

The Table Strategy of Christ and His People

(Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

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.

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. 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.” (Luke 5:27–32)

Jesus Wants You at His Table

- A. I’m just going to give you my main point up front: Jesus wants you at His table.
 - 1. Have you ever gone to a wedding where they don’t have assigned seats for the reception? So you come in and you’re the first one to sit down. But then, as people start filing in, no one comes and sits down next to you. Isn’t that a horrible feeling?! “Nobody wants me at their table!”
 - a. You might feel that way on the whole. Your parents, your spouse, your coworkers, your church, they don’t want to make room for you at their table.
- B. But listen to me: I don’t care how unworthy, how despised, how sinful, how uncool, how broken you feel—Jesus wants you at His table! He wants to share a meal with you!
 - 1. What exactly this means will hopefully become clear as we progress through our text.

The Outline

- A. At the center of our text is this meal that Jesus has with the riffraff of His day. It’s an amazing scene when at last we see it for what it really is. And there’s a lot we can learn from it. So we’ll be here for two weeks.
 - 1. This week we’re going to come at this meal from Christ’s perspective. We’re going to talk about what I would call Christ’s table strategy—how He uses the table to reveal His redemptive purposes, His healing love for sinners.
 - a. He wants you and I at His table!
 - 2. And next week we’re going to look at this meal from Levi’s perspective. We’re going to talk about Levi’s table strategy—how he uses the table to rehearse and reinforce the

redemption Christ brings. He brings others into the drama of redemption through shared food and fellowship enjoyed in Christ's presence.

- a. If Jesus wants us at His table, who do we invite to sit around ours? We're going to see the table—the simple, mundane, everyday table—as a massively strategic element in our evangelistic and discipleship efforts.
- B. But before we even get to this table, this meal, at all, we first need to deal with vv. 27-28 by way of introduction to this whole culinary affair.

Levi the Tax Collector

- A. Jesus, moving from the scene with the paralytic, now sets His eyes with intent upon a tax collector named Levi, who, Luke tells us, is “sitting at the tax booth” (v. 27).
1. It would be wise for us to consider just for a moment what it meant to be a tax collector in Jewish culture at this time. For we won't perceive the profound nature of Jesus' activity here until we do.
- B. Forgive me if something like this is your profession, but it is true that no one, in a sense, even today, likes the tax collector. No one likes to pay taxes, to be audited, to have someone knocking on your door asking for money owed. That's just never a fun time. You don't invite that person in for tea or whatever. You're a bit turned up by them.
1. But, though we can kind of relate here, tax collectors in Jerusalem at this time were disliked, disapproved of, despised at another level altogether and for reasons much more personal and inflammatory.
- C. Tax collectors were a problem on at least three different layers: politically, ceremonially, and ethically.
1. Politically, the tax collector was an Israelite siding, in a sense, with Rome. The taxes were going to Rome, and this tax collector was representing and collecting for Rome. Any faithful Israelite, therefore, saw the tax collector as collaborator and traitor. “How could they be working for God's enemies?!”
 - a. As one commentator puts it: “Anyone familiar with “moles” and informants in Nazi and Communist regimes will appreciate the loathing of tax collectors in first-century Judaism. There cannot have been many Jews in first-century Palestine who expected (or wished!) to see in a tax collector anything other than the husk of an individual whose soul had been eaten away by complicity with Roman repression” (Edwards, PNTC).
 2. Ceremonially, we realize that for the strict Israelite, the fact that tax collectors had to maintain continual contact with Gentiles in the course of their work rendered them ceremonially unclean. On this assumption, the rabbis regarded as unclean any house entered by a tax collector.

- a. So if a tax collector walking into my house makes it unclean, what happens when I share a dinner table with Him?!
- 3. Ethically, and this is probably the worst layer of all, it is understood that the current process for taxation allowed the tax collector abundant opportunity for manipulating rates and things to fill his pockets. They were known as cheats, extortionists, gouging the rich and poor alike.
- D. Given the political firestorm that has characterized these days, perhaps I could bring this a little closer to home by making the following analogy:
 - 1. For some of you, you might see the Democrat in a way similar to how the Israelites saw the tax collector—they've sided with the enemy, they show no regard for God's word, they promote things like abortion and the homosexual agenda!
 - 2. For others, you might see the Republican like they saw the tax collector— they've sided with the enemy, they show no regard for God's word, they neglect the poor, the minority, and the refugee!
- E. Whatever analogy you want to draw, what we have here is another instance where Jesus moves towards the outlier to bring him in! Whether you voted for Trump or for Hillary, Jesus wants you at His table.
 - 1. His kingdom (and His table) truly is not of this world!

“Follow Me”

- A. As we return to our text we now find Jesus beginning to interact with this man: “[And He said to him, ‘Follow Me’](#)” (v. 27b).
- B. Certainly think there is a flash of Christ's sovereignty in this text where He just says “[Follow me](#)” and Levi almost instantaneously seems to just drop what he's doing and obey. There's something utterly compelling about this Jesus—when ears are opened to hear His voice, when eyes are opened to see His beauty, when hearts are opened to love Him above all. People just obey.
 - 1. So there seems to be something of a sovereign summons here.
- C. But perhaps there is more as well. We have to assume that all the reports spread abroad about Jesus have reached Levi as well. I think it is safe to assume Levi has heard about this Man named Jesus. He's heard about the demons being cast out, the sick being healed, the leper being cleansed, the sinner being forgiven.
 - 1. “And now this Man, Jesus, is here and he's talking to me?!” And he's stunned! “Me?! I'm a tax collector?! Me?! I'm a traitor, a thief, impure, immoral?! Me?! Jesus wants to be associated with me?! I'll drop anything for that!”

Leaving Everything

- A. Levi gets it. Levi's stunned by the grace of it all. Therefore, Luke tells us: "[L]eaving everything, he rose and followed him" (v. 28).
1. There's no doubt, no hesitation, no second-guessing, he's all in! "Leaving everything!"
- B. In case we miss the full weight of the "everything" here, consider the words of one commentator: "This must have meant a considerable sacrifice, for tax collectors were normally wealthy. . . . We should not miss the quiet heroism in this. If following Jesus had not worked out for the fishermen, they could have returned to their trade without difficulty. But when Levi walked out of his job he was through. They would surely never take back a man who had simply abandoned his tax office. His following of Jesus was a final commitment" (Leon Morris).
- C. We're aware that the poor are often rich in faith. But sometimes, it's the richest of people that are the most ready for Jesus. They've had all the world could offer and found it lacking.
1. I suppose Levi never would've thought that Jesus could receive him after all he'd done. He traded his soul to gain the world. He had lost the bet. But here Jesus gives him another go. Here Jesus gives him a way out of the mess he'd made of his life.
 - a. Sometimes it's the richest of people that are the most ready for Jesus!
- D. Every one of us here this morning has to face this call: "Follow Me."
1. For some that call comes in like amazing grace! We're with Levi in this: "Incredible! He's talking to me! I'm so tired of trying to find my joy in the stuff of this world. I never thought you'd have me Jesus, but if you're calling me in, I'll leave it all to get there!"
 2. But for others the call might feel a bit threatening, ominous. "Everything?! That's a pretty comprehensive word. I don't know. Are You worth that?"
- E. It's breathtaking to think what that word "everything" wraps around. Think of all we can put in that little word?
1. We could start with the bad stuff—like your sin, your greed, your lust, your underhanded ways, your self-righteousness.
 2. But we can continue with all the good stuff too—like your job, your kids, your house on the hill, your dream for retirement, your health, your ministry, your hope of having a spouse, your career aspirations, your money, and on we could go! Is Jesus worth that?!
- F. If you're on the line here this morning, I've been praying for you (and for myself)! I've been praying that we would enter into the party!
1. Enter into the party? What party? Don't you see?! That's where all of this is going in our text! From the booth to the banquet. This leaving everything, leads into a party!

- a. But you can't get into the party if you're unwilling to peace with all of your stuff. Outside the party, that's where the rich, young ruler sits all sad, that's where the older brother sits jealous and judgmental.
 - i. They never get in because they never let go for Christ.

(1) Jesus' Table Strategy: Revealing Redemption

What's in a Meal?

- A. Now we arrive at the meal I mentioned at the beginning: "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" (v. 29).
 - B. We might be tempted to immediately see this meal from Levi's perspective and leave it at that. For, after all, Levi is the one throwing the party. It's his house. It's truly amazing what he does.
 - 1. But before we look at the table from Levi's perspective, we must look at it from Jesus'. We can't miss the act of grace it is for Jesus to even be here at this table in the first place. Redemption is being revealed around this table.
 - a. It's one thing to talk to a tax collector along the road and another thing altogether to enter into his house and eat with him.
 - i. That's an act of grace that will send tremors up the spines of the religious elite in Jesus' day. "How could He do such a thing?!"
- C. To understand this sort of thing we must get a handle on the way Jesus and Israel conceived of the dinner table. Quoting one scholar: "It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the cultures 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" (Bartchy, "TABLE FELLOWSHIP," DJG).
 - 1. This would explain why in Luke 7:34 we see that eating with someone makes you their "friend". Or in Luke 15:2 we find that eating with someone is indicative of "receiv[ing]" them.

The Operating Table Is the Dinner Table

- A. And, furthermore, this explains why the Pharisees and their scribes are so torn up about this: " 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" (vv. 30-32).

1. We'll look more at this next time, but for now I just want to bring out one main point: namely, the Great Physician's operating table is the Son of Man's dinner table.

a. Are you hearing me on that? The Pharisees are complaining about who He's eating with and He responds by saying: "I'm doing physician work here!" Jesus is going to put sinners back together by eating and drinking with them. That's His brilliant missionary strategy.

B. Listen now to Tim Chester on this point: "How would you complete the sentence: 'The Son of Man came . . .'? . . . There are three ways the New Testament completes the sentence . . . 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45); 'The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10); 'The Son of Man has come eating and drinking . . .'" (Luke 7:34 [cf. Matt 11:19]).

The first two are statements of purpose. Why did Jesus come? He came to serve, to give his life as a ransom, to seek and save the lost. The third is a statement of method. How did Jesus come? He came eating and drinking" (p. 12).

1. In other words: the Son of Man came to serve, to give His life as a ransom, to seek and save the lost, and the way He would accomplish this is by pulling up a seat at the table and eating and drinking with them.

a. Again, the Great Physician's operating table is the Son of Man's dinner table!

C. Chester goes on: "Jesus spent his time eating and drinking—a lot of his time. He was a party animal. His mission strategy was a long meal, stretching into the evening. He did evangelism and discipleship round a table with some grilled fish, a loaf of bread, and a pitcher of wine.

Luke's gospel is full of stories of Jesus eating with people: In Luke 5 Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners at the home of Levi. In Luke 7 Jesus is anointed [by a sinful woman's tears] at the home of Simon the Pharisee during a meal. In Luke 9 Jesus feeds the five thousand. In Luke 10 Jesus eats in the home of Martha and Mary. In Luke 11 Jesus condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law at a meal. In Luke 14 Jesus is at a meal when he urges people to invite the poor to their meals rather than their friends. In Luke 19 Jesus invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus. In Luke 22 we have the account of the Last Supper. In Luke 24 the risen Christ has a meal with the two disciples in Emmaus, and then later eats fish with the disciples in Jerusalem. Robert Karris concludes: 'In Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal'" (p. 13).

This Should Not Have Surprised Us

A. Perhaps all of this seems surprising to us. That's his big missional strategy? The dinner table? But it should not have surprised us. Indeed, all of redemptive history, the entire biblical narrative, can be seen through the lens of a meal.

B. In Genesis what do we see but God creating a people and saying in essence: "Dine with me!" "And God said, 'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food'" (Gen 1:29).

1. But we preferred to eat alone. "Which one tree among the myriad of fruit-bearing trees am I not supposed to eat from? Well then that's the one I want!"

- C. Humanity fell by way of a meal. But the Scriptures also make plain that in the new heavens and new earth humanity will be fully restored by way of a meal.
 - 1. As the angel declares on behalf of God in [Rev 19:9](#): “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And in [Rev 22](#) we see that Lamb’s bride is invited in to drink from “the river of the water of life” and eat from “the tree of life” at long last (v. 1-2).

The Last Supper

- A. But how, you might ask, does the rebel, the traitor, the enemy of God become the Bride? If we so stubbornly refused to sit at the table of Eden, how could we ever imagine ourselves sitting at the table of heaven and the New Jerusalem?
 - 1. Answer: By sitting at the table of Christ! In between these two outlying, ultimate meals, at the beginning and the end of world history, are the meals our Savior comes down to share with us.
- B. And as we follow Him through Luke’s gospel we come to find that all of His earthly meals are climbing up to one climactic point: the Passover meal He sits down to eat with them in [Luke 22](#)—fitly called now: the Last Supper.
 - 1. It’s a meal that symbolizes His undoing as our Passover Lamb—His body broken for us, His blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. And in this it’s a meal that also symbolizes God’s desire to be reconciled to us, to befriend us again, to be united intimately with we His enemies once more!
- C. Humanity fell by way of a meal, and humanity will be fully restored by way of a meal, because humanity has been redeemed by way of a meal—a meal symbolizing the death of God for sinful men.

Carried to the Table

- A. This is how Jesus can move towards the Levi’s—the traitors, the unclean, the thieves. He’s going to die for us.
 - 1. I’m the traitor. I’m the filthy. I’m the thief. And Christ invites me to come find healing around His table over shared bread and wine.
- B. I don’t know the sort of things that would keep you from coming to His table, but let me just say this as we close: Whatever your background; whatever your political affiliation; whatever your sinful tendencies; however hopeless you feel; however broken, sick, tired, washed up, worthless; however dirty and disgraced; however relationally broken you feel—every relationship you ever touch falls apart, every person you ever get close to you destroy; however big of a failure you feel as a parent, or as a kid, or as a boss, or as an employee, or as a Christian; however ashamed you are for still dealing with that same sin year after year; however embarrassed you are for your appearance, or your ethnicity, or your personality, or your social awkwardness; however sick you feel and for whatever reason...there is room for you around the table of our Lord!

1. He wants you at His table. He died to have you with Him around His table.
- C. As Robert Munger has said: “The church is the only fellowship in the world where the one requirement for membership is the unworthiness of the candidate.”
1. Therefore, don’t let your unworthiness keep you from coming, it is your unworthiness that qualifies you!