

Good morning, Fellowship. It's great to be with you. This morning we're continuing our series, *Love Your Neighbor*. If you have a Bible, open up to Luke 5.

A couple of Christmases ago, my parents bought us a small gift. It was this little box of cards called, "Table Topics." It's simple. As you're sitting around the dinner table, you simply pull out a question and ask it to open up conversation. Our kids love it. Here are a few examples:

- Should kids be forced to try new foods?
- What do you enjoy most about your siblings?
- What do you worry about the most?

One night as we sat around having these conversations, it led to another popular question you've probably heard before. "If you could have dinner with any 3 people, dead or alive, who would they be?" From there, they chose the 3 people they'd have dinner with. Our son, Roman, being a basketball lover chose Luka Doncic, Steph Curry, and of course his favorite player: LeBron James. Our daughter said Pete Wentz from the band Fall Out Boy, Kathleen Hanna another singer, and her favorite author, Rick Riordan.

Now, let me pose that question to you. Who would be at your table if you could choose anyone – dead or alive – to be at your table for one meal? Would you choose, like Roman and Isabel, 3 people you admire? Would you choose a mixture of historical figures and present ones? Would you choose people completely different than you or those that are similar to you? Who is at your table?

If you're super godly, I am sure one of them was Jesus. In Luke 5, we'll see who actually got to sit at the dinner table with Jesus.

Luke 5:27-30: ²⁷ After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me." ²⁸ And he left everything behind and got up and *began* to follow Him. ²⁹ And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other *people* who were reclining *at the table* with them. ³⁰ The Pharisees and their scribes *began* grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus invites a tax collector named Levi to follow Him. Levi leaves everything behind to follow Jesus and then invites Jesus to celebrate at his house. Let's talk about tax collectors for a minute. To put it simply – they were hated. They're not like now. They were HATED then. Like...REALLY hated.

During this time, Israel was governed by Rome which meant Israelites paid Roman taxes which led to resentment for anyone associated with the Roman government. These tax collectors were mainly Jewish men who purchased contracts from and worked with the Roman government to collect taxes and tolls. They were asked to collect a particular amount of money

and anything over that they kept for themselves. If Rome asked for \$1,000 and they collected \$2,000 – they pocketed the extra money which incentivized over-taxing.

They betrayed and were oppressing their own people for financial gain. Tim Chester adds this: “...there’s more to it even than that. The Jews were looking for the day when God would defeat the Romans and re-establish His kingdom. So, it wasn’t just Jews versus Romans, it was God versus Romans. And the tax collectors had opted for the Romans. They were traitors to the nation and traitors to God. They were God’s enemies.” In the eyes of anyone Jewish – they were the scum of the earth.

That makes Jesus’ invitation to Levi scandalous. He’s hanging with the enemy – the oppressor – Benedict Arnold. And he’s not just hanging with Him, He’s invited this deceiving, conniving, greedy, betrayer to follow Him – to become His disciple. The rabbi, Jesus, will teach this man God’s Word, transform Him, and launch Him out to do the same.

Think about something with me. Think about how radically different Jesus and Levi are. Levi is a liar and deceiver. Jesus is the way, the Truth, the life. Levi takes. Jesus gives. Levi betrays his people. Jesus redeems His people. Levi oppresses. Jesus liberates. And this is important. Levi wasn’t oppressing just anyone. He was oppressing Jewish people – Jesus’ people. **These two didn’t have much, if anything, in common. They were radically different. But that’s what Jesus does, right? That’s what He did for you and me. He chooses us, in spite of how radically different we are from Him, to become His disciples. In His grace, He chooses us.**

Back to the celebration. Levi invites all his scum bag tax collecting friends and a group of people called, “sinners.” Sinners were ungodly outcasts. Some of them had diseases or deformities and the belief was their disease and deformity was punishment for their sin or their parent’s sin. They were unwelcomed with and rejected by the religious elite and forbidden from worshiping God in the temple. Again, it’s a group of people radically different than Jesus. **No religious leader would be caught with either of these groups of people.**

I was telling Kurt, this week, about my own journey in the faith. I became a Christian in High School and when I did, I began devouring God’s Word. I even had this goal of highlighting every single passage of Scripture so that others would see how much I read my Bible. I wanted people to see how “godly” I was. And, it lead me down this path of being very judgmental and very legalistic. If I saw someone drinking, cussing, smoking, or insert any other sin...I assumed they weren’t a “very good Christian.” And I would disassociate with people for that reason. I didn’t want to be around them and didn’t want them around me. I pushed people like that away in hopes of maintaining my purity and not being tainted by their impurity. I wanted to look good and I only wanted to be around people that were like me – the “good” Christians. Ever done that? Ever avoided someone because of your own fears, insecurities, or judgments? I’m sure you have. Who were or are those people?

Jesus, though, isn’t just near them; He’s sharing a meal with them which is incredibly important.

In ancient culture, to have a meal with another person meant acceptance and fellowship. It was an expression of joy. It meant you were being welcomed into relationship. It was communal, intimate and a symbol of a shared life.

“It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the culture of the Mediterranean basin in the first century of our era. Mealtimes were far more than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment. Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy, and unity. Thus, betrayal or unfaithfulness toward anyone with whom one had shared the table was viewed as particularly reprehensible. On the other hand, when persons were estranged, a meal invitation opened the way to reconciliation.” – Scott Bartchy

This is why the Pharisees are so upset and ask in verse 30, “Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus, a rabbi and Jewish man, eating with “these kinds of people” means He accepted them as they were. He wanted a relationship with them. Rabbis didn’t do that. They kept their distance because interacting with them would make them unclean. But Jesus wasn’t worried about that. Their sin and differences didn’t matter. Reconciliation with the Father is what mattered. He wanted His own image bearers to feel valued when they were with Him. **He wanted to make sure that those who seemed far off from God – were actually sitting right next to Him.**

Chapter 5 isn’t the last time Jesus shared a meal with people radically different than Him. He eats with people throughout His ministry. He even shared meals with the religious elite – showing once again – He wasn’t worried about who He interacted with. He, as the end of Luke 5 says, came for the sick and wanted every person He came in contact with to experience healing. He simply wanted to show value and worth to the people He created, people who bear His image.

Fellowshipping over a meal was one of, if not THE, preferred method Jesus used to Love His Neighbors. He used the meal, to show people they mattered, no matter how radically different they were than Him.

If we think about Genesis, we see why meals were so important to Jesus. God creates everything on heaven and earth – water, land, animals, and people. He provides nourishing food, and everything needed for a thriving life in the garden. There’s vertical intimacy and connection between God and His people, horizontal connection for humanity, and an enjoyment of God’s creation.

But once sin enters, it disrupts and dismantles that intimacy and connection. God’s people become His enemies. Humans become enemies of each other, leading to hostility, tension, and murder and that’s continued to this day. People begin worshipping creation instead of the Creator. It’s a true nightmare.

So...when Jesus comes to earth...there are these pockets of time – these moments that everything operates like it was intended to in Genesis. Think about it. God, in Jesus, is sitting at a table with His prized creation – those made in His image. There's vertical intimacy and harmony. There's love, laughter, and joy. **The people in this passage in Luke 5, are sitting around, and they're interacting with God through Jesus, experiencing His love and grace. He is FOR them.** The tax collectors and sinners are no longer ostracized and marginalized, they're together and accepted. They're experiencing joy and peace. And, they're doing this all around a table – enjoying food – creation as it was intended to be enjoyed. It's like...it's like they're back in the Garden of Eden. Everything is how it's supposed to be.

That's why the dinner table was Jesus' preferred method of loving His neighbors.

Fellowshipping over a meal is sacred – it's a spiritual moment. It's the beginning or maybe even the pathway to reconciliation. You know who misses out? Those who refuse to embrace the “radically different.” The spiritually elite. The religious leaders. They're so worried about their own legalistic following of the rules, their own reputations, and cleanliness – that they miss the opportunity to sit at a table with those radically different than them and enjoy a sacred moment with God Himself. **I don't know about you, but I would hate to be so wrapped up in my own puritanical misinterpretation of Scripture that I miss out on a redemptive and loving moment between God and His people.**

Friends – I have one point for you this morning – it's time for us to reclaim the dinner table. Jesus is showing us that one of the primary ways we love our neighbors is through shared meals. Love your neighbors through shared meals. Love your neighbors by reclaiming the dinner table as sacred and inviting them there. It's time for us to re-elevate its significance.

Parents, we need you to eat meals with your families. Fathers, Happy Father's Day. We need you to lead out in this. Mothers, we need you to lead out in this. Over the last 3 decades there's been a 33% decrease of families eating together and half of those families “eat together” with the TV on. Mealtimes last, on average, 20 minutes. If we want change, and to love our neighbors, we need to reclaim the dinner table.

But it's not enough for us just to do this as a family. We must do this as a culture. It's time for us, like Jesus, to gather around the table with people radically different than us – now more than ever. We need meals with those radically different than us in race, socioeconomic status, marital status, political affiliation, interests, hopes, and dreams. The dinner table must become sacred again. A place where radically different people can show up and be fellow image bearers and that's it. A place where we can listen, share, empathize, be encouraged, be challenged, grow, show compassion and support one another.

This isn't just about being radically different racially but I want to make a small comment on that. Just this week, Dr. Tony Evans said, “...families must make connections with other families who are different from them and partner together to serve yet another family that is worse-off than theirs. This is where reconciliation happens, not in seminars but in service.” How can we do that? By loving our neighbors through a shared meal.

And so that is my challenge to you this morning. If we're going to make the dinner table sacred, if we're going to reclaim it, and love our neighbors by sharing meals with them – then we must take action. **Invite someone radically different into your home for a meal.** If you don't feel comfortable doing that right now, do it virtually. To help, I want to give you 3 questions you can ask – no matter who is there and no matter how radically different they are from you.

3 questions you can ask no matter who is at your table:

What has been the worst part of this season of life for you?

What has been the best part of this season of life for you?

How can I actively show my love for you?

We do this, because Jesus has done this for us. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. Jesus pulls a seat up at the table next to radicals like you and me and says, "You're welcome here."

This past Thursday, I had the opportunity to be a on a Zoom call with the Mark Cuban Heroes Center for Father's Day. There were about 12 guys on this call – black, white, Hispanic, professors, law enforcement, music producers, lawyers, firefighters, Christian, non-Christian, some local, some out of state. We spent two hours together talking about what it means to be a man, a father, and a leader. We were vulnerable. We were honest. We had unique perspectives and experiences. We were radically different and yet we found commonality and hope in each other. I haven't been that challenged, that encouraged, or that inspired in quite some time. That's what can happen around the dinner table, too. I hope you'll invite others to yours, join them at theirs, and love your neighbors well when you do both.

There's no better way for us to close today than with communion. Earlier, I told you that a meal together took us back to the garden when things were as they should be. But it also gives us a glimpse of heaven. We get to bring a piece of heaven to earth when we share meals together. Heaven is going to be filled with every tribe, tongue, and nation. Jew and Gentile. Black and White. Rich and Poor. Republican and Democrat and everyone in between. The body of Christ is diverse. Heaven is going to be diverse. So, why not bring heaven to earth now?

And it's only because of Christ that that's possible. So, I hope you have your elements. This bread...it is symbolic of the body of Christ...broken for us to reconcile us to Himself and to each other. This juice...it is symbolic of His blood...shed for each of us...radically different than Him...separated from Him...but His blood shed to reconcile us to the Father and to each other.

Fellowship, I love you. Go and reclaim your dinner table and in doing so – love your neighbors well.