

**SI:** Between Thanksgiving and Christmas we do a lot of eating together.

That's one of the significant activities of the holidays.

In the Gospels, Jesus does a lot of eating with people.

It was one of the significant aspects of his ministry.

In fact, Jesus himself makes the point that he did not come to fast but to feast.

He says about himself: The Son of Man came eating and drinking.

So the way Jesus eats with people, and the how and why of his eating with them is an important part of his message.

Over this Advent Season we're looking at Jesus Christ, God in the flesh,  
on four occasions where food and drink were being served.

Once at a big wedding reception,

twice in people's homes, around their tables,

and once at a campfire eating breakfast on the shore of a lake.

And through these meals we're going to see who Jesus is and why he came  
and what a difference in can make in the lives of people who believe in him.

**INTRO:** My mother taught elementary school for 30 years and I heard her say  
more than once that she liked teaching boys more than girls.

And the reason, she said, was that boys would fight but then the next moment  
they would forget all about it and be playing together.

But girls—the way she put it was—We're starting a club and you're not in it.

I don't have any reason to doubt my mother's observations, but it's certainly true  
that girls and boys, women and men all have a deep down desire to be in the club.

C.S. Lewis wrote a famous essay called "The Inner Ring."

It describes our common desire to be accepted within the "inner ring" of whatever  
group matters to us at the time.

To feel excluded or on the outside is miserable.

Lewis talks about the moral compromises people make to try into the inner ring,  
and how once you get there, you see there is a more inner, inner ring.

He says at one point:

You are trying to peel an onion; if you succeed there will be nothing left.

Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain.

He also says:

The quest of the Inner Ring will break your hearts unless you break it.  
What is this universal human desire to be on the inside?

If a person sees an inner ring of connected people in his workplace  
or an inner ring of cool people high school senior class  
or even an inner ring in his church and wants to be in that ring  
and feels excluded and unhappy—what's behind that?

Those desires are all pointers to the deepest inner ring—

Who is in with God? Who does God accept?

Who does the Creator look at with approval?

That's the question.

This meal of Jesus is about the inner ring.

It's about who's in and who's out with God.

You might think that Jesus would get rid of the idea of an inner ring,  
but he doesn't. There's still an inner ring.

Jesus says: Yes, there are people who are in and people who are out.

But Jesus completely overturns the qualifications for who gets there  
and how they get there.

The Pharisees believed the good people were in and the bad people were out.

Jesus demolished that and brought something so different that he said—

if you try to combine the two it will be like putting new wine in old wineskins.  
New wine, still fermenting, it will explode the old, rigid wineskins.

Let's look at this passage under two heading.

First, let's look at it from the view of the Pharisees

that the good people are in and the bad people are out.

Second, let's look at it from Jesus' point of view.

But I'm not going to summarize his view yet.

Let's explore the passage and discover it together.

## **MP#1 The good people are in and the bad people are out**

Jesus went to eat in the home of a tax collector named Levi.

This man Levi is the same disciple who is also called Matthew, author of Gospel. Levi had a banquet for Jesus and he invited his colleagues who were also tax collectors working for the Roman government, and he invited many of his friends. This greatly bothered the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

They criticized Jesus and complained that he was eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.

Why did they complain? What was bothering them?

They were concerned about contamination.

We understand how contamination works. It happens with proximity. If you come into contact with a person or an object that has germs or viruses, you touch them or breathe them and they get on you, you get contaminated. I once heard that in a hotel room, the most germ-covered object is not the bedspread, it's the TV remote. People carry it into bathroom, use it to scratch!

The Pharisees didn't have a germ theory.

Their concern about contamination was not about physical health and wellness.

They believed in spiritual and moral contamination by proximity.

If the morally clean person came into contact with the morally unclean person, that would make the clean unclean.

The pure would become impure by contact with the impure.

If that happened, then you were out of the inner circle.

Jesus clearly didn't buy that. He ate with unclean, impure people.

Tax collectors. These were not honest civil servants working for the IRS.

These were Jews who worked for the Roman occupiers.

They were notorious for forcing people to overpay on their taxes so they could keep a cut. The Romans didn't care if they overcharged as long as they got their tax. They backed up the Jewish tax collectors with Roman swords.

The tax collectors were money-loving oppressors and collaborators.

Sinners. That meant people who didn't live according to all the laws of Moses.

These were people outside the circles of respectable life.

By Jesus eating with them, coming into contact with them, these morally and spiritually defiled people, he would be defiled.

It would be easy for someone to imagine that this way of thinking is characteristic of religion. That only strict religious people think about moral contamination. But this is not just something religious people do.

Everybody does this, even secular people.

I read a fascinating article recently by Joseph Bottum, he's a political commentator.

The title was: "The Spiritual Shape of Political Ideas"

His thesis is that for some Americans, political ideas have taken on religious characteristics.

One example he uses is this idea of moral contamination.

How contact with bad people can contaminate good people.

He gives an example of how the actor Alec Baldwin was once greatly admired by liberal New Yorkers. He had all the credentials, on the board of progressive organizations, a vocal Democrat, on the receiving end of conservative attacks.

But that all changed when he used an antigay slur to chase off paparazzi.

Joseph Bottum says after a video of him doing that went viral, he was shunned.

Baldwin was a generous patron of the arts and his voice was used to welcome concert goers to the New York Philharmonic in Lincoln Center.

But after this incident audiences began to boo and hiss so the recording was removed. Just the sound of his voice was considered contaminating.

Allison and I watched a few episodes of a Netflix series called:

Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee.

Jerry Seinfeld drives around Los Angeles with different comedians and celebrities and they get coffee. In one episode the comedian was Michael Richards, who was on the Seinfeld show as the character Kramer.

But a few years ago Michael Richards responded to some hecklers with racial slurs and as a result his career was destroyed.

He seems truly sorry but there's no way back.

Nobody will touch him for fear of contamination.

Jerry Seinfeld had him on an episode of this show, but he just wished good luck.

He didn't risk getting too close because in his world, Michael Richards is a tax collector and sinner. He'll never get back in.

Another interesting detail in Joseph Bottum's article.

He points out that in Christianity there is discipline for sinful acts, and in Christianity there is always a way back in through repentance.

Paul says not to eat with someone who calls himself a brother and persists in sinful deeds. But if he repents, accept him back.

On the contrary, Bottum says, in the secular version there is no grace extended.

Those who break certain rules become unclean and there's no way back.

No one wants to touch them for fear of moral contamination and becoming

an outcast like they are.  
Everybody is afraid of being excluded from the inner ring.

I know I've spent a lot of time on this, but I think it's valuable to see that what Jesus was dealing with when he went to Levi's home and the criticism of the Pharisees is a universal human response.

This is the default position of the human heart.

The good people are in and the bad people are out.  
If you're a bad person, no matter how hard you try, you're not going to be allowed into the inner circle. And the good people aren't going to touch you. Because if they do, they will become contaminated.

There's one more facet to this view that the good people are in and the bad are out. It's self-deceptive. Because people who operate under this way of thinking—define what is good according to their own standards.

Jesus put his finger on that self-deception when he said:

It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.

He wasn't saying that the Pharisees were spiritually healthy—

He was saying that they thought they were healthy. They saw themselves healthy. The Pharisees could not see themselves as they really were because they defined good superficially. Defined it as rules they were able to keep.

To be fair—the Pharisees knew they sinned from time to time.

Would not have said that they were perfect.

But when they looked in the mirror, they were convinced of their basic goodness.

“I've made some mistakes in life, but deep down I'm a good person.”

That's the way many people view themselves.

Years ago I knew a girl named Shannon who was anorexic.

Once she was shopping with a friend of hers, trying on bathing suits.

She came out of the dressing room in a bikini, stood in front of a mirror.

Her friend burst into tears and said: “Shannon, I'm so worried about you.”

She replied: “Don't worry, I'll be fine when I lose a little more weight.”

I'm not sick. I'm healthy. I'm good as I define it.

But what about the people who know or who sense they aren't good.

Something is wrong with them. They are outside the inner ring?

That brings us to our second point, Jesus' view.

According to the Pharisees, the good people are in and the bad people are out.

But according to Jesus. . . .

**MP#2 The humble people are in and the proud people are out**

Jesus says: I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.  
So who does Jesus touch? Who does he bring into the inner ring?

Those people who know they are sinners and who repent of their sin.

What do we know about Levi? About Matthew?

Historians tell us that tax collectors in Roman provinces purchased their office from the government. Purchased the responsibility of collecting taxes or tolls in a certain area, guaranteed to fill the amount required by the government.

Anything extra they collected was theirs to keep.

The whole system was built on corruption and extortion.

Maybe Levi started out saying:

I'm only going to charge a reasonable amount for a modest standard of living.  
But that didn't last and he found himself making moral compromises,  
squeezing people, hurting people.

Remember, that's what Zaccheus admitted doing. Another tax collector.  
We don't know what Levi thought about his work.

Did it bother him that he was despised by most people? Or a thick skin.  
Was he sometimes bothered by how much he was hurting people and how much  
he loved money? Did he sometimes try to be more fair?

Did he sometimes let people off the hook to soothe his conscience?  
Or had he gotten hardened to his way of life and ways of self justification?  
We don't know.

But what we do know, what Luke tells us, is that the watershed moment for Levi was when Jesus passed his tax booth and said: Follow me.

And Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.

This was not like Peter, James, and John leaving their fishing business.

They could go back to that trade, and they occasionally did.

Levi burned his bridges. He left his job and lost his income to follow Jesus.

Why did he do that? Why did he follow Jesus?

Because the call of Jesus awakened in Levi an accurate understanding of himself and his moral and spiritual condition. And it awakened in him an intense longing for God's forgiveness and grace.

He wanted to be in the inner ring. Not of respectable Jewish society.

But the inner ring of God's favor.

And he believed that Jesus Christ would take him there.

Levi had one thing the Pharisees didn't have.

The Pharisees were scrupulously honest when it came to financial dealings, and they were patriots, would have died before working for oppressors.

But Levi had something they didn't have.

He knew he was a sinner in need of God's grace.

Wonderful line in commentary by Kent Hughes:

The first link between my soul and Christ is not my goodness, but my badness; not my merit, but my misery; not my standing, but my falling; not my riches, but my need.

I ran across a list of names on internet. I'm going to read and ask you a question.

Whitney Houston, Willy Nelson, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Elvis Presley, Randy Travis, Alan Jackson, Mahalia Jackson, Andrea Bocelli, Judy Collins, Diana Ross, Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie, Rod Stuart, Johnny Cash, George Jones, Loretta Lynn, Carrie Underwood, Destiny's Child

What song they have all recorded? Not Jingle Bells! *Amazing Grace*

*Amazing Grace* was written in 1779 by the Anglican minister John Newton.

His life story is well-known. He was a slave ship captain.

He carried black human beings, from Africa to the slave markets of the West Indies.

When his ship was about to sink in a storm he cried out to God.

He was saved. Became a minister. Wrote this hymn about God's grace.

John Newton once said:

I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.

That doesn't seem to be a psychologically healthy practice.

To continue to reflect with humiliation on the bad things you've done.

But Newton said hoped he would never forget to do that. Why?

Do you remember how the Pharisees avoided people outside the inner ring for fear of moral and spiritual contamination? Universal human fear.

If the clean touches the unclean, the clean becomes unclean. Danger of exclusion.

Jesus did touch the unclean. And he didn't become contaminated.

Instead, contamination worked in reverse. They became pure.

Earlier in this same chapter in Luke a leper came to Jesus and said:

If you are willing, you can make me clean.

In Jewish thinking, lepers were unclean.

This was not just a matter of physical disease. Their leprosy was considered to be God's judgment. It was thought to be a picture of their moral condition.

You didn't touch a leper and he wasn't allowed to touch you.

Jesus said: I am willing, be clean. Jesus could have just said the words.

He didn't have to do anything. But he did. He touched the man.

And when he did, Jesus didn't become unclean, the leper was healed.

That's what happened to Levi. Jesus called him and went home and ate with him.

No doubt to the end of his life, Levi remembered that day, that meal, that touch. I'm sure Levi never wanted to forget the gratitude and joy he felt. And that's what John Newton was expressing.

That's why people who know God's grace through Christ find joy and relief in confessing their sins and even remembering with humble gratitude times of great forgiveness in the past.

According to Jesus, it's not the good people who are in and the bad people who are out, it's the humble who are in and the proud who are out.

And Jesus finishes by saying that these two ways of life, these two radically different self images are completely incompatible.

You can't have God's grace and reliance on your own goodness. Trying to combine them is like tearing a piece from a new garment to patch an old garment. The patch doesn't match and the new garment is ruined. Or he says it like putting new wine, wine still fermenting, in old, rigid wineskins. They will burst and the wine will run out and be lost. You can't be proud of who you are and believe you're a good person deep down and at the same time know you're a moral leper humbly needing Christ's touch.

And Jesus says one more thing.

No one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, "The old is better." Jesus is saying, If you have a taste for your own goodness, it's going to be like smooth, old wine to you, and you're not going to have a taste for the sharp, tangy taste of my grace. Grace is actually going to be off-putting to you.

A neighbor once asked me: Is God going to condemn me for not going to church? I: Going to church never saved anybody. Only Jesus saves. Are you trusting Jesus? It seemed like he didn't hear me. Because started talking about family business. How they have run this business through years with integrity. Helped people. How haven't been extravagant on selves, put money back into community. Didn't hit me until later that he was answering my question: Are you trusting Jesus? His answer was: I'm a good man. God's going to let me in the inner ring. He only had a taste for the old wine of self-righteousness.

So here's my question for you:

It's Christmas time. It's a season of feasting. It's a season of eating and drinking. For you, is it going to be the old wine of your self-righteousness. Is your focus this season going to be on your innate goodness, and how you're in the inner ring or have good hopes of getting there.

Or are you going to see yourself as God sees you, a sin-sick person in need of forgiveness. Are you going to drink the new wine of God's grace in Jesus? Jesus invites you. Come, follow me.

Come to Bethlehem. Come to the manger.

Come to Jesus and receive his touch of forgiveness and the full acceptance of God and inclusion into his favor.