



Luke 5:33–35

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Reflection

On Friday we left Jesus relaxing in wrong sort of company; on this occasion, dining with tax collectors and 'sinners'. During Jesus' three years of ministry he was often found in this sort of company. On Friday, he was being hosted by the tax collector Levi who'd thrown a great banquet in his honour, no doubt inviting all sorts of undesirables from around town. To Jews in Jesus' day, tax collectors ranked right up there with lepers, prostitutes, Samaritans, Romans and shepherds when it came to persons of ill repute. And to make matters worse Jesus was doing more than simply associate himself with tax collectors and sinners, he was actually dining with them. Table fellowship in the ancient world was a serious matter. Jews would not even dine with non-Jews, let alone notorious sin-

ners. In that culture to share a meal with a tax collector was tantamount to sharing in their crimes. And so on Friday we caught the first murmurs from the Jewish religious elite directed towards Jesus' disciples. Luke 5:30,

30 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'

Jesus' reply to them is as memorable as it is profound,

'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'

The implication being that the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ who’d received Jesus at their table were closer to the kingdom of God than these self-righteous religious professionals, who, blinded by their own sin, were standing in judgment over the actions of the Son of God.

‘I have not come to call the so-called righteous, but sinners to repentance and if you’re to have a place in my father’s kingdom then you’ll need to find a place at my table with repentant sinners such as these.’

It is these sentiments that hang in the air as Jesus is further questioned in today’s passage, which I’ll read to us now from Luke 5:33–35,

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Clearly Jesus' break with Jewish traditions has flowed through to the behaviour of his disciples. They go on eating and drinking apparently in flagrant violation of the practices of devout adherents to Judaism like John the Baptist's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees. And to get an idea of what is at stake here it's important

to understand that fasting was one of the pillars of first-century Jewish religious piety. The Old Testament Law required only one fast a year – on the day of Atonement – but zealous Jews would fast periodically throughout the year. There were also different types of fasting ranging from abstaining from all solids and liquids except water, to a partial restriction of your diet, right through to abstaining from all food and water in the most extreme situations of repentance, prayer and petition, as well as national emergency.

In Leviticus, the original intention for fasting was to ‘deny yourself’ or to ‘humble your soul’ before God and in addition to abstaining from food the Israelites would also humble themselves by wearing sackcloth, mourning, and praying. As time went

on fasts multiplied for other legitimate reasons which came to include repentance, mourning, seeking guidance from God, or urgent prayer imploring God for his help in a particularly intense way.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees who saw themselves as religious purists, and were looked upon by the people as leaders of the Jewish religion, had adopted the habit of fasting twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays because Moses is said to have gone up to Mount Sinai on those days when he received the Ten Commandments and Old Testament Law. They felt in doing so that they were adopting Moses' rigorous approach to God and his holiness. And very likely John the Baptist's disciples (following the austerity of John's lifestyle in the wilderness and the tradi-

tions of the Old Testament prophets) had a similar approach to fasting.

And, of course, all of this, given the habits of Jesus' disciples taking their cue from a master who regularly banquets with tax collectors and sinners, well all of this made Jesus' disciples somewhat of a laughing stock. And yet Jesus' short response, incredibly rich in Old Testament allusion, and his illustration that will follow in tomorrow's passage, gives short shrift to any objections.

‘Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? 35 But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.’

Jesus' imagery works on many levels. In the Old Testament God is frequently described as Israel's husband and lover (e.g. Isa 5:1; 54:5–6; 62:4–5; Ezek 16:6–8; Hos 2:19) so Jesus' stunning metaphor is tantamount to claiming not just that he is the Messiah (Luke 4:21), or that he can forgive sins (Luke 5:20), but that he is in fact God himself. And if you've ever been to a Jewish wedding, even today, you'll know about the warmth, and happiness and joy of the occasion. In the first century, Jewish newly-weds did not honeymoon but stayed at home for a seven-day long celebration in which they were treated like kings and queens. They were attended by close friends and family who were exempt from all fasting through a rabbinical ruling that said, 'All in attendance on the bride-

groom are relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy.’¹

And so Jesus is saying with all those Old Testament overtones that his presence justifies a feast, and that his followers had the joyous privilege of a perpetual wedding party. In such circumstances, it is wrong, if not downright impossible to mourn. Jesus’ disciples might have been unhappy at their own sin, but Jesus’ presence brought them relentless joy. For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross (Heb 12:2). And his sinless personality radiated joy. He was love incarnate, and people felt his love. Jesus cared, and his disciples knew it. His presence evoked a sense of security and well-being. His holiness and perfect purity made them conscious of their

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Preaching the word; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 195–97.

sin but his presence was also a bath to the soul, for he forgives sins. Jesus brought genuine release from real guilt; liberation from slavery to sin. As they followed him, his disciples woke each day abounding in hope. They found life to be a continual feast in the presence of Jesus.²

Think

Is this your experience of Jesus? There is certainly a place for fasting and devout prayer in the Christian life, but our lives are far more characterised by bountiful joy, peace and freedom in Christ. Jesus came eating and drinking in the company of sinners, and sinners saved by grace like you and me respond in kind. New creation brings new joys and deeper happi-

² Ibid.

ness than anything we've experienced before and continual celebration. We've been freed from slavery to Satan, sin and death. We've been freed from religious rule keeping and works-based distortions of the Christian faith and this should be the cause of great joy and celebration.

Pray

So ask Jesus to fill you with the joy of his presence today. Ask to be filled with his peace that transcends all understanding. And go and eat and drink in the company of sinners. Share with them what Jesus has done in your life, and how Jesus, if he were alive in the flesh today, would be there, right along side you with them too.