

Meals with Jesus

Feasting with Sinners (Luke 5:27-32)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on September 5, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ There's no question that this pandemic experience has changed our normal behaviors and reshaped established practices in our lives. **In my opinion, one of the more tragic changes is the fact that we are much less frequently having people over in our homes.**
 - That means one of the most important ministries in the life of a church has been hindered by this pandemic. I'm talking about **the ministry of hospitality**. Of welcoming people into your personal space – whether that be your home, or apartment, or dorm room. It's about welcoming them in such a way that strangers end up feeling like neighbors and friends feeling like family. That's hospitality.

- ❖ **And in many cultures like ours, hospitality revolves around a shared meal.** Around sharing table fellowship. Where you're not just giving your guests food – you're giving them fellowship, friendship, acceptance, love, etc. That's why it's considered ministry.
 - But during this pandemic, there's been good reason why many of you are hesitant to have guests over. Not knowing their vaccination status. Knowing you'll be unmasked during the meal. Having unvaccinated children in the home. **Those are reasonable factors for why many of us – who, pre-pandemic, would frequently open up our homes to host and entertain – have significantly cut back this practice.**

- ❖ But that's a tragic outcome that needs to be addressed. When this series was planned last spring, I thought we'd be in a better place. The plan was issue a challenge to recover the ministry of hospitality and open up our homes again. I didn't think we'd be in the Red Zone.
 - But I still want to challenge you in that way, even though I know we have varying degrees of caution and comfort levels with COVID. So *how* and *when* each of you are going to recover this practice is going to vary. **But since showing hospitality is commanded of Christians in Scripture, I think it's still appropriate to bind your conscience on this matter by reminding you of our biblical responsibility.**
 - **Romans 12:13**, *“Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”* **1 Peter 4:9**, *“Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.”* **Hebrews 13:2**, *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”* **Church, let us not neglect our responsibility to show hospitality, even during a pandemic.**

- ❖ Now our goal in this series is to look more closely at the various episodes in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus shared a meal with others. We want to learn from his practice of sharing table fellowship. Which will be convicting because Jesus directly challenged religious norms and transgressed social boundaries. **He was more than willing to share a meal with the social and moral outcasts of society.**
 - Commentators on Luke's Gospel have noted how meals with Jesus really function as a plot device. They're used for character development. **By observing whom Jesus was willing to eat with, we learn so much about him.** And at the same time, we learn so much about ourselves and, sadly, how much our attitude resembles that of the antagonists in these stories.

- ❖ **The Pharisees were extremely cautious about cleanliness and purity.** And they were concerned – not just with purity of the food on the table – but of the persons around the table. They refused to share a meal with certain kinds of people because they were afraid of contamination. Of being exposed to a kind of impurity that would make them unclean.
 - Well, that’s convicting. **Because nowadays we’re the ones who are extremely cautious about cleanliness and contamination.** To the point that we’re extremely reluctant to share a meal with certain kinds of people.

- ❖ I’ll be honest. When I saw how my next-door neighbors would interact with each other during the peak of the pandemic, hanging out with no masks and no social distancing, it made me and my family very reluctant to have them over. When they would invite us to their parties, we would respectfully decline and offer some excuse for why we’re busy. But the real reason is because we didn’t want to be around them for fear of catching COVID.
 - Now again, I agree with the need for proper precautions when pandemic conditions are severe. I’m all for that. But I know my wicked heart, and I know my reluctance to draw near towards those who have a different opinion than me on vaccines or masks – is only a symptom of a deeper heart problem.

- ❖ **Even before the pandemic – I need to ask myself and you need to ask yourself – were we already excluding certain people from our table fellowship?** If we were to look back and picture who sat around our table pre-pandemic – who shared a meal with us in our personal space – was there a very limited kind of person there?
 - Were there people around your table that shared a very different faith, a very different political view, a very different set of lifestyle choices, or just a different ethnicity or culture? **With whom do we practice hospitality? And does our practice resemble more of Jesus’s or the Pharisees’?** That’s the key question.

- ❖ So this morning, as we study Luke 5:27-32, I want to help you hear the call of Christ, to reflect the heart of Christ, and to commit yourself to the mission of Christ. First, we’ll see that **the call of Christ** is a call to leave everything and follow him. Second, **the heart of Christ** is a desire to go out from our inner circles to fellowship with outsiders. And third, **the mission of Christ** is to heal sinners by calling them to repentance.

The Call of Christ

- ❖ Let’s begin by considering the call of Christ – **a call to leave everything and follow him.** Our passage is about the call of Levi. Jesus calls him to become one of his followers. Levi is an alias for Matthew, better known as the author of the Gospel of Matthew.
 - Now let’s look at the context around our passage first. Chapter 5 begins with Jesus calling disciples to follow him. **The first set of disciples are Galilean fishermen – Peter, James, and John.** It’s not surprising at all that Jesus would surround himself with such men. Fishermen were representative of the Jewish populace.

- ❖ But as chapter 5 continues, Jesus engages those on the outside or margins of society. He first encounters **a man with leprosy** and then **a man who was lame**. These are the diseased and disabled. They're weak and broken physically. Jesus heals their physical condition, but he is more concerned with their spiritual condition.
 - He tells the healed leper to visit the priest and be restored to the faith community (5:14). And he assures the lame man that his sins have been forgiven (5:20). **So from the context surrounding our passage, we Jesus calling being to follow him and healing people – not just physically but spiritually.**

- ❖ So starting in v27, Jesus calls into his circle a social and moral outsider. *“After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, “Follow me.””* **In those days, tax collectors were fellow Jews who worked for the Roman government, collecting taxes from their own kinsmen on behalf of an oppressive empire that had subjugated them.** So these tax collectors were viewed as traitors.
 - And not only that, tax collectors had the reputation of skimming off the top and profiting off the backs of their own people. So they were traitors and extortionists. That's why *“tax collectors and sinners”* became a catchphrase to describe the cheats and scoundrels of society that decent, religious people would do well to avoid.

- ❖ **It's natural, at this point, to wonder who might be a modern-day equivalent to a tax collector.** I thought about this a lot, and I found it difficult to pinpoint one group in our society that would be clearly viewed as outsiders. Within the more insulated Jewish community of Jesus's day, there was a general consensus on who was an insider and who was an outsider. But I don't find that to be the case in our society today.
 - Now it's not because we've mature and we're past the point of labeling people and excluding them. No, we still do that. But we're so polarized and divided that there is no consensus of who's in and who's out. **We each have our own tribes, and we end up labeling, demonizing, and excluding everyone else.** Everyone is on the outside of each other, and yet everyone is self-assured that they're one of the insiders.

- ❖ So if you're a Democrat, then the tax collector is a Republican. Or vice versa. If you're a conservative, then the tax collector is a liberal or progressive. If you're pro-vaccine and pro-masks, then the tax collector is anti-vax and anti-masks. Or vice versa. If your pro-individual rights, then the tax collector is anyone who supports mandates and restrictions.
 - The point is that you and I may not agree on who a tax collector is today. **But the reality is that both of us are viewed as a tax collector in someone's eyes.** At least we share that in common. **And guess what – that means all of us can identify with the tax collector in our text.** All of us are Levi in somebody's eyes.

- ❖ **But what's infinitely more important is how we're viewed in Christ's eyes.** Which is the same way he viewed Levi. Not as a tax collector. Not as the world viewed him. But as a prospective follower – as someone he's calling to follow. **That's how Christ views all of us – as either present followers or prospective followers.** He's calling us all.

- ❖ Look back at v28 and see how the call to follow Jesus is no small matter. It's a call to leave everything. *"And leaving everything, [Levi] rose and followed him."* **In his case, Levi left his profession as a tax collector and began full-time following Jesus as a disciple.** Now that was a decision he could never take back.
 - Peter, James, and John could always return to fishing if following Jesus didn't work out. In fact, they did that, at the end of John's Gospel. They had returned to their old profession as fishermen before Jesus reappeared to them (Jn 21:3). But for Levi, there was no going back. **If you suddenly drop everything and abandon your tax booth to follow Jesus, you can kiss your profession as a Roman tax collector goodbye.**

- ❖ Now for Levi to follow Jesus, he didn't think he could work any longer as a tax collector. He was committed to leaving behind his former sins. But because, in his estimation, those sins were so entangled with his profession that he felt called to leave it all behind.
 - But that wasn't the case for all tax collectors. **A life aimed at pleasing the Lord did not require all tax collectors to quit their jobs.** Back in **Luke 3:12-13**, when a group of tax collectors came to John the Baptist for a baptism of repentance, they asked him, *"Teacher, what shall we do?"* **And his response to them wasn't to quit your job – but to do your job with integrity.** *"And he said to them, 'Collect no more than you are authorized to do.'"* So not every Christian tax collector left the profession. Which should give pause to anyone who feels that faithfulness to follow Christ necessitates a career change.

- ❖ Maybe – but maybe not. I know some of you feel like your job is a distraction to your faith, or a source of temptation, or a waste of time in light of eternal realities. But before you conclude that faithfulness necessitates a career change, ask yourself the following:
 - **First, does your profession require you to perform work that's illegal?** This should be obvious. If your profession requires you to deal drugs, to extort people, or to help people evade taxes – if your work involves you in illegal activity, then yes, a call to follow Jesus would definitely mean leaving behind that profession.

- ❖ But that question doesn't go far enough. **Second, does your profession require you to perform work that's forbidden in God's Word?** Just because something is legal doesn't make it moral according to God's Word. Consider abortion. It's been in the news this week for good reason. Even after the recent bill passed the Texas Legislature, prohibiting abortions after a fetal heartbeat can be detected, being an abortionist or working in an abortion clinic is still legal according to the law of the land. But the law of the Lord would say otherwise. So not every legal profession is permitted for those who seek to faithfully follow Christ.
 - **Third, does your job place you in an environment where you are likely to be tempted or pressured into ungodly habits or behaviors?** And this is what convicted Levi. He answered it as Yes – this job puts me in an environment where I am too tempted and too pressured to fall back into ungodly habits and behaviors. I need to quit. But not every tax collector would answer in the same way. They may not feel the same pressure or temptations.

- ❖ So I hope those are helpful principles for those of you wrestling with that question – if faithfulness to follow Jesus necessitates a career change. **But regardless if you're facing a decision to leave behind your job, what is common to all of us who are called to Christ is the call to leave behind our old identities and allegiances.**
 - That means regardless of your profession, following Jesus is now **your primary vocation**. Regardless of your political leaning or theological tribe, follower of Jesus is now **your primary identity**. Regardless of how much you value your ethnic or cultural heritage – regardless of how much you love your country or your family – **your primary allegiance** is now to Jesus and his band of followers. That's fundamentally what it means to leave everything to follow him.

The Heart of Christ

- ❖ We just looked at the call of Christ, now let's consider the heart of Christ. If we continue in v29, we'll see that **the heart of Christ is to go out and fellowship with outsiders**. Now don't get me wrong. Jesus is not against developing close community and creating inner circles where you grow deeper with a small group of people. That's why he called the twelve disciples and spent so much time with them. **But at the same time, Jesus would often step out his circle of insiders to fellowship with outsiders – with the ultimate goal of expanding his circle and making them insiders.**
- ❖ We see an example of this in v29. **We're told that Levi's first response – after meeting Jesus and becoming a follower – was to practice hospitality.** He made for Jesus, *“a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.”* Jesus enjoyed the company, and they enjoyed him. But the Pharisees grumbled. Look at v30, *“And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?””*
 - The big contrast in our text is between Jesus and the Pharisees and their vastly different approach towards sinners. **Bottom line, the Pharisees sought to avoid sinners; while Jesus sought to be around them.**
- ❖ **Jesus challenged the religious norms of his day by his willingness to share table fellowship with those generally considered to be deplorable sinners.** And that's what aggravated the Pharisees. They wouldn't have cared if Jesus showed some mercy and fed some hungry sinners on the street. Their problem is not with showing mercy to sinners but with sharing table fellowship with them. **Because in their culture, to share table fellowship is to extend friendship, to express acceptance, and to exhibit unity.**
 - So your willingness to sit at a table and share a meal with someone speaks volumes. **That explains why the Apostle Paul felt it necessary to publicly confront a fellow apostle when Peter refused table fellowship with Gentile Christians.** Galatians 2 recalls a time, while they were in Antioch together, when Peter withdrew table fellowship with Gentile believers once members from the Jewish circumcision party arrived in town. **Paul was appalled because to refuse fellowship around the dinner table is tantamount to refusing fellowship around the communion table.**

- ❖ That Galatians 2 incident demonstrates why it was such a big deal – scandalous even – for Jesus to attend this great feast. **His willingness to share a meal with them communicated a willingness to call sinners his friends, to call them his family.** That’s his heart.
 - Now notice how, in this case, that Jesus is not technically practicing hospitality because he’s not inviting sinners to his house. **He’s not calling them over to his sanitized, personal space and expecting them to behave properly.**
 - Notice how he's willing to go where sinners live. Where they hang out. He attends *their* dinner parties, participates in *their* activities, joins *their* gatherings. He goes to them because there's little chance they'll step foot into a gathering of the faithful.

- ❖ **Church, don't be offended when non-Christians don't like to attend our gatherings.** Don't be surprised. They don't have the Spirit of God in them, so you wouldn't expect them to have a taste for the things of heaven. Now I'm sure you know some non-Christians who are spiritually curious and open to learn, and that's evidence of the Spirit doing a work in their hearts. But for the most part, non-believers don't want to spend their time in Bible study, singing praise songs, or going around a circle sharing struggles and praying for each other.
 - **If you want to build significant relationships with the non-Christians in your life, then you need to be willing to enter into their spaces.** To feast with them – even if the company they keep or the conversation they carry can, at times, be very worldly. **That’s the challenge we’re faced with – to go where sinners are in the world without adopting the tastes of the world.** In that sense, every follower of Jesus is a missionary – sent into the world, to navigate foreign spaces, bringing the word of Christ with you, and all the while maintaining a faithful Christian witness.

- ❖ As a pastor, I'm obviously encouraged when members participate and serve in the various ministries of the church. But let me say this up front – if the activities of the church are taking up so much of your time and keeping you from going out and fellowshiping with outsiders – **please feel free to say No to more church-related activities.** That is, if your goal is to get more involved in the lives of your non-Christian friends and colleagues.
 - But here is a warning: Don't fool yourself into thinking you have the same self-control as Jesus possessed to be in the world without adopting the tastes of the world – so be aware of your own limits and weaknesses. **Know your limits.** For example, if you're prone to excessive drinking and drunkenness, then it may not be wise, for you, to go to feasts or parties where the social drinking of alcohol is a primary activity.

- ❖ So know your limits. At the same time, **know your purpose.** You should be participating in these activities to be a friend and to bring Christ with you. Don't use missionary activity as an excuse to sin. Which leads to a third exhortation, **know your identity in Christ.** You are an ambassador of Christ entrusted with the Lord's message of reconciliation. When you're in the world and surrounded by their voices and the messages they're promoting, it's easy lose yourself and forget your purpose. **So yes, make it your aim to reflect the heart of Christ to be around sinners and with sinners, but don't forget who you are in Christ.**

The Mission of Christ

- ❖ So this leads to our third and final consideration. We've looked at the call of Christ, the heart of Christ, and now let's consider the mission of Christ. **His mission, his vocation, his reason for coming was to heal sinners by calling them to repentance.** That's what he came to do.
 - If you understand that that is Jesus's mission, his vocation, his job, then it makes complete sense that he would often surround himself with tax collectors and sinners. There's nothing scandalous about that at all.
 - Think about it. **Would you be shocked to meet a doctor who surrounds herself with sick people?** Would it be considered scandalous if she enjoyed spending time with patients? No, you would consider her a good doctor who has a clear sense of her mission in life.

- ❖ The same could be said of Christ. He had a clear sense of mission. He knew his vocation – his calling as a Physician. Look at v31. *“And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”*
 - So Jesus self-consciously saw himself as a Physician. Just like many of you. **I think this pandemic has helpfully clarified the heart and mission of physicians and their brave and noble task.** While the rest of us are doing all we can to avoid people with COVID, physicians, nurses, and other medical practitioners are purposefully drawing near to these patients to bring healing and wholeness.
 - **In the same way, the Pharisees and most Jews did all they could to avoid sinners, while the Great Physician purposefully drew near to those who were spiritually sick with sin.**

- ❖ And just like a good doctor with good bedside manners – who is comfortable around sick people and sick people are comfortable around him – Jesus, as well, is comfortable around sinners and they're comfortable around him.
 - **Somehow he's able to communicate acceptance of the *person* without acceptance of their sinful behavior.** He doesn't hold sinners at an arm's length, waiting for them to clean up their act first. And yet, neither does he turn a blind eye to their sin.
 - **Jesus accepts sinners just as they are but loves them too much to leave them that way.** Let me say that again. Jesus will accept you just as you are, but he loves you too much to leave you that way. So he's going to call you to repentance. That's what he says in v32. *“I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”*

- ❖ **Now this is not to imply that the Pharisees are righteous and have no need of the Great Physician.** The *“righteous”*, in this case, refers to the *“well”* in v31 – which refers those who assure themselves that they're healthy, so they think they have no need of a physician. **In the same way, if you're self-assured that you're righteous before God, then, of course, you're going to think you have no need for a Savior.** No need for Jesus.

- ❖ **But according to Scripture, everyone is sick and everyone needs Jesus.** We live in a Genesis 3 world where all of creation is under the curse of sin. Including us. **That means we are *not* just people who commit sins – we are sinners.** Our very nature has been corrupted. The moral trajectory of the heart is bent towards self-rule and selfishness.
 - **But the good news of the gospel is that the Great Physician is also the Great Redeemer who died in our place on the cross.** To not only cleanse our hearts and forgive our sins – but to change our hearts as well. To grant us repentance (Acts 11:18). To bend our moral trajectory in the other direction – towards him and his righteousness. **That's why Jesus came to call sinners – not just to follow – but first *to repentance*.** To repent means “to turn”. Before you can follow Jesus, you have to repent – you have to turn around and go a new direction in life.

- ❖ **Now, unlike the Pharisees, I think many people today would applaud Jesus for his willingness to draw near to sinners. But they'll probably take offense at all this talk of repentance.** That sounds like making people feel guilty or pressuring them to change the way they're living their lives. That sounds too condemning. Too judgmental.
 - But we just have to go back to the physician metaphor. I think you'd agree that a good doctor is one who listens, who shows compassion and care. But if you have high cholesterol, a family history of heart disease, and you're not exercising or eating healthy, then a good doctor is *not* going to just listen and affirm behavior that is detrimental to your health. **A good doctor is going to call you to repentance.** To change your diet. To change your lifestyle. To exercise more and snack less.

- ❖ **Friends, the Great Physician is likewise compassionate and caring, but in the same way, he won't affirm sinful behavior or turn a blind eye.** He's going to call you to repentance. Now unfortunately, when many hear that word *repentance*, it sounds like cleaning up your life. It sounds like getting your act together. It sounds like you have to do all this self-improvement before you can follow Jesus. But that's all wrong. **All repentance requires is for you to admit you're sick and that you need the healing that only Christ brings.**
 - This week I was reflecting on the lyrics of the old hymn “**Come Ye Sinners**”. The third stanza fits our text quite well. It goes like this: “*Come, ye weary, heavy laden, / Bruised and broken by the fall; / If you tarry 'til you're better, / You will never come at all. / Not the righteous, not the righteous; / Sinners Jesus came to call.*”

- ❖ And then in the fourth stanza, it speaks to what is required of those whom Jesus calls to follow. It says, “**All the fitness He requires / Is to feel your need of Him.**” That's all Jesus requires – to know you're sick and to trust that only he can heal you!
 - Let me put it this way: **You don't have to change your life before you're ready to come and follow Jesus – but you better be ready for your life to completely change.** That's what repentance means and that's what the gospel promises!