousness will keep you from enjoying the table.
- Conclusion: A Feast Foreshadowed

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who would you say are often considered "outcasts" from society today? Who would you say are often considered "outcasts" from the church community today?
2. How does the gospel teach us to welcome sinful people to the church?
3. How has the local church demonstrated to you the welcoming nature of the gospel? In what ways can you/we do better?
4. Is there any self-righteousness in your heart that you need to repent of?