

3 Reasons to Leave the Table

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[0 : 00] Do you grab your Bible, have it open at Luke chapter 14. And before we start to think about this passage together, I'm just going to pray.

! Lord God, we need you to speak into our lives. Lord, we don't need to hear more of our own voice. We don't need to hear more of my voice.

We need to hear your voice speak to us. So please, as we open your word, would you speak to us, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Jesus sits down at the table, but he's not really wanted. He's been invited to join the Pharisees. But even though he's the greatest man in history, the most gracious man in human history, he's not welcome. In fact, he's being watched.

[1 : 07] That's what the passage says, isn't it? Verse 1. One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. Why is this?

If you read what's been going on in Luke before now, he's been nothing but kind. And his words have been nothing but straight talking and clear and honest.

Yet here he is, and he's being watched. Why is that? Well, it's because we as human beings, we have a problem with Jesus.

Because I think the person who can love me best and knows what's good for me is me. So I don't want Jesus to tell me any different.

See, the truth is that Jesus makes us uncomfortable. And that's what he does when he sits at the dinner table in this passage. And so we have our reasons because he makes us uncomfortable.

[2 : 10] We have our reasons ready for rejecting him. And the people around the dinner table in this passage today have their reasons for rejecting him as well.

But Jesus knows. And he has words for them and he has words for us. So we're going to explore together in this passage what Jesus reveals at dinner about people's hearts.

And what we're going to see is that getting a good seat at the best table is not about being a good person. It's not about being recognized as great.

It's about being a guest. It's about being Jesus' guest. But before we get there, there's three reasons we'll see why people want to leave the table.

Right? Three reasons. Reason number one. I'm a good person. How many times have we heard that, thought that? I'm a good person. Right?

[3 : 11] So really I should be okay. God should, if there is a God, then he should accept me anyway. And we can think that in lots of different ways actually, can't we? One of those thoughts goes something like this.

I have kind of rules for being a good person and what it looks like to live a good life. And I keep those rules. Well, most of the time. Okay, some of the time I keep those rules.

Apart from, well, that thing I don't really like to think about. Anyway, I'm a good person. And I keep those rules so God should accept me. Or here's another way we sometimes think.

Look, I'm not a complete mess. I kind of run my life pretty competently. I'm not a burden on others around me. In fact, I'm contributing. I'm not scrounging.

Kind of a, you know, I'm a good Christian. Well, here's another way. I'm pretty smart. You know, I paid attention at school.

[4 : 11] I'm well educated. So I don't make stupid decisions. And I don't break the law. I'm committed to my family. I don't mess around. So God should accept me.

I'm a pretty good person. This is exactly what the Pharisees would have said. The Pharisees who invited Jesus to the tables. They would have said that they were good men. Law-abiding, upright, moral, good examples, good manners.

And what does Jesus have to say about that? Let's read. One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. And there in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body.

Why is the man there? Well, he's there because the Pharisees have invited him. He's a plant. He's a plant. He's a test for Jesus.

What will Jesus do with this sick man on the Sabbath? Jesus knows it's a trap. And he doesn't care.

[5 : 20] He springs the trap. And he heals the man. Let's keep reading. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?

But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, Jesus heals him and sends him on his way. So he heals the man and then he asks two questions. Question number one.

Is it a good thing to heal someone on the day of rest? Now, in some ways, that's a ridiculous question, isn't it? I mean, of course it's a good thing to help somebody be well.

And Jesus is pointing out that there is something seriously wrong that this question even needs to be asked. And what are we supposed to think? We're supposed to think bad Pharisees.

Yes. You've got it all wrong. Bad Pharisees. And kind of the thought behind that is, I'd never do that. But Jesus asks another question.

[6 : 28] And he asks a very personal question. He asks a personal question which we are supposed to hear him. asking us. And here it is. In verse 5.

Then he asks them, If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out? Here's another way to ask the question.

Have you ever broken the rules of being good for something that you really want? Or for someone that you really care about? A little white lie for your child to protect them?

And that question hurts, doesn't it? Because it reveals that even if we have an idea of what it means to be good, we fail our own test. See, when it's the Pharisees, it's easy, isn't it?

We know what's going on here. Very smart people, good intentions. They make policies and decisions which lead to very bad outcomes. So the Pharisee system meant that this man wouldn't have been healed.

[7 : 37] It's easy to dismiss that. We've all seen it. We've all been at the other end, haven't we? There's a policy or a rule or something which leads to a ridiculous outcome. And we know it's bad. But when the question becomes personal, that's different, isn't it?

And I think if you're in doubt about this, then ask your nearest and dearest, is there anywhere in my life where I'm inconsistent? Possibly even slightly hypocritical?

And if you haven't created an atmosphere of fear around yourself, you will find that your nearest and dearest come back with an answer. See, the problem is, it's not just society that needs fixing. It's us. None of us keeps the rules for being good. In fact, if we're supposed to find ourselves in this passage, then it's in the sick man that we find ourselves.

Because in front of God, our sin is a little bit like that man, that poor man's swollen, distended stomach. It sticks out a mile.

[8 : 51] And we can't hide it. And we can't cure it. We don't want to be like this, do we? We don't want to sit at a table with rules that stop people being helped.

And we don't want to sit at a table where our inconsistency and hypocrisy is pointed out, or at least is obvious. But if we're honest, we can't fix that.

We can't heal ourselves. And all our goodness won't change other people either and won't heal them. We can't make them whole.

And so the only solution is to leave that table and go find the man who heals. So reason number one to leave the table.

I'm a good person. Reason number two. I'm already respectable and valuable. So why would I need Jesus' opinion? If there is a God out there, he should recognise that I'm worth something.

[9 : 56] I think I've earned some respect. In fact, you flip that. Actually, we tend to see around us, don't we, people getting angry if they feel they've been disrespected or even just not being affirmed in their choices.

People get annoyed. Can you remember queuing for school dinners? I can remember queuing for school dinners. First, there's kind of the jostling for position because you want to be front of the queue.

Or maybe, actually, last. Because if you're last in the queue, what do you often get? Double helping. Jostling for the queue.

And then there's the rush to sit with your mates, isn't there? Because you don't want to get left on the table with the dribbly kids. That's sad. But that is how it goes at school, isn't it?

It's a little bit like that here. Let's keep reading. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable.

[11 : 01] See, Jesus looks at all the guests and he sees them picking their place, the place that they think reflects their value. I deserve this place. And they're scrabbling for recognition and respect.

And what does he do? He tells a story, but it's a parable. So it's a story with a deeper meaning. Verse 8. When someone invites you to a wedding feast, it's about a wedding feast.

And what should we be thinking of? We should be thinking about two things here. First is, the wedding feast that went wrong right at the beginning. The marriage that failed because blame tore it apart.

That's Adam and Eve. And we should also be thinking about the eternal wedding feast at the end. Celebrating the marriage of Jesus and the church, the party that goes on forever.

So this parable is about human beings and where we are going. Let's keep reading. Do not take the place of honour for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.

[12 : 06] If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, give this person your seat. And then humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place so that when your host comes, he will say to you, friend, move up to a better place.

And then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests. Jesus says, look, if you're always demanding the respect that you deserve, if you're always looking for affirmation of your value in this world, you're not going the right way about it, even if that's what you want just for down here.

A little bit of irony in what Jesus is saying, isn't there? Really what's underneath is, what a silly game. What a silly game to play.

Would you want to be at that table? It's like musical chairs, but with a lot of agro, isn't it? I don't want to play that game for my whole life.

And Jesus shows here that when people do this, they're always playing the comparison game, aren't they? Because where are you looking? Over at the next spot. Or over at the next spot over there.

[13 : 17] So we're measuring how valuable we are by comparison. And that's no good, is it? Because that's not real value, that's just relative value.

We need some way of knowing that we are valuable, that isn't linked to where we're sitting at the table with everybody else. That won't help us. Verse 11.

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Here Jesus says, this is how it works at my table.

The last will be first. The humble will be exalted. glorious reversal. And Jesus is warning us, if you do the school dinner queue thing, elbows out, and in your rush to get a good place, get the respect you deserve, then you will miss the cosmic truth.

Which is that self-forgetfulness, because that's what humility is, that is what will be rewarded in the end. That doesn't mean thinking less of yourself.

[14 : 33] Oh, I'm rubbish. It means thinking less about yourself. That's what humility is. That's better, isn't it? Isn't that what we want? Not elbowing people out of the way to get what's ours, but instead, self-forgetfulness.

Yes, we're already respectable and valuable, but only the humble will be held high in the end. So that's the second reason to leave the table. Third reason to leave the table.

I'm pretty generous, community-spirited, you know, believe in helping people. I welcome them into my home. I care about charity.

Why should I give Jesus a seat at my table? Why should I listen to him? Just imagine you're at a wedding for a moment. You've been invited to the reception.

You arrive at the reception, the wedding breakfast. What's the first thing you do? You go to the seating plan, don't you? Because you want to know, who am I sitting next to?

[15 : 41] Is it anybody I know? Because it's so much more fun when it's with people you know. It's so much easier than building bridges and trying to be friends with complete strangers.

That's what happens, isn't it? It's our default setting. Jesus turns to his host. When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives or your rich neighbours.

If you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. Here's the party. Family are invited. Friends. Rich neighbours. There's community. There's sharing. And Jesus says, real love is love that has no chance of being repaid.

If you flick back in Luke to chapter 6 and verse 32, Jesus has explained this before.

[16 : 48] 6 verse 32. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you?

Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be repaid in full.

And here it is. But love your enemies. Do good to them and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High.

And this is what Jesus says in verse 13. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

See, this is real love because it's sacrificial. It costs us something and we won't get it back. That's the kind of love that crosses boundaries, isn't it? And bridges difference.

[17 : 56] See, if we invite just our friends and our rich neighbours, all those people we like and who are like us, that just reinforces difference. Real love, Jesus says, doesn't just share wealth, it shares pain.

And what happens then? Verse 14. And you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Jesus says, you live this way, you will be blessed. Or in other words, in non-Christianese, this is the good life. This is a happy life. Sharing with those who can't repay you.

And most of us don't believe him, do we? If we're honest. And Jesus says, you will be repaid. And most of us are thinking, yeah, after I'm dead. And yes, Jesus is asking us to love in a way that looks beyond this life.

Because that's what he did. So I'm generous and community-spirited. But the goal is actually sacrificial love, Jesus says.

[19 : 17] Well, two questions for you to think about. First of all, which of these three statements, I'm good, I'm already respectable and valuable, and I'm generous and community-spirited, which of those, if you're honest with yourself, describes you best?

Let's take a minute to think, which of those, I'm good, or I'm good enough already, I'm valuable and respected, so I don't need God.

I'm generous and community-spirited. Which of those describes your heart the best? And given what Jesus has said, just take ten seconds quietly now to think, what will you do?

Here's another question to think about.

Which of your family, friends, colleagues, community could never, ever repay you if you showed them love? Think where you normally are, where you work, where you live, where you study, whatever it is you do.

[20 : 43] Which of those people could never, ever repay you if you showed them love? And then ask yourself this, what would it look like for you to share your table with them?

We don't really want to be part of that, I'll scratch your back, you scratch mine kind of party, do we?

We don't want cliques. What we want is people who are willing to bleed for a stranger. That's what we want. But these other things, competence, respectability, good reputation, affirmation of our identity, being community-minded, those things have become our gods.

Not compassion that breaks tradition. Not humility. Not sacrificial love. It's certainly not Jesus. We need saving from those gods, don't we?

There's a Nina Simone song that says, you've got to leave the table when love's no longer being served. That's where we are. We see better sometimes in our country, don't we?

[22 : 09] Get glimpses of it and we think, oh, that's great. We need more of that. How can we get that? How can we break with worshipping these other things and thinking that they make us okay?

What do we do now? Well, the answer is with the man we learnt these things from. How can I get a seat at his table?

That's what we need, isn't it? Well, if we want that, then we need to think about who Jesus is and what he has done because that explains it all. Look back to verse 4.

Taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way. Now, this healing is not just subversive, which it definitely is, isn't it? It's breaking all the Pharisees' rules, but it's symbolic, just like all Jesus' healings are.

The thing about Jesus' miracles is it's not supposed to tell us how Jesus can fix all our problems. It's supposed to point us to who he is so that we will trust him and follow him.

[23 : 19] Here, this miracle tells us that Jesus is the one who can heal what laws and polite manners and good behaviour cannot heal. And we need the hope of that healing, don't we?

We need that power in our lives. So it's Jesus that we need. How can we get near him? How can we know that we'll always be welcome at that table?

Well, Jesus is the supreme example of the man who humbles himself. That's the key. And what he said in verse 11, for all those who humble them, excuse me, all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Come with me to Philippians chapter 2. Where Jesus is described.

Philippians chapter 2. Paul is talking about the Lord Jesus and he says, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

[24 : 37] Rather, he made himself nothing. Taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

And therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under earth and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father.

So when Jesus humbles himself and dies on the cross, he takes our pride and our lack of compassion and all the other things that stand in the way of us being like Jesus has described and he takes them.

He takes them with him to the cross and instead he gives us his goodness, his righteousness, so that if we trust in him, then we are among the righteous and we will be raised and we will be repaid and we will be rewarded in the end.

And he dies on that cross so that anyone, regardless of what table they eat at, regardless of where they live, what their status is, how much money they have, how clever they are can have a seat at his table.

[26 : 00] And it's the cross that shows that we are objectively valuable, right? It's the cross that means I don't have to look across the table and think, am I better than that person? Because Jesus has died for me and so I know I'm valuable and I'm free from the comparison game.

I don't need other people to affirm my value because Jesus has died to tell me that I'm valuable. Jesus has died to give me a seat at his table.

Because that's the truth, isn't it? The truth is, it's not we who grant Jesus a seat at our table if we're convinced. It's Jesus who calls us to come and sit at his table.

It's Jesus' love that has gone across the threshold that bridges the difference, that invites those who can't repay him. And he says, come and be with me at the great feast.

so that's the question. Not, have you extended an invitation to Jesus to be part of your life? But have you accepted the undeserved invitation from Jesus to come in from the cold and be at his table?

[27 : 21] See, it's not about being good. It's not about being great. It's about being a guest. Jesus' guest.

I'd love you just to imagine a world where we all have a seat at Jesus' table and as a result, we all step over the boundary.

We forget about tradition and cultural difference. We all step over the boundary and we help heal.

We do our part in Jesus' work, making people whole.

where we all accept Jesus' remarkable upside-down way of doing things and we accept that that is better than jostling for position in life forevermore.

Can you imagine if we all did that? Where we all invite enemies to sit at the table alongside our brothers and sisters because that's what Jesus does because he makes them into new brothers and sisters.

[28 : 23] what a world that would be, wouldn't it? That's the world that Jesus is building. So what we need to do now is be his guest.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that in the face of your goodness and glory and in the light of the cross all our reasons, all our reasons, Lord, that we should be acceptable to you fall away and in the light of the cross, Lord, we are all invited to join you at the table to be changed.

Lord, will you help us to say yes? Help us to hear your voice. Help us to rejoice as we eat and drink with you and invite others to do the same.

In Jesus' name. Amen.