

## ***How Jesus Ate Lunch, and Why*** **Luke 14:1-24**

Eating meals together is a key part of socialization in most every culture. Dining customs may vary widely from one place to another, but everywhere food appears to play a key role in friendship and business. A retired missionary mentioned that when he served in India three generations ago, the highest caste might – as the need arose – defecate in public (as the need arose), but would not eat in front of foreigners or lower-caste Indians; a Brahmin once commented to him: “You Westerners are odd; what we do in public, you do in private; what we do in private, you do in public.” Dining customs may also differ considerably from one time to another. In a previous generation, American families made a point of eating dinner together. Now, in an era of fast foods and afterschool programs, one survey indicates that 40% of families eat together four or fewer times a week. Still, eating together plays a crucial role in most cultures. This week, we reflect on how Jesus ate with others, and why, as well as on the implications of his practices for us today.

### **Day 1: Luke 14:1-2 Inclusive Invitation**

In this account, Jesus crosses several significant social barriers. First, he accepts an invitation from a leading Pharisee. This entails crossing three social lines. For one, the host is a social and religious leader, while Jesus – as an itinerant preacher – operates somewhat outside the organized social framework. For a second, the host emphasizes ritual purity and strict obedience to both Old Testament law and Jewish tradition, while Jesus is widely known to disregard such expectations, as he does here by healing on the Sabbath. For a third, at this point in his ministry, Jesus has had enough experience to realize that the Pharisees are generally opposed to him; even here, while inviting him to lunch, they keep a close eye on him. Still, he joins them for the meal.

Beyond all this, Jesus crosses another social barrier in entertaining a diseased man. Dropsy is an archaic, generic term for a variety of conditions involving fluid retention (and great thirst), due either to a heart or to a kidney condition. Whatever the underlying cause, the diseased were generally marginalized as a threat to the spirituality and the health of the rest of the community. Sometimes this particular condition was considered to be punishment for sin. So Jesus steps across social boundaries in each direction, challenging the elite, and welcoming the disenfranchised.

Which all raises questions about the people with whom we choose to socialize. Often our social networks involve people who are all from the same socio-economic level, or the same school or college, or who share the same interests, or who are all believers, or whose personalities we click with, or whom we have known for a long time, and so forth. Can you identify three friendships you have that cross social barriers? If not, what can you do to reach beyond your normal social circles?

### **Day 2: Luke 14:3-6 Significant Conversation**

In the course of this otherwise routine meal, opportunity arose for Jesus to share his deep theological convictions. As a diseased man appeared, a controversy broke out: Does God permit healing on the Sabbath? Jesus heals the man, justifies his action, and silences his opponents.

As we spend time with people unlike us, similar opportunities will arise when we can naturally share our convictions, worldview, and faith. (For example, I had more regular opportunities to share my faith while working in a bank for a year, than while studying in seminary for several years.) Yet the same applies also to socializing with one another: discussion of weather is not all that interesting; sports is not so important; sharing about work takes us only so far. Let's also talk about things that matter. For example, a natural question over Sunday lunch is: "How does the point of that Bible text apply to your life situation?" Or, "How did you become a Christian?" Or, "What spiritual challenges are you currently facing?" Or, "Currently, in what way are you serving God, and how is it going?"

### **Day 3: Luke 14:7-11 Egalitarian Socializing**

Jesus disrespects social norms in a third way: not only does he cross social boundaries and engage in substantial (even controversial) conversation, he also eschews social hierarchies. First-century culture, whether Jewish or Greco-Roman, paid careful attention to social conventions regarding status and rank. One manifestation of that was seating arrangements at formal dinners and parties. (I remember one foreign diplomat complaining about seating arrangements at a State dinner during the Carter administration, after he spent the evening seated next to the nine-year-old Amy Carter, who buried her nose in a book the entire time.) Jesus mocks all that. Nowadays, apart from weddings, where the bridal party and immediate family have special seating, we are not nearly so conscious of formal social status in seating arrangements. But we are highly sensitive to social status in other contexts. The most common may be when selecting a college to

attend (a 'reach' school). But another obvious example is in choosing whom to date: don't we all aim at least a little higher socially (or physically, or educationally, or financially) than we think we can attain (a 'reach' relationship)? Or, when invited to a party, do we scan the list of respondents to the Evite, before deciding whether or not to go? Or do we choose our seats carefully when out with a group at a restaurant, so that we can sit near the center of the table, or next to the most popular? The criteria by which we measure or attain social status have certainly changed, but perhaps not the basic behavior of social climbing.

#### **Day 4: Luke 14:12-14 Why Jesus Would Not Join a Frat**

Perhaps Jesus would join a frat, but he would not conduct himself according to the usual practices (quite apart from the drunken, sex-driven parties which give frats a bad name). Fraternities and sororities are built on inclusion and exclusion: tight bond with insiders, and exclusion of others. Though, of course, we are all in frat-like relationships, showing special attention to those who are within our family or friendship networks, and who reciprocate both our affection and our kindnesses, and largely or totally ignoring others, especially those who are socially or socio-economically distant from us. To some extent this is inevitable, which may explain why Jesus called for special efforts to overcome the exclusivity of friendship and social bonds.

Of course, fraternities and alumnae associations are of little relevance to churches. But the question is whether our church, congregation, or fellowship groups function much the same way, not only to bind us in close relationships, but also to exclude others. After all, practically speaking, each of us can nurture only 6-8 friendships at one time, so to add one practically requires subtracting another. And how would we ever apply Jesus' exhortation about banquets – inviting not friends or family, but the socially disenfranchised – given that the only common form of banquet most of us throw is for our wedding. At the very least, his exhortation calls us to broaden the boundaries of our existing social network (and possibly to consider donations for the support of the poor for every feast that we throw for ourselves, our families and our friends).

#### **Day 5: Luke 14:15-24 Why Jesus Ate Lunch This Way**

In this passage, Jesus tells a parable to explain why he eats lunch with the people he eats with, why he discusses what he discusses, and does what he does. Why does he warn against elitism and social climbing? Why does he

challenge exclusive, reciprocal relationships? Because he lives according to the principles governing the reign of God.

Luke makes this clear by drawing a strong connection between 14:1-14 and 14:15-24. The first section ends by advocating: “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (14:13). Why? Because this is precisely what God does: “The owner of the house ... ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’” All four items are the same, with only one difference in order. Jesus acts as God acts. Jesus does not just obey God. He *embodies* God. He does not just proclaim the kingdom. He *inaugurates* the kingdom. And all who are followers of God or Christ, all who live under the reign of God, do so also.

#### **Day 6: Luke 14:15-24 An Additional Reason Why We Eat Lunch This Way**

One of the most debilitating aspects of Christian teaching is the tendency toward moralism: Live this way, because Jesus did. Obey this, because the Bible says so. Do this, because you should. Endless lists of do’s and don’ts, commands and obligations. We want to avoid moralism, because Scripture avoids it. Instead, Scripture affords us much deeper reasons and more powerful motivation.

Jesus ate lunch the way he did, because the kingdom of God is the way it is. Since God is inclusive in inviting all types in the kingdom, Jesus is inclusive with his dining companions. Because God cares about issues of import, Jesus discusses those sorts of issues – and enacts them – over dinner. Because God equally created all, loves all, and redeems all – because no one can lay claim to any higher status on these issues – Jesus treats all equally. And so, obviously, should we.

But, ultimately, obligation – should or must – is not why we do so. We do so, instead, because God has treated us this way: because he has invited us, because he engages with us, because he created, loves, and redeems us. Consequently, our hearts overflow with gratitude, and we naturally treat others similarly. We have experienced grace, so we show grace. Beyond all that is a reason that runs deeper still: because Christ lives within us, because he lives through us, because we live through him, and we live his way, empowered by his love and his Spirit. Not because we *must*. Nor because we *should*. But partly because we *can*. And mostly because *Christ lives in us, transforming us into his likeness*.