

Well, it turns out the Pharisees were right. Let me explain.

In the gospel lesson today, the Pharisees and scribes grumble, saying, “This man [Jesus] receives sinners and eats with them.” It was the type of grumbling that was meant to be heard. They wanted to send the message that they were opposed to this activity. Filled with self-righteous indignation, they say to all who will listen, “Jesus eats with sinners.” They’re right. He does.

In their eyes, Jesus’ choice of dining partners invalidated any claim he had on being a teacher of the people. How could somebody claim to speak for God and then hang out with the scum of society? The people He shared a table with weren’t even trying to lead righteous lives. Respectable rabbis just did not do this. Doesn’t this young man (from Nazareth of all places) realize how scandalous this looks? He receives sinners and eats with them! And, that is correct. That’s how he operates.

The Pharisees had this one pegged. Jesus did indeed take lunch with the lowlifes and sup with the social misfits. He knew all about the tax collectors’ methods of legal extortion and still spent time with them. He was well aware of the reputation of women selling their bodies and he dared to share a meal. He had no problem approaching those whose diseases made them ritually unclean. There was something seriously wrong. And there was, but it wasn’t Jesus.

What was wrong was the attitude of quote-unquote religious people. What’s wrong is when people who really ought to know better take a look around and think to themselves, “Well, at least I’m not as bad as her or him.” What’s wrong is when people who like to come across as very devout also habitually categorize people based on race or economic standing or education as if slapping a label on them makes it alright to criticize them or ignore them. It’s not Jesus who is the problem. The problem is the human tendency to invent traditions and regulations and self-serving organizations that have nothing to do with Jesus and everything to do with making ourselves look good and feel better. We are wired for an “us versus them” mentality, and we can even dress it up in a way that seems to be virtuous. And as long as we hang on to attitudes like these, we will never take a seat at the table with Jesus. Why would we? Jesus eats with sinners. And if I believe deep down that I’m not that flawed, why would I want a spot at the sinners’ table? The idea is embarrassing, if not downright offensive.

But here’s the catch. The Pharisees were right when they said, “Jesus receives sinners.” If you’re looking for him, that’s where you’re going to find him. In response to his accusers, Jesus told a story about a Shepherd who goes looking for one lost sheep. The kingdom value in that story is pretty obvious. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is looking for the lost, the broken, the fearful, the selfish, the isolated. He’s looking for anyone who’s been humbled down to the point where they can say, “I don’t have anything to give you, Lord. I can’t come to you on the basis of my goodness, because there’s nothing there.” That’s who Jesus has come searching for, not the self-righteous, but the one who has given up on ‘self’ as an avenue to God. It is precisely for the person who has made a mess of things and owns that fact that Jesus has come. If that’s the

outward state of your life or just the secret condition of your heart today, there is fantastic news for you.

The Pharisees were right on this point. Jesus receives sinners and eats with them.

Jesus will not shrink away from you because of what you have done. He will not exclude you because of who you are. When you come to Jesus with, “Lord have mercy” welling up from deep inside, you are finally ready to hear him say with authority “Your sins are forgiven! As far as the East is from the West, that's how far your sins are from you now because of me.”

Your sins have been dealt with (not excused but dealt with); paid for; the punishment they deserve has been handled by Jesus himself. In the court of God's justice you are found “not guilty” because Jesus took your sentence. The Lord is merciful. He shows mercy to those who realize their spot at the table; their relationship to God; their life in his Kingdom is not a reward for good behavior, but is one hundred percent a gift. It all depends on God not repaying us in proportion to what our sins deserve. That payment fell on Jesus in his passion and death.

So, if you have been brought low by sin and failure, come and have a seat. So that his forgiveness could be sent to you today, Jesus sets his table in the church. So that his pardon could reach you, he offers his body and pours out his blood for you to eat and drink. So that you could know the joy of fellowship with the Son of God, He brings you to His supper where you are treated as an honored guest. More mercy could hardly be shown.

So, score one for the Pharisees. They were right. Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. This is our only hope.