

Come to the feast

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[0 : 00] Now perhaps you can turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 9 as we continue to work! as we continue to work through this section of Jesus coming to establish the kingdom of God.

We come to verse 9 to verse 17 and at the center of this reading is the invitation from Jesus to come to the feast of God's grace. So let's hear God's word again. As Jesus went on from there he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me he told him and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this they asked his disciples why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? On hearing this Jesus said it is not the healthy who need a doctor but those who are ill. But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy not sacrifice for I have not come to call the righteous but sinners. Then John's disciples came and asked him how is it that we and the Pharisees fast often but your disciples do not fast. Jesus answered how can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them then they will fast. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment for the patch will pull away from the garment making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wine skins. If they do the skins will burst. The wine will run out and the wine skins will be ruined. No. They pour new wine into new wine skins and both are preserved.

So I want to begin talking about a short story. It's one of my favorites. It's Babette's Feast by Karen Blix and I've mentioned it before. It's a lovely book. It tells the story of a Parisian chef who decides to leave that life behind and to head up to Norway to live in a remote religious community up in a Norwegian fjord. It's a community that is aging, kind of fallen on hard times, dispirited, discouraged and into that setting comes Babette. And no one knows her past. No one knows that she was this famous chef but one day 14 years later she comes into a vast sum of money and her response is to throw a lavish meal. To have shipped all the way from Paris the very best of food, the very best of wine and to throw a great meal for the community. And the community at first are somewhat reluctant.

They're not used to such luxury and the idea of such expense being lavished on them. But during that meal something wonderful happens. And the whole tale, the whole story of Babette's Feast is really a story of grace breaking in. That through this lavish meal old wounds are healed.

Forgiveness is extended.

[3 : 30] Reconciliation takes place. Joy breaks out around this dinner table. And at the end of the meal there's a general who stands up and gives a speech. And here's just a little fragment of it. He says this.

He says, grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular.

Grace takes all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. For mercy and truth have met together and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another. That's Babette's Feast. And now we come to Matthew chapter 9 and a feast with Jesus. So Jesus, as we've seen, has been continuing his mission. He's been bringing in the kingdom. He has been defeating the forces of evil. He has been forgiving sin. And now we encounter him extending God's grace through an invitation to follow and through a meal. And eyes open wide to the nature of God's kingdom and to the wide open invitation and welcome of King Jesus into the kingdom of God.

It is an announcement of God's grace that is shocking to some. It's a remarkable message that God himself is acting to reconcile sinners to himself. That God's king, the son of God, is proclaiming amnesty so that rebels might be brought home to God. And while as we see in the story, some are

so scandalized that they stay on the outside looking in, others receive the invitation with that grateful confidence and they come to the feast of God's grace. And as Matthew paints the picture for us, and remember Matthew is a key player in this story, we too are being drawn into the scene and we're being drawn in to consider our own response to Jesus as he invites us to experience his grace this evening. So three things to focus on. First, this invitation to follow the call of grace. That's the call to Matthew from

Jesus that we meet in verse 9. As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. Last week I was meeting with a friend from Central America and we ended up talking about street crime. And he was telling me how his brother copes with the realities of street crime in the part of Central America where he lives. And what happens is if he sees someone coming towards him who intends to rob him or do no good of some kind, my friend's brother will make the first move, not to run, but to extend an act of kindness. He said sometimes he'll offer him a cigarette. Sometimes he'll ask him if he needs a ride somewhere. But all the time he's wanting to diffuse the situation to turn a potential enemy into a friend. When I heard that, it's quite a striking story. It wouldn't be my instinct, I don't think.

[7 : 09] It reminded me of another striking story, a chap by the name of Darrell Davis, who's a fairly significant jazz pianist. But he made a decision about 30 years ago to actively befriend members of the KKK.

The KKK, that racist organization in America. And the striking thing about it is that Darrell Davis is an African American. And over these years of deliberately after gigs, sitting down across drinks, trying to establish friendship, some 200 white racist supremacists have turned off that path because Darrell Davis, who they saw as an enemy, acted in friendship and bridged the gap. And that's what grace can do. And those stories, in a sense, prepare the way for this far greater story in the mission of King Jesus. Because what we have here is God's Messiah King, welcoming an enemy of God into his kingdom. Here is Jesus extending friendship and grace to someone who had deliberately chosen to go against God and his way of life. Bringing Matthew into his inner circle, into life of friendship with Jesus, the Savior. Because when we find Matthew sitting at a tax collector's booth, we know a couple of things are true of him. We know that he has by choice made himself a traitor to his nation, to the people of God. Because he's siding with Rome, the occupying force in first century Palestine.

And he is stealing from his own people. And worse even than that, we know that Matthew has made himself a traitor to God. Because in siding with Rome, he has made himself unclean. So he is unable to worship God. But actually, he has no intention of worshiping God because it's money, not God, that has his heart.

So we find him sitting at the tax booth. And it seems he is comfortable in his choice. But then comes the call of Jesus, follow me. And we need to understand that is the call of God's grace.

Matthew is doing nothing to deserve this. He is not trying to earn his way in. And even if he was, he is getting nowhere near that level. This invitation, we know, was shocking to so many people who were around it, perhaps even shocking to Matthew himself. But it's entirely in keeping with the powerful words of Jesus we've been encountering in these chapters. Kingdom words, mission words. So back in chapter 8 and verse 26, there was Jesus and his disciples on a storm.

[10 : 11] And Jesus speaks to the storm, be still. And immediately the storm stops. And then Jesus, it was confronted by a demon-possessed man. Chapter 8, verse 32, he simply told the demons to go and the man was healed.

Last week, we discovered that Jesus met a paralyzed man and he declared both, your sins are forgiven and get up, take your mat and go. And now the Savior with authority, the Savior who's bringing in the kingdom, calls Matthew, follow me. And immediately he got up and followed. This money maker now becomes a disciple maker. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount had declared, you cannot serve both God and money. And now in this moment, a new master has captured Matthew's heart. And so he will gladly follow Jesus as an expression of his worship, leaving his money behind. And we see, and we see it often in the ways that Jesus extends an invitation to people, that it creates scandal. It creates opposition. And that makes sense.

If coming near to God was on the basis of goodness and being religious and being fit and acceptable for God, because Matthew absolutely isn't that. But what we discover is that here is Jesus.

He is God in the flesh. And he's been given this mission to establish his kingdom on the earth. And in people's hearts. And he operates in a completely different way. Here is the one who does have the power and authority to call people to himself and to forgive sin and to extend God's undeserved grace to the despised, to the outcast, to people like Matthew.

Two things this reminds us when we think about the call of God's grace. One, as Christians, we should always have gratitude for our salvation. The way the Bible talks about our salvation makes clear that the glory belongs to God and God alone for saving grace. The gift of faith is a gift that comes from God himself. Think about one of the pictures that Jesus uses of himself. He describes himself as the good shepherd. And as the good shepherd, he has come to rescue lost sheep, wandering sheep, in the dark and in danger sheep. And in order to rescue us, Jesus says, John chapter 10, he must lay down his life for his sheep. And then having laid down his life for his sheep, he says, I must call my sheep and they will hear my voice and they will come into the flock of God. So at every point, it's down to Jesus. It's down to the grace of God. And the wonderful thing about the call of Jesus, as it comes to Matthew, as it comes to each one of us, that call is come as you are.

[13 : 29] It's not come once you've cleaned up your act, not come once you've left your old life behind, once you have got yourself on the pathway of religion. He says, come to me. Rest. Give up trying to earn your salvation. Rest in what I have freely extended to you. Come to Jesus for salvation.

Come to him to receive life. Because it's gift. It's the gift of forgiveness. It's the gift of new life from God. So we are always to be a grateful people. But secondly, we recognize that the good news that Jesus proclaims in this call of grace, it gives hope to all of us and to any of us.

When we think about why did Christ Jesus come? John Calvin put it this way. Jesus came to quicken the dead, to justify the guilty and condemned, to wash the polluted, to rescue the lost from hell, to clothe with his glory those who are covered with shame. And if we see ourselves in any of those categories, we recognize, well, in Jesus there is hope. When we know I am not good enough for God.

When we are honest enough to admit that, yes, I have chosen to follow other masters and I've not given God a second thought. When we recognize I am needy and I am unable to fix what I have broken, then the message of Jesus and his salvation becomes good news. And each one of us here today, we're invited to know this, that Jesus invites us to receive this grace that gives new life. that we're invited to come to Jesus freely as the one who is able to declare our sins forgiven and covered so that we are not condemned if we're in him. That we can freely come to the one who is able and promises to wash all our guilt and shame and to bring us home to God and to clothe us with honor.

[15 : 38] And so this evening, have you heard that call? Will you hear that call? Will you respond in faith as Jesus delivers once again the call of grace?

The second thing we need to see, and it's very much related, is this connection between food, friendship, and the demonstration of grace? It's there in verses 10 to 13. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

Some of us may be familiar with the author Rosario Butterfield. She's written a couple of significant books in the last couple of years. One was called *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, which is the story of her coming to faith in Jesus from a very atheistic background out of the LGBT community. And the second is called *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*. And that both tells her story of the importance of hospitality in her own life, but also how she uses hospitality as an opportunity to share her faith with others. And the common thread across those books and why I mention them is that it was food and it was friendship around a family dinner table over months and years that led Rosario Butterfield, ultimately to put her trust in Jesus. There was a Christian couple who listened to her disagreements and who entered into discussions and who walked with her through various struggles until she was ready to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. With the result that she and her family now live with the idea that their dinner table is a place where grace can be extended. Where people from all walks of life can come and share food and share conversation and come and ask questions and voice their objections and be heard respectfully. A place where food and friendship becomes a place where grace can be learned of and experienced and put into practice. And the pattern is here, isn't it? It's here in Jesus' actions at this remarkable meal.

Because what we've just read in verse 10 is that Jesus, the Son of God, is deliberately sitting down and eating with God's enemies. In first century religious society, the Pharisees would say the tax collectors and the sinners, the sinners, the sinners, these are the outsiders. These are the others. These are the ones who are far away from God. They're not living God's way. And yet Jesus welcomes them in.

And in Jesus' day, and I think in our day as well, but maybe to a lesser extent, to share a meal with someone was a really significant act. A signal of friendship. A demonstration of unity. A way to break down walls of division. An invitation to reconciliation. And the Son of God extends that to sinful people. A demonstration of grace. Jesus is also extending mercy. Look at verse 13. So after hearing that the grumbles of his opponents, Jesus says, go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. And Jesus there quotes from the Old Testament from the prophet Hosea. Hosea chapter 6. And God sent Hosea to speak to a very religious society. A society that still had the form of worship. But they didn't have the heart of worship. They thought, well, so long as we're doing sacrifices and so long as we're going to the temple, then God will be pleased with us regardless of our heart. And the message of the prophet becomes the message of Jesus. Have you forgotten who God is?

God is compassionate and merciful. And so he is looking for mercy. Jesus is God. And so he demonstrates mercy around this mealtime. And Jesus is also enacting grace. Verse 13. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? For this reason.

[20 : 34] I've not come to call the righteous. I've come to call sinners. And we have this remarkable reality that Jesus is none other than the Holy Son of God who has come in the flesh and he has come near and he is moving towards people not to judge, but to save and to extend God's grace. That sinful people, broken people, despised people, rebellious people can come near and know the joy of God's welcome.

A gift they didn't expect. A gift they could never earn. A gift that nobody else was extending to them. The Pharisees were driving them away. But Jesus does the opposite because Jesus is on a mission of grace.

But we notice, don't we, in the midst of the joy and the celebration, the scowls and the frowns of the Pharisees. Why is that? Tim Chester writes this, the Pharisees knew God's kingdom was going to be a party.

Their objection is with the guest list. They thought when God's Messiah was sent, he would absolutely side with righteous people. And the Pharisees were sure and certain that they were righteous and God would accept them. And then they hear this, God's king comes and says, he's come to call sinners.

They had lived their whole lives thinking acceptance from God came by performance, through ceremony and ritual and religion and separation and trying in one's own strength to be pure and holy. And now they discover Jesus saying God accepts people by his grace.

[22 : 22] They were so used to labeling and despising anyone who didn't measure up to their standards. But they learned that when Jesus comes, God's Messiah comes, he operates in a whole different way. He celebrates when those who need mercy draw near. He rejoices to extend God's gracious invitation and so this meal becomes a demonstration of grace. But sadly, there are those on the outside who want no part of it.

As we think about this mealtime and this demonstration of grace, it's a reminder to us, I think, that we need to always guard our hearts. It's really easy to point the finger at the Pharisees.

How could they act like that? But it can be a really easy attitude to fall into. I think we often have that default way of looking at life. This is my idea of the good life.

This is what I need to do in order to make it, to reach the standard. And this is how I regard those who mess up or who don't measure up. And we also, in our own minds, can become really judgmental and critical.

And we can, even as Christians, we can assume that we are somehow earning God's favor. And so we need to be careful always, I think, to guard our hearts.

[24 : 00] To learn to remember and to preach the gospel to ourselves daily. To rest in and rejoice in God's grace.

And to learn to celebrate when we see God's grace in action in other people's lives, in other churches, in other nations. To be glad as we see God's work.

This story also reminds us that we need to go to Dr. Jesus for grace. Look at verse 12. Again, as the Pharisees have grumbled, why did your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

Jesus said, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. The religious leaders, in other words, Jesus saying, you expect a Messiah who will keep far away from sinful people, hurting people, people who need help.

And Jesus says, that's not the way. Jesus can only do his work by being among the broken, being among the spiritually poor and needy.

[25 : 05] And that's why he feasts with sinners. Because that feasting is a demonstration of God's lavish love and kindness.

That would forgive sin, that would grant new life. Not because they earned it, but because God loves to be merciful and gracious. I think as we recognize this example from Jesus, we are reminded again of the significance for us as Christians, of the practice of hospitality.

So maybe one implication for us is in our own way to go through a feast. To recognize that the place of hospitality in our own mission and witness, that we would make room in our homes, in our hearts, in our schedules, to extend something of God's grace and mercy to others.

Not necessarily something fancy and elaborate, but having a heart that wants to show something of God's love to those who need to discover it.

I think it's significant that folks like Sam Chan, who's a prominent evangelist, when he's asked what's the greatest tool for the church in the 21st century in reaching the world, he points to hospitality.

[26 : 30] If we want to share faith with our friends, people like Sam Chan would say what we need is to make room. Because when we extend hospitality of any kind, whether we sit down for a coffee or we go for a walk or we sit down for a meal, it's creating the room for conversation to move from the surface towards deeper things.

It's as we welcome people in that some of those barriers perhaps are broken down, that perhaps people feel able to share their stories with us and we can share our stories with them.

Hospitality is one way that people can see, here's what faith looks like in action. Because we're not as hospitable, I guess, as a culture as perhaps we used to be.

And hospitality within the church or among Christians is one way to make our message more plausible. We go through a feast because that's what God does for us.

God throws a feast. It's that wonderful image, isn't it, in the climax of the father's dealings with the prodigal son in Luke chapter 15.

[27 : 42] Remember the son who has walked away in rebellion and treated his father shamefully and has made a mess and a wreck of his life. But when he comes back in repentance, the father embraces him.

And he clothes him with honor. And then there's the joyful feast. The picture of God's joy when sinners repent.

God's joy in showing saving grace. One last thing to say, and again, it's related. It's the idea that we are invited to feast on God's grace.

Look at verse 14 into verse 15. Then John's disciples came and asked him, how is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?

Jesus answered, how can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? And then he draws attention to the fact that the cross is coming. The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, then they will fast.

[28 : 47] So we've had a couple of wedding invites recently, I imagine. Many of us have had wedding invites. And we know when we get a wedding invitation, we know when the date is coming, that there are expectations.

That we know that there are appropriate types of clothing to wear. And we expect, as guests, there will be a particular kind of food that we will be eating.

And both of those, the clothing that's worn, the food that is eaten, is a demonstration that this is a day of celebration and not lamentation.

We are going to be invited to feasting and not fasting. When we think about a couple getting married, this is the day when their waiting is over.

It's the time for them to joyfully be united as husband and wife. And so Jesus picks up this imagery to say when the bridegroom is here, it's a time for joy, it's a time for feasting, not a time of fasting.

[29 : 49] And there's something so significant about Jesus' choice of imagery. Because he's saying something about himself and he's saying something about the kingdom.

So in the Old Testament, you could go to a book like Hosea and you would discover the Lord declaring that he enters into a covenant relationship, a marriage relationship with his people, that he is the bridegroom and his people, the church, is his bride.

And then Jesus comes and he takes that title for himself to say I am the son of God and I am the bridegroom and I have come to win a bride for myself.

And so it's not a day of fasting, it's a day of feasting. When they ask, when John's disciples say, how come you don't fast? Jesus knows and they know that in the Old Testament, fasting was often connected with waiting, waiting for the Messiah.

And so fasting would sometimes come with a prayer, come Lord God, come to rescue us and to restore us, send your Messiah to rescue and to restore. So why is it feasting, not fasting with Jesus?

[31 : 05] Because he is the Lord who has come. Now that rescue mission has been put into action and he is in the business of restoring people's lives back to God.

and he will do that as he alludes to by way of the cross and then the resurrection. And then he moves from there to those two images in verse 16 and 17 where he says, you shouldn't try and patch up old clothes with a new patch because it will just make things worse and you shouldn't try and put new wine into old wineskins because they'll just burst.

New wine needs new wineskins. And we might think, what on earth has that got to do with everything that's been going on so far? Well, as we kind of come to a close, let's try and draw two lessons from that that pull things together.

With the coming of Jesus, he is in effect working out that principle of out with the old and in with the new. He is declaring to the Pharisees and to us as well that because Jesus the Messiah is now here and he is bringing in the kingdom of God and that's a kingdom marked by grace, this is something radically new than what the Pharisees were offering.

He's saying those old forms of religion, those old structures of religion, they cannot contain this good news, this new reality. And so Jesus declares, out with the old and in with the new.

[32 : 34] And so it's out with any kind of human standard word of dividing people into righteous and sinner and saying, if I can just work hard enough then I'll be one of the good guys and God will accept me.

It's out with any idea of human performance to try and merit God's approval. It's out with those old ways of external practices to try and impress God and win his favor.

But rather it's in with the gospel of grace. Remember Paul's words in Ephesians, for it is by grace you have been saved through faith and this not from yourself.

It is the gift of God. And it's in with the new covenant in Jesus' broken body and shed blood through the cross and the resurrection in Jesus that we now have a new heart and we now have new life with God.

We have forgiveness by God's grace. God's spirit now dwells within us and he is changing us from the inside out. Now we have in Jesus a savior for any and all who will believe and who will come to the feast.

[33 : 53] So it's out with the old and it's in with the new. And in this meal and in this welcome we're also reminded that outsiders are being welcomed in by God's king.

This meal with Jesus is not a strange one-off in the storyline of the Bible. It fits with a key biblical theme that the God of grace is in the business of welcoming rebels and strangers and outsiders and outcasts and enemies.

And that's profoundly good news for all of us. That we can be drawn into life with God through faith in Jesus. It was there back in Genesis 12 in the promise to Abraham that one of his seed would be a blessing to all nations.

And we heard it again from the prophet Isaiah chapter 25. God will prepare a feast on his holy mountain. A great picture of his lavish generosity and who's it for?

It's a feast of rich food for all peoples. As you read the gospels as you read the story of the church in the New Testament we see just how wide God's gracious invitation runs.

[35 : 06] It runs to tax collectors those labeled as sinners. It runs to prostitutes. It runs to dying criminals. It runs to Gentiles from all nations being brought in. We heard at the beginning that

