

Dinner at Levi's House

Mark 2:13-17

¹³Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

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This is the neighborhood where I grew up. I come here often. I have many memories that connect me with my past. Some of those experiences were not only important then, they continue to shape my life today.

One happened one evening as I followed my father. He was a scribe of the Pharisees. They took the faith seriously and worked hard to live the faith with integrity.

When my father and I would walk, he would recite scripture.

God is our refuge and strength.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

These scriptures guided his life.

One of his favorites was

It is in vain that you rise early and go late to rest for the Lord gives his beloved sleep.¹

My father also loved the wisdom of Scripture. He would often recite Proverbs.

Better to eat a crust of bread in a home with love than the finest meat where there is hatred.²

As a scribe of the Pharisees, my father was respected in our community. "Shalom" people would say to him and he would smile in response.

What I remember about this night was that my father and his colleagues had been troubled by Jesus.

Jesus had come from southern Galilee and had generated a lot of interest. He had been healing people and teaching with authority.

You might have expected my father and his friends to be pleased at this, but Jesus' teaching seemed to threaten them.

¹ Psalms 127:2

² Proverbs 15:17 (TEV)

The day that I'm describing to you, Jesus had encountered Levi – a local tax collector. Normally, tax collectors were the butt of jokes. Not only did they work for the occupying Roman government, they often had a not-so-subtle racket of extortion going on. Many thought of tax collectors as twice-baked traitors.

Rather than Jesus pointing a finger of judgment at Levi, he called him to be one of his students. A tax collector mind you!

My father and his colleagues had met in the afternoon to talk about Jesus:

“Misguided faith” they said, and “Poor political judgment”.

Jesus called Levi, but it was my father and the other scribes of the Pharisees who began following closely Jesus' -every move.

That night, Levi threw one of his parties and the regular party crowd was there: other tax collectors and some lower level Roman officials and Jesus was there.

Levi's courtyard was something like your back yards; it was easy to see what was going on.

Levi's crowd had no concern for the dietary laws and Jesus seemed unconcerned as well.

That offence against my father could not have been greater had Levi and Jesus been playing football in my father's flower garden.

My father and his friends went to the edge of the courtyard and spoke to some of Jesus' followers. It was a way of speaking their mind without directly challenging the rabbi, but I think they hoped that the followers might reign in their leader.

Picture it: the well-dressed and sophisticated scribes talking over the fence to these tax collectors.

Here's the part that sticks in my mind: Jesus walked over to this conversation and seemed to know what's going on.

I heard him say: “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I'm here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually-fit.”³

With that, Jesus turned and rejoined the party leaving my father and his Pharisee friends at the fence.

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I've thought about that night many times. I realize that my father and his friends were scriptural and prayerful, there was much in their life to be commended, but they were also self-assured and proud – too proud to have invited this Jesus to their homes.

When I come to this place, I can see Jesus standing in the midst of those motley tax collectors. They knew so little of my father's world, and so much of their own need.

We all must choose whether we'll stand with the Pharisees in our finest *appearance*, or have dinner with Jesus and the sinners.

³ Mark 2:17 (The Message)

My father and his friends held their ground, but eventually I became a follower of Jesus.

I soak up Jesus' acceptance of people like Levi and me. Such relief! I don't have to pretend to be something I am not.

But it has also done this. When my hands were full of myself and trying to present my best self, there was no room for receiving. Now that I've emptied my hands and my heart of all that I find that they're open and ready to welcome what the great physician wants to give me.

It's not Levi's courtyard, and I don't think that there are any tax collectors here today, but it is our dinner with Jesus. I hope you'll not be put off by our appearance. You see us as we are: sin-sick under the care of a great physician.

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