



A Life That We Can Live

Imitating Christ

A Life of Welcome

Now the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:1-2

“This Man Welcomes Sinners”

Luke 15 begins with a contrast between “tax collectors and sinners” and “Pharisees and scribes.” Apparently, sinners are drawn to Jesus, but religious leaders complain that he accepts and even eats with sinners. What is it about Jesus and what he does that elicits such different responses?

The extension of welcome, compassion, and friendship across well-defined boundaries of exclusion was a parable in action, a way of communicating Jesus’ understanding of God and those who are welcome in the kingdom. Jesus defends his table fellowship and friendship with the “tax collectors and sinners” (15:1-2) by telling three parables of God’s own mercy.

The Gospel’s presentation of the absolute welcome of Jesus’ ministry is evident in the numerous scenes in which Jesus reaches out to sinners, foreigners, tax collectors, women, and the poor. The prevailing attitude toward these groups was conditioned by both social and religious factors — attitudes that would keep these people beyond the borders of respectable society. Therefore, a vital part of Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom of God consisted in his challenge to the social prejudices of his day. The scandal, of course, was that Jesus welcomed such outcasts, shared table fellowship with them, and even played host to them.

Mark notes these differing responses to Jesus’ practices of welcome (2:15-16). Matthew develops the theme (9:10-11; 11:19; 21:31). But it is Luke who brings it to center stage, often through the setting of a meal.

- ▶ Jesus calls the tax collector Levi to be one of his disciples and then attends a party with Levi’s associates (5:27-32)
- ▶ Jesus acknowledges that his critics consider him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners (7:34)
- ▶ Jesus commends the faith of a disreputable woman who anoints him during a meal at the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50)
- ▶ Jesus upends conventional standards about whom to invite to a banquet, describing the kingdom of God as a banquet where the invitations keep extending beyond the original guest list: to the “poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (14:1-24)
- ▶ Jesus justifies his practice of welcoming and eating with sinners by telling the parable of the prodigal son (15:1-2; 11-32)
- ▶ Jesus takes the initiative to eat with the chief tax collector Zacchaeus, inviting himself to his house (19:1-10)

Table fellowship, one of humankind’s most basic and common practices, was transformed by Jesus into an occasion of divine encounter. It was in sharing food and drink that he invited his companions to share in the grace of God. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, meals are so frequent that someone once commented that Jesus seems always to be on his way to or from a meal, usually with outcasts and those viewed as sinners. Jesus so cares for those rightly or wrongly stigmatized by society that he ignores the popular restrictions on intimately associating with them, and he was aware of the reputation he had earned: “The Son of man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (7:34).

His association, however, is never an end in itself. Implicitly or explicitly, he is calling people to change their ways and follow him in a life of discipleship. As David Seccombe observes:

“Once we see that Jesus construed his eating with sinners — his offer of friendship and their acceptance of it — as tantamount to entrance into the kingdom of God, we see how appropriate was the celebration which got him his reputation as ‘a wine drinker and a glutton’ as well as ‘a friend of tax collectors and sinners’. Their meals together were an expression of their new relationship with Jesus, which was celebrated as though it was a new relationship with God.”

Welcomed and Transformed (Luke 19:1-10)¹

Zacchaeus was known in town by just one word: “sinner” (19:7). In Hebrew his name meant “pure” or “righteous” — a sign pointing to who he was created to be. It was a reminder that he had been made in the image of God. But these days Zacchaeus was not living out his name. He was neither pure nor righteous.

He was, after all, a tax collector. Tax collectors took goods from others for the good of themselves. They were employed by the Romans. The Romans had marched into Israel and taken over. And to fund Rome, they taxed groups like the Jews nearly to poverty. That’s why throughout the gospels the phrase “sinners and tax collectors” is used. Tax collector had become just another synonym for “sinner.”

¹ This account of Luke 19:1-10 is adapted from Chris Altrock’s article, “Making Room for the Rich: Becoming a Community Where More People Matter” ([Link to article](#)).

Not only was Zacchaeus a tax collector, he was the “chief” tax collector. He was the head of teams of corrupt crews taxing their neighbors into poverty and getting rich off it. And no one was getting richer than Zacchaeus. Every penny he gained came through the suffering of others.

When Jesus entered Jericho, Zacchaeus started running. But he wasn't running *away* from Jesus the way he seemed to have been running away from God his whole life. He was running *toward* Jesus. Wealthy men, prominent men, adult men like him did not run in that culture. It wasn't something that was dignified. The only people you would see running in Jericho were children. Zacchaeus was running towards Jesus in the way that a child would run toward a parent.

It seems like something on this day made him realize the weight of that label, “sinner.” He finally caught a vision for who God created him to be: pure and righteous. He finally felt the gulf between who he was and who he was made to be. So he did the only thing he could think of: He ran to Jesus.

Even Zacchaeus had heard the stories. Stories of how this man made room for people no one else would. Stories of how Jesus had been eating with sinners and tax collectors. Stories of how people had been transformed in his company. So Zacchaeus scrambled as close to Jesus as he could get. He ran to the only one who was willing and able to do anything for him.

And here's what Jesus did — Jesus welcomed him. The entire city rejected him. But Jesus welcomed him. In fact, to show just how much he welcomed Zacchaeus, Jesus invited himself to the house of Zacchaeus. He wanted everyone to know the depth of his welcome for this man that everyone else called a ‘sinner.’

Jesus “welcomed him gladly” (v. 6), The crowd, however, had its own opinion: **All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” (v. 7).** All they can see is their judgment that Zacchaeus is a sinner. And from their perspective, for Jesus to stay in such a person's home was equivalent to sharing in his sin.

What happens next likely shocked the muttering crowd. This act of welcome by Jesus was so abundant, so powerful, that Zacchaeus was fundamentally changed by it. He had been calculating all the people he has wronged. Probably no sheet of paper was long enough to list all those people, but Zacchaeus is so moved by a Jesus who receives him when all others have rejected him that he determines to pay back what he had taken. And not just to pay it back. But to quadruple it.

Salvation, Jesus says, has come to this house (v. 9). Zacchaeus had spent a life defined by his greed, self-centeredness, and distraction, but once he experienced the welcome of Jesus, those things about him were washed away and replaced with compassion and benevolence.

A Life of Welcome

Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus has shown himself unwilling to follow his culture's traditions about not associating with the ritually impure and the morally wicked. He is willing to go to their homes. Indeed, here he insists on it. He shares in their food and lodging, but he never does so for inclusiveness' sake. A call to repentance is always implicit unless, as here, the individual in question takes the initiative to declare his change of heart and behavior. Whereas the crowds see Jesus welcoming this type of man as becoming a partner with

him in his crimes, Jesus believes that godly character and righteous living can be modeled and have a positive impact by rubbing off on others as they commit to change their ways.²

Welcoming others (especially to table fellowship) was one of the early Christian ways of welcoming outsiders, as it was for Jesus. When we come across statements like, “And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved,” immediately after mention of the believers taking their meals together regularly (Acts 2:46-47), we should probably see the early Christians as continuing the practice of Jesus, which would include extending table fellowship to “tax collectors and sinners,” among others.

Jesus calls us to be a community that practices this same boundary-breaking compassion and mercy today. All around us people are hungering for the love of God to welcome them, to include them (whether they realize it or not). Such welcome is a powerful light shining in the darkness of world that excludes, separates, and divides.

The way God has worked in Christ to welcome and to reconcile sinners to himself reveals the way Christians are to welcome others. This welcome, this radical greeting, is the welcome offered to the one who does not look like ourselves, who is not a member of our “immediate” family. Perhaps this person dresses differently, celebrates different traditions, looks different, or is without a job or home. We make room for others at this table, we extend Jesus’ welcome, we bid one another eat and be satisfied, thankful to Jesus for his welcome and generosity by calling us together in our differences to his table.

Of course, as in Jesus’ ministry, the point of these efforts is not merely to break down cultural barriers or develop friendships with those with whom we might not naturally associate. Implicitly or explicitly, Jesus is calling people to follow him, and our practices of welcome must do the same.

Start in Your Neighborhood

God is at work in our world, in our city, and in our neighborhoods—and in those spaces, God longs to work through us to make things whole. We are all very busy in our own circles, but if we can cross the road once in a while and pay attention to what is happening on the other side, we will discover endless opportunities to live a life of welcome among the people who are closest to us each day.

Much like our own lives, what we’ll find on the other side of the road won’t always look neat and tidy. But also like us, we’ll find people who are hungry for mercy, kindness, compassion. There are so many among us who are dying for a little bit of love, encouragement, and blessing. Our neighbors need to hear and see and taste and feel authentic Christian welcome spreading from our homes. The possibilities for this are endless — just imagine what it would look like to see neighbors together in conversation, prayer, food, friendship, childcare, and all the daily matters upon which relationships are built.

How might we take the first step toward becoming an extension of Jesus’ welcoming embrace to the people around us? Henri Nouwen says it well: “More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them...**I wonder if the first thing shouldn’t be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs, that you do not simply like them, but truly love them.**”

² Craig Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus’ Meals with Sinners*

Discussion

1. If you could invite three people (dead or living) over to your house for dinner, who would it be?
2. Luke makes a point to contrast Jesus' welcome of Zacchaeus with the grumbling of the crowd. Why do you think Luke wants us to notice this?
3. Do you think it's easier (or more natural) for us to divide and separate ourselves from others than to practice Jesus' example of welcome? Why? What are some examples of things in our culture that influence division? What would Jesus say about these things? Where would we find Jesus in the midst of these things today?
4. Jesus reaches out to Zacchaeus first. What does this tell us about God and who God is? How does this passage illustrate Jesus' life mission (see 19:10)?
5. Following in Jesus' example, what does a life of welcome actually look like for us? What practices are associated with it? What are some barriers to following Jesus' example of welcome and how do we overcome them?