

Eating with Lost Sinners

Luke 5:27-32 on March 9, 2025

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Please read Luke 5:27-32 before going further in this transcript.

Today's sermon title is "Eating with Lost Sinners." And I want to be clear about this from the get-go: all of us are sinners, whether we're still lost, or whether we've now been found. So this title isn't meant to be in any way offensive or exclusive, but rather just to highlight that Jesus intentionally ate, not just with those who'd been found, but also with those who were still lost. In today's passage, Jesus and His disciples catch some flak from the religious elite, for hanging out with lost sinners. They're told that they shouldn't be associating with people like this. But, as it turns out, that's exactly what Jesus' followers are supposed to be doing. In Luke 5:32 Jesus says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." One of the primary reasons that Jesus came to this earth was this: To call sinners to repentance.

Today's text clearly demonstrates how Jesus didn't wait for sinners to come to Him; He went to them. And those of us who are deeply devoted followers of Jesus, should do the same. We should spend time with lost sinners; we should make it a priority to be in their proximity, getting to know them, and inviting them to consider their need for Jesus.

Back in January, we talked about increasing our evangelistic passion, and how it's tied to our VISION of being a church who...

...welcomes all people and cares for our neighbors

...personally shares the gospel locally and globally

Increasing our evangelistic passion is also tied to two of our CORE VALUES:

- Connecting with the community
- Evangelizing the lost

During that sermon, I challenged each of us to pray daily, for 2-3 non-Christians within our circle of influence. We considered an acronym called FRANCES, which stands for...

Friends:

Relatives:

Acquaintances:

Neighbors:

Colleagues:

Enemies:

Strangers:

I'd like us to consider this acronym once again, and to consider the names of 2-3 people we could be praying for. Personally, I'm currently praying for 6 particular people: 4 of them are neighbors, 2 of them are acquaintances. 1 of the 2 acquaintances was a stranger to me back in January, but I've recently made some efforts to get to know them, so now we've become acquaintances. (So I guess that's at least a little bit of progress.) Well how about you? Do you have 2-3 names in mind? If so, I urge you to continue faithfully praying for their salvation. Well, with this in mind, let's dive into today's text.

Luke 5:27-28 begins, "27 After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, 28 and Levi got up, left everything and followed him." When verse 27 says, "After this," it's pointing back to the preceding passage when Jesus heals and forgives a paralyzed man. We talked about this two weeks ago. The Pharisees and teachers of the law had been there as well, and they'd witnessed Jesus' incredible power to both heal and forgive. Now, right on the cusp of this ("After this"), they witness Jesus calling a sinner named Levi to follow Him, which would have further shocked and disappointed the Pharisees: "Are you serious? This is the kind of person Jesus calls to be His disciple? Is Jesus paying any attention at all to what He's doing? This guy's a tax collector! For heaven's sake, what is He thinking!?"

Levi is probably better known to most of us by his other name, Matthew.^{1 2} In fact, spoiler alert, this is the very same Matthew who will become one of the 12 Apostles, and who will one day go on to write the Gospel of Matthew; THIS very same tax collector. All of this is way down the road from the event we're reading about today, nonetheless, it should reassure us: Jesus knew exactly what He was doing! And it wasn't just because He saw potential in this guy, Jesus saw potential in a life that would be changed and transformed by the goodness and power of the gospel!

Now, this being said, there were good reasons why tax collectors in that day had a bad reputation, especially *Jewish* tax collectors. They were seen as traitors who worked for the Roman government, selling out their own people for profit. Not only were they helping the pagan government who was oppressing the Jewish people, but they often charged more than they

¹ See Matthew 9:9 and Luke 6:15.

² "Since first-century Jews often had two names (usually one in Hebrew or Aramaic and the other in Greek or Latin), there is no reason why this tax collector could not have been called Levi Matthew." (Robert H. Stein, Luke, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 181.)

were supposed to.^{3 4} It's worth noting that, as a tax collector, Levi had something in common with the man with leprosy from earlier in chapter 5: he also was excluded from the mainstream Jewish community. Even though he was likely rich, he was a social outcast! In fact, because he was a tax collector, he wouldn't have been allowed to serve as a witness in court, and he wasn't allowed to go into the Jewish synagogue. He would have been SO deplorable, in fact, that even his own family members would have been looked down on.^{5 6 7} Now, if you can relate in some way, to this man's rejection and mistreatment by his own people, then I have some good news for you today: Jesus takes a particular interest in outcasts. And He wants to offer them the same gift that He offers to anyone else. Rather than mistreating them, or excluding them, He wants to include them, just like He did with Levi.

Verse 28 says that Levi went all in: "and Levi got up, left everything and followed him." This brings to mind Luke 5:11, "So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him."⁸ Just as Simon and his fishing partners had left everything to follow Jesus, so also did Levi (he even left a really good-paying job). Now, it's worth noting that when these men are called to follow Jesus, it wasn't quite as abrupt as it may come across in the immediate context. What I mean is that when we consider the comprehensive witness of all four Gospels, they indicate that these men had all likely had previous contact with Jesus. For example, my *Study Bible* notes that "Since Jesus had been ministering in Capernaum for some time [now], Levi [had probably] known him previously."⁹ This was likely true for anyone who left everything to follow Jesus. Another example is found in John 2, which records the wedding at Cana in Galilee, which is when Jesus performed His first miracle. So this "water to wine" miracle would have preceded the "miraculous catch of fish miracle" in Luke 5. And since Jesus'

³ "Taxes were collected for the Roman government by Jewish agents, who were especially detested for helping the pagan conqueror and for frequently defrauding their own people." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1708 footnote on Luke 3:12.

⁴ Tax collectors...is understood better as "toll collectors" who were located at commercial centers, such as Capernaum and Jericho, to collect tolls, customs, and tariffs. Such people had bid and won the right to collect such tolls for the Romans. The fact that their profit was determined by how much they collected and that their bid had been paid for in advance led to great abuse. They were hated and despised by their fellow Jews. Dishonesty among tax collectors was the rule, and their witness was not accepted in a court of law. Thus they were often associated with sinners and prostitutes." (Robert H. Stein, Luke, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 133.)

⁵ "Jewish tax collectors were...regarded as outcasts. They could not serve as witnesses or as judges and were expelled from the synagogue. In the eyes of the Jewish community their disgrace extended to their families." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1656 footnote on Mark 2:15.

⁶ "Viewed by Jews as direct or indirect instruments of the Roman oppression and as thieves because they charged a much higher amount in order to pay themselves. In Luke, they are among the marginal and rejected community." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2074 footnote on Luke 3:12.

⁷ In Luke 19 we'll run into a chief tax collector named Zacheus.

⁸ "They" includes Peter, James, and John and likely Peter's brother Andrew as well. Also consider Luke 14:33.

⁹ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1714 footnote on Luke 5:28.

disciples were with Him when He attended this wedding, that indicates that they'd known Jesus previously, before they left everything to follow Him.¹⁰

¹¹

Here's the reason this matters: these followers of Jesus had taken time to count the cost, and to carefully consider what it would mean for them to follow Jesus fully.¹² So we shouldn't come away with the impression that they decided to follow Jesus on a whim, or an impulse; it was a deliberate, thought-through choice for each one of them. Following Jesus with this kind of devotion is something that all of us should think about long and hard, before committing to it. And then, once we've committed, we should hold fast to it for the rest of our lives.

Luke 5:29-30 goes on, "29 Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. 30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sects complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'" Apparently it's Levi's idea to hold a banquet for Jesus, and Jesus agrees to it. There's a huge crowd there, including Levi's fellow tax collectors and many other people as well. We can't be sure if they just showed up for the free food and drinks, or because they were interested in learning about Jesus; I'd guess, probably some of each. Be that as it may, clearly Levi wanted his friends to meet Jesus. He didn't just want them to TASTE the good food, he wanted them to taste the goodness of the gospel, the goodness that he himself had personally tasted. And as verses 31-32 will make clear, Jesus was all in on this plan: "Levi, I'd absolutely love to hang out with your friends! After all, I've come to call sinners to repentance."

Now these "tax collectors and *others*" in verse 29 are referred to as "tax collectors and *sinners*" in verse 30. This word "sinners" commonly referred to adulterers, thieves, and other people of questionable moral standards.¹³
¹⁴ So this gathered assembly was probably a rather interesting bunch! The old Garth Brooks' song comes to mind, "I've Got Friends in Low Places."¹⁵

¹⁰ John 1:35-42 also records a previous encounter between Jesus, and Simon and his brother Andrew.

¹¹ In Acts 1:21-22, when they are choosing Judas' replacement, Peter makes it clear that they need to find someone who'd been with them the whole time Jesus was living among them, from the time of John's baptism to Jesus' ascension.

¹² Consider Luke 14:25-35, especially verses 28-30,33.

¹³ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1656 footnote on Mark 2:15.

¹⁴ "Sinners" = ἁμαρτωλός "pertaining to behavior or activity that does not measure up to standard moral or cultic expectations (being considered an outsider because of failure to conform to certain standards is a frequent semantic component. ...a term tantamount to 'outsider'." (William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 51.)

¹⁵ Released back in 1990.

("where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases") Boy oh boy, did Levi ever have a lot of friends in low places! These were his people!

Verse 29 says they were eating with them; the *ESV* translates it: "reclining at the table with them."¹⁶ Now, personally, I try to picture who may have been sitting next to whom. You can't help but wonder if any of the fishermen may have been sitting next to a tax collector to whom they'd paid their taxes, or to whom they still owed taxes – now THAT would have been an interesting dinner conversation! Awkward? Uncomfortable? Yep.

Despite whatever awkwardness there may have been, Levi did not keep his faith in Jesus a secret! He didn't even hesitate to invite his work colleagues and his other friends, to come and meet Jesus.¹⁷ (I can't think of the last time I threw a big party at my house and invited all of my spiritually lost friends to hear about Jesus. Can you?) For Levi, hosting this banquet was just a natural overflow of his faith.¹⁸

For the Pharisees and teachers of the law, there was absolutely nothing "natural" about this, because it went against the cultural norms of the day. After all, when you ate with someone, it was a sign of friendship; it was an act of fellowship.¹⁹ And these sinners, were no friends of theirs! In fact, it's highly unlikely that these Pharisees ate any of the food at the banquet. Given their separatistic practices, they wouldn't have even sat at the same table as any of these sinners.²⁰

Bible scholar Robert Stein explains it this way: "This shared activity implied acceptance of such people as one's "brothers and sisters" ...To "break bread" with someone had important consequences. Even as contact with [those with leprosy] brought ritual uncleanness, so in the minds of the Pharisees, contact with tax collectors and sinners brought moral (as well as ritual) uncleanness."²¹ This brings to mind the requirement in Leviticus that those with leprosy must announce themselves: "Unclean! Unclean!"²² But in today's passage, rather than the tax collectors and sinners identifying themselves, the Pharisees did it for them: Unclean! Unclean!

¹⁶ So we could say that Jesus reclines rather than declines this opportunity to eat with lost sinners.

¹⁷ Contrast this with the faith of the Pharisee, Joseph of Arimathea, in John 19:38 and Luke 23:50-51.

¹⁸ "the subsequent banquet should be understood as one of the ways Levi was following Jesus." (Robert H. Stein, Luke, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 181.)

¹⁹ "To eat with a person was a sign of friendship." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1656 footnote on Mark 2:15.

²⁰ In fact, Bock says: "That this encounter comes after the party is clear, because the Pharisees would not have come to such a party, as their question shows, even in the unlikely event that they had been invited. The appearance that the leaders are near or at the party is a result of literary compression." Citing Marshall and Tiede in part, Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 495.

²¹ (Robert H. Stein, Luke, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 182.)

²² Leviticus 13:45.

Now, to be fair, there is a place for being wise about who we associate with, especially if we're younger, or more impressionable. 1 Corinthians 15:33 warns, "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" So if we're influencing lost sinners to consider Christ, that's great! But, if we're being influenced away from Christ and toward sinful behavior, then it would be wise for us to rethink that particular association.²³ We also shouldn't be naïve about the potential dangers out there. There are certain people who are best avoided if we don't have the necessary training or the knowledge that's needed to truly help them.

With a few exceptions like these in mind, for the most part, we should be ready and willing to hang out with whichever lost sinners God brings into our lives. And, we should always humbly keep it in the forefront of our minds, that we're sinners too. If we've been blessed to find forgiveness and new life Christ, then we're incredibly fortunate, but that doesn't make us better than anyone else.

Well even though these religious leaders register their complaint with the disciples, Jesus is the one who responds.^{24 25 26} Luke 5:31-32 says, "31 Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." To be clear, we shouldn't think that Jesus is somehow suggesting here that these Pharisees are spiritually healthy and righteous, and therefore have no need for a doctor, or no need to repent of their sins. They are in need of Jesus equally as much as the tax collectors and sinners they're complaining about. The problem is their own spiritual blindness; they don't even see their own lost condition and need for rescue. Friends, the first step in finding salvation is seeing our lost condition for what it is, admitting that we need spiritual help and healing. Without this, we'll never turn to Jesus in repentance. So one of the best ways that we can pray for spiritually lost people, is that they'll come to the same realization that we came to: we are spiritually sick and in need of repentance.

Verses 31-32 are right in line with Jesus' Messianic Manifesto from back in Luke 4:18-19: Jesus said: "18 The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²³ This also prompts me to pray for any believers who are on Spring Break this week.

²⁴ I do wonder what answer Jesus' disciples might have given the Pharisees, or if they even tried?

²⁵ Luke records multiple instances of this kind of muttering: see Luke 15:1-2, 19:7. Jesus continues to be in hot water with these religious leaders throughout His earthly ministry, but He's never too worried about it, because He's in step with His Heavenly Father's will the entire time.

²⁶ This word for "complain" is the same word used in the Old Testament when the Israelites grumbled against God in the desert. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 496.

But some of us don't yet see ourselves in these ways. We aren't yet ready to admit that we're spiritually poor, or that we're imprisoned by sin. We're oblivious to our own spiritual blindness, and to the oppression that's holding us down.²⁷ There are two basic kinds of spiritually lost sinners in the world: those who know they're lost, and those who don't; those who admit that they're lost, and those who won't.²⁸

Later on, in Luke 18:9-14, Luke records a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector: "9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."²⁹

This word, "justified" in verse 14, means "made right with God."³⁰ Made right, because we admitted that something was wrong, so we turned to God for help. This requires a large dose of humility and a healthy sense of self-awareness. Jesus came to justify sinners, to call them to repentance. So as much as He was willing and eager to be among Levi's friends, His message for them was that they needed to turn to God.³¹ You see, repentance isn't just an admission of guilt, it's also an admission of being in need. This is why childlike faith is so responsive; little children are under no illusions that they can handle things on their own, so they're quick to cry out "Abba Father! Help me Lord!"³²

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:4 says that "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

²⁸ Jesus may be being a little tongue and cheek in Luke 5:31-32, because He, of all people, knows that there is none righteous, no not one. Except of course for Himself, the perfect Son of God. Luke 16:15 later describes the Pharisees as "ones who justify [themselves] in the eyes of others." Luke 18:9 calls out the Pharisees for "[being] confident of their own righteousness and [looking] down on everyone else." These religious leaders had a false sense of assurance in their own righteousness, and it would keep them from receiving the spiritual doctoring they so desperately needed.

²⁹ "The righteous cannot repent, but sinners can." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 498.

³⁰ δικαιώω ("justified") = "to render a favorable verdict, vindicate. ... β. of God *be found in the right, be free of charges.*" William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 249.

³¹ "Jesus associated with sinners and condemned all sin." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 497.

³² "A repentant heart is open, not closed, to God. The physician seeks to call people to see themselves honestly, as they really are. They are ready to let God work on them. This willingness to rest in God and have him enter one's life is the essence of repentance. The Pharisees' attitude prevents this type of work from being done on them." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 500.

I'd like to close by sharing one other acronym that I learned in my evangelism class. Part of the class was reading some research by a guy named Rick Richardson. Rick makes a compelling case for "Blessing the world to reach the world." Based on his research with the Billy Graham Institute, he suggests "5 bless practices for reaching the spiritually lost:³³

Begin with prayer: for and with unchurched people.

Listen to their story: hang out and get to know each other.

Eat with them: show hospitality and build relationship.

Serve and be served: help people and let them help you.³⁴

Share your faith story: invite them to consider following Jesus.³⁵

So we begin by praying for the unchurched people within our circle of influence. And we even pray *with* them if/when it's appropriate. We listen to their story. Without a genuine relationship, we'll never come to realize their joys and sorrows, or the pain and trauma they may have gone through, or the accomplishments they celebrate. So we need to listen and get to know them. We also bless them by eating with them, showing hospitality and building relationship by having them over for a cookout or taking them out for coffee. We bless them by serving them in whatever ways they need to be served. And we also let them serve us. A genuine relationship should be mutual, not one-sided. So, just like any other friendship, it's a two-way street and we let them help us if/when they'd like to.

Finally, when it's appropriate, and not forced or pressured, we share our faith story. This should just be a natural, comfortable part of our relationship. It's not a "bait and switch" or a sudden "shock" to them where we really "lay it on them!" It's simply a natural part of getting to know each other and caring enough to share how faith has impacted our life, and how we think it could bless and benefit theirs. May the Lord help us to be more and more like Jesus, as we learn to eat with lost sinners, and as we point them to the hope and healing that can be found in the gospel.

³³ Adapted and modified from Rick Richardson, *You Found Me*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2019, p. 181.

³⁴ "Nothing you do gives dignity to others or creates openness to your sharing like receiving their help." Rick Richardson, *You Found Me*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2019, p. 181.

³⁵ This brings to mind a great song by Paul Alan called, "To Bring You Back."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uH0OUiKWOAI>