



# GRACE CHURCH

## Feasting with Jesus

Luke 5:27-39

Grace Waco | 12.31.23

December 26th, the day after Christmas Day, is officially known as *Boxing Day*. While in the U.S. we don't acknowledge it as a holiday, many countries around the world do. The original point of Boxing Day, which started in Victoria England, was to box up gifts for the poor or lower class. It was also when servants in large country houses received a holiday, since they had to serve on Christmas Day. Boxing Day was a feast day for those who didn't get theirs on Christmas Day.

As Americans, we tend to think Christmas ends on December 26th. But historically speaking that has never been the case. The church calendar counts 12 days of Christmas time, until January 6th, the of Epiphany, a new season marking the adoration of Jesus by the Magi and his dedication in the temple.

So for many of us, especially those in service professions, it's back to work on December 26th. The machine doesn't slow—it moves faster than it did even in Victorian England. Instead of 12 days of feasting, we get one. So here is a quick reminder that it is in fact *Christian* to keep up your decorations until January 7.

If I may be so bold, I want to propose that we are not very good at feasting. We have Thanksgiving, 4th of July, Christmas, maybe New Years and some Birthdays... but we don't really understand the nature of feasting. Feasting is not first about family, nor about food, or about extravagance. Feasting is first and foremost a marker, a remembrance, of some sort of provision. It is an enjoyment of a reminder of past faithfulness. Feasting is about worship. And Biblically speaking, it always comes after a time of fasting. Traditionally in the church, Advent is a time of fasting before the feast time of Christmas, just as Lent is a time of fasting before the feast time of Easter. The point is: some great work of God is to be celebrated—but in order to celebrate it rightly, we must learn to long for it and wait for it and fast for it.

We are bad at feasting because we are bad at fasting. We don't really know what it is like to not get what we want, when we want it. Fasting is the opposite of convenience. And since we have understood fasting, we have misunderstood feasting. Feasting is not the indulgence of all our desires—it's the culmination of our desires.



In our text this morning, we have a perfect sermon for Christmastime. Advent was the time of waiting and fasting—expelled so well in Peter’s second epistle which we covered—but Christmas is the time of participating and feasting. How do we feast?

In our text today, we are introduced by Luke to a theme that will be very prevalent in his gospel writing—the theme of feasting, or eating and drinking, with Jesus. As we have said before, in the gospels there are three ways Jesus refers to his own mission: 1) the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost; 2) the son of man came not to be served by to serve; and 3) the Son of Man came eating and drinking. In other words, there is some Biblical link between Jesus’ eating and drinking and his work of salvation.

So we might say it like this: you have heard that the gospel of Jesus is that he died as a sacrifice for your sins and was risen so that you could be clean and right before God. That is true. You may also have been taught that the gospel is that Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead to defeat Satan and death and give you eternal life. That is true. But we can also say that the gospel of Jesus Christ is that he died and was risen from the dead so that you could eat and drink with God.

So with that in mind, let’s examine how Jesus feasts, and therefore how we are to feast with him, by seeing: 1) Who Jesus invites to feast with him; 2) What Jesus’ feast is like; and 3) How we feast with Jesus.

## **Who Jesus Invites to His Feast**

In the ancient world, feasting was often called “table fellowship”. When you invited someone over to your house, you shared the table with them. And in sharing with them, you were identifying with them, accepting them as a friend. This has special significance for Jewish culture, since to eat with someone was not just to socially accept them, but to come before God together.

In the east, even today, to invite a man to a meal was an honor. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood, and forgiveness: in short, sharing a table meant sharing life. In Judaism in particular, table fellowship means fellowship before God, for the eating of a piece of broken bread by everyone who shares in a meal brings out the fact that they all have a share in the blessings of the master of the house which are given by God.<sup>1</sup>

You do not invite just anyone to this kind of fellowship. And you certainly do not invite those who are unclean or unworthy of this fellowship. This is not a matter of kindness or hospitality, this is a spiritual matter. You can see why then, as we will see in a minute, it was so confusing that Jesus ate with all sorts of seemingly unworthy people. It was part of the reasoning given for his sentencing to death—that his eating and drinking with outcasts and sinners was a kind of blasphemy against God—totally incongruous with the claims he made about being the Messiah.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Jeremiah, *New Testament Theology*



In **verse 27-28**, Luke recounts the call of Matthew, called here by his name Levi, in rather brief detail, even briefer than the gospel of Mark. Levi is a tax collector, which means he would be an outcast in Jewish society. Levi collected taxes for Rome, the occupying government. Primarily his job was to sit in his booth, at the city gates, and charge anyone coming in with produce, fish, textiles, or anything to trade with a heavy tax. Many tax collectors were wealthy due to the ability to always change and fluctuate their rates in order to pocket more for themselves off the top. They had the support of Rome behind them, which means that extortion was just part of the job. Although a Jew, if he was a tax collector he was likely not a religious one, since Torah Law prevented Jews from doing business with gentiles. To be a tax collector was to lie in bed with the enemy, and to be outcast from Jewish society as not a real Jew. No good Jew wanted Levi at Christmas dinner. Tax collectors were in the same group as lepers—it wasn't just that people didn't like them, but that to even touch them or be around them would risk spiritual uncleanness. A tax collector couldn't even give to the poor—since Jewish law prohibited receiving money or alms from a tax collector. They couldn't go to synagogue. Jewish law said that you could lie to tax collectors without it being a moral wrong.

Levi was economically wealthy, but he was socially and spiritually poor. And Jesus, like the leper in the previous story, comes up close to him and calls him to follow him. Luke notes that he “left everything” to show his identification with Peter, James, and John in the passage before, but also to note that following Jesus meant a change of lifestyle, a new kind of living, an “away with the old, in with the new” idea that comes up later in the text.

We are so good at ostracizing, excluding, and uninviting. It's part of the human condition. Just look at how even kids understand that to identify with someone is to risk being misunderstood. If you hang around someone who is known as annoying, you may be seen that way too. If you hang around someone who is seen as less than, you get lumped in. My wife told me that she learned in a teacher training that among kids with autism, only 8-10% report that have been contacted by a friend in the last month. It's the same kind of sadness that didn't make interracial marriage officially legal nationwide until 1967. We may not go out and say we despise those who are unlike the norm, but by our exclusion we show that a core fear of man is the fear of shame from associating with those who are seen as shameful.

Shame is a core human emotion, and it is often felt in social situations—because deep down it is a sense of being unacceptable and found out. Ed Welch defines shame like this:

Shame is the deep sense that you are unacceptable because of something you did, something done to you, or something associated with you. You feel exposed and humiliated. Or, to strengthen the language, You are disgraced because you acted less than human, you were treated as if you were less than human, or you were associated with something less than human, and there are witnesses. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ed Welch, *Shame Interrupted*



But Jesus is completely unafraid to invite and associate with the shameful. It's not just pity, either. It would be like a prominent church member going to evangelize prostitutes on the street corner, only for the police to show up and round them all up together, her with them. And instead of exclaiming: "I'm not with them!", she rather accepts her association with them as an act of solidarity and love. Jesus is unashamed to feast with those seen as most shameful.

## ***What Jesus' Feast Is Like***

The second aspect of Jesus' feast we see is ***what kind of feast it is***. Levi holds a *great feast*, **verse 29**, in his house. This is likely a kind of Roman feast known as a "symposium"<sup>3</sup>, where there would be a course of food, followed by a time of drinking wine and often a presentation of some kind by an honored teacher. All of this means that it is likely that Levi is holding this feast in order so that his friends and colleagues might be in the presence of Jesus and hear teaching from Jesus and desire to follow him just as he has. In short, it is an evangelistic dinner.

Although Jesus is eating and drinking with sinners, his aim is not to give the thumbs up to their way of life. He says in **verse 32** that he has come to call sinners to *repentance*, literally a turning around of their ways and lifestyle. But in this scenario, the sinners have an advantage to those who are seen to be righteous. They get the opportunity to turn to Jesus.

Those who are furthest from the kingdom of God in this world are not those who have sinned their way into being outcasts. It's not the liars and cheats and sexually immoral, the gamblers and addicts and swindlers. There is a great sadness in seeing wickedness, no doubt, and God will not allow injustice to continue on the last day—but there is hope for those who are great sinners, because they *know* they are. The greatest sadness in the world is those who think they are not sinners, and who never see their sickness. It's the undetected cancer that will kill you.

So this dinner is an evangelistic dinner, a chance for those who seem to be the furthest from the holiness of Jesus to hear the call of Jesus and respond. And this is the kind of feast Jesus is inviting us into. It's a feast of repentance—which is a great gift—to turn around from our sin and into the presence of God. But we can only take advantage of this invitation if we understand our need for it. As Jared Wilson says: "we really find Jesus at the moment when we have the least to offer him".<sup>4</sup>

So this is an evangelistic dinner, offered to those who know their need for Jesus. But it's also a **dinner of healing**. There is a reason that Luke links this dinner with the healings in the previous passage, and why when the Pharisees grumble about Jesus' choice of dinner partners, he says in **verse 31** that this is a dinner for those who are "sick". There is something about feasting with Jesus that heals us of the kind of sickness that can only be described as shame. The tax collectors have

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<sup>3</sup> See *Dining in the Kingdom of God*, Eugene La Verdere

<sup>4</sup> Jared Wilson, *Friendship With the Friend of Sinners*



been shamed by society, and Jesus has come as the great physician to heal them—and the tool he uses is a feast.

You see, Jesus isn't just there to evangelize the loss. He is there to befriend them. This is fundamentally what it means to “eat and drink” with them. This is why Jesus compares his presence to a wedding feast, where he is the bridegroom. He is inviting them to his *wedding*, which is a great honor. He wants them to share in the celebration of a lifetime.

Now, we should stop for a second and define: what really is feasting? Feasting is not binging, it's not shameful excess. It's rather uninhibited and unashamed freedom. Freedom to enjoy. Freedom to be known, to be self.

The reason weddings should be great feasts is because they are a celebration of unashamedness. The bride and the groom are accepting each other and covenanting, vowing to be totally open, to be naked and unashamed together. That is worth celebrating when it is done in faith. This is why Jesus' feast is like a wedding—it's the celebration of a union between him and his church with no shame or fear of rejection.

But we all have been to a party that wasn't really a feast. Parties that aren't feasts are places where we feel more shame, not less. Instead of letting go, we put on airs. Or we just distract ourselves from the shame we feel. It's awkward, life is hard, so we drink too much and eat too much and drown out our longings with fleeting pleasures. Or, we just don't party at all.

Normally, we associate the lack of partying with the pharisees, but look: they are at this feast. They are participating. But the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is not the party they attend, but who they party with. They are at the dinner, but they are not “eating and drinking with sinners”. Normally they wouldn't be caught dead at a dinner with tax collectors, which means that the real reason they are invited into this party is because they have some sort of curiosity about Jesus. They are not yet ready to dismiss him outright—see them grumble to “his disciples”, showing that they are numbering themselves among those who are interested in Jesus—but their judgment is clouded by their expectations of Jesus. They have accepted him as some sort of prophet, and are here to receive his teaching, but something about the way Jesus converses with and fellowships with the unclean makes them second guess.

Why do they feel so uneasy? I think it's because they also felt shame. They feel they are missing something, but unlike the tax collectors, they can't admit it. Their feast of shame is their own shame. Because the funny thing about shame is that it can often be produced not just by the disapproval of others, but also by the disapproval of ourselves. The higher standards we put on ourselves to be perfect in our own power, the stronger our sense of shame. And the Pharisees were known for having standards that went above and beyond God's own law.



When that happens, nothing can satisfy us, and we cannot feel at ease at any feast. Claude Monet, one of the most acclaimed painters in history, once wrote near the end of his life to a trusted friend:

“More than ever today, I realize how artificial is the undeserved fame I have won. I keep wanting to do better, but age and sorrow have drained my strength. I know beforehand that you'll say my pictures are perfect. I know that when they are shown they will be much admired, but I don't care because I know they are bad. I'm certain of it.”<sup>5</sup>

How could he be certain of the badness of his masterpieces? It is because, although everyone told Monet he was righteous, he felt himself to be imperfect. There was a shame that he could not shake, the shame of his own inability to measure up to his own standards.

The Pharisees are the ones who are being told are righteous and perfect, and yet notice how different they are from Jesus. They carry shame, because even though they pretend to be perfect, they know that they are not. There is very little separating them from the tax collectors and sinners.

But Jesus is different. Even John the Baptist's followers are different from Jesus, as they bring up in **verse 33**. Jesus is doing something entirely different than any other prophet before him. Previously, the prophets showed their holiness and devotion by their removal of themselves from the world of sinners. But Jesus shows his holiness by his *welcome* of sinners. *What is so different about Jesus?* It's that Jesus carries no shame. Because he is without sin, he is not ashamed to befriend sinners. Because he has no shame, he carries his righteousness without a hint of vanity.

All of this leads to Jesus' parabolic sayings in **verses 36-39**. What is all this about new wine and old wine? What Jesus means to say is simply that the kind of feast he is bringing is a new kind. If you put new wine into old wineskins, the fermentation of the new wine will bust open the skin. So Jesus is saying: don't fit me in the box of the old covenant. Don't assume that the way to please God has ever been by a following of the law without a change of heart.

So the gospel of Jesus Christ might be summarized this way: God is throwing a party. We've fasted for quite a while, and we should be ready for it. And it's a wedding party, the greatest celebration you've ever seen. And the bridegroom has shown up. He is kind and a friend to the lonely. He is ready to feast. He invites all the outcasts and sinners and poor and sick to come to him for healing.

So the last question is this: how do we feast with Jesus? How do we get in on this?

## How we Feast with Jesus

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<sup>5</sup> I found this in an art book somewhere and wrote it down. Here is a reference online.  
<https://www.yevgeniawatts.com/blog/ed-monet-and-ira-glass>



There is an old Danish story called *Babbette's Feast* where a French refugee cook named Babette is employed by a puritan family. She lives with and cooks for them for years. Her only link to her past life is a lottery ticket. One day she finds out that her ticket has won her 10k francs, equivalent to about 50k in today's money. She decides to hold a great feast of gratitude for the family that has taken her in. She does her best to prepare a French dinner worthy of kings. The dinner is a beautiful thing, showing the great and unknown artistry of Babette. After the dinner, the family finds out that Babette has spent all 10k francs on the dinner. One of the family members says: "Now you'll be poor for the rest of your life", and I love this, Babette answers: "An artist is never poor." For Babette, a great feast, a great work of art, done in gratitude and honor, could never be a waste. Her friends, in her opinion, deserved the best, her very all, and so she gave it to them, without a regret in her heart. Now you might think: was one single meal worth all that? But that is what Judas thought when Mary Magdalene poured her expensive perfume on Jesus.

Babbette gave everything she had in honor of her friends. And this is what Jesus does, he gives his very life for his friends, for us. And so to feast with Jesus, we are called to the same thing. Give up our desire for reputation, give up trying to impress. Give up on trying to hide your shame. Instead, bring your shame to him and allow him to honor you with the crown of heaven.

The key to coming in to feast with Jesus is knowing that Jesus is worth leaving everything for. Coming to feast with Jesus is exactly what Jesus calls Matthew to: leave everything, and follow me. To come empty handed and ready to receive. That itself takes great humility—to put yourself in a place of need.

How do we feast with Jesus? It's by stopping our religiosity, which is trying to cover up and clean up before coming to Jesus. It's what every other religion says: do this, become this, master this, obey this, then you can eat with God. But Jesus says to sinners: come and drink the new wine. It's not easy, Jesus says in **verse 39** that once we get used to the old, we won't have a desire for the new. But once we really taste the new wine for the first time, it's so much better.

Now we live in the time of already-not-yet. Jesus has brought the feast to us. This is the gospel we are called to believe and be saved in—to allow ourselves to be welcomed and loved by Jesus and healed of our shame. But we also await the final feast. Until then, as Jesus says, since he is gone for a time, there will be times of fasting. But our fasting is only as a preparation for the new wine we taste now and know is coming fully. In our waiting, Jesus doesn't leave us empty. Every day we are invited to commune with Jesus by his Spirit. And every week, we come to the table of the Lord, where Jesus is said to meet with us and commune with us. It is in this supper that we feast on and with Jesus, and he says that he will fast until he drinks it again with us in the new heavens and the earth. So your first step to learning how to feast well? Come now, those who are in Christ, to this table. Take, drink and eat.

