Eating and Drinking with the Outcast

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[0:00] Good morning everyone. I love a good love story. Give it to me in a novel, in a film, on stage, in a song. I love a wedding. I even love reading articles or watching videos online about animals that have fallen in love in the wild, coupled up.

I saw a story recently about some penguins in a Dutch zoo that they coupled up and kept stealing each other's eggs. Drama. Love stories make me happy. They entertain me. And I'm sure I'm not the only one in the room that thinks so.
But these kind of love stories, as we all know, they have their ups and downs. They are never truly plain sailing. For example, though I love them, in any rom-com, the story is pretty much always almost the same.
Boy meets girl. They fancy each other. But then they have a fallout, usually over some miscommunication, misunderstanding, that could easily have been avoided if they had just talked like normal human beings.
Then they ghost each other for a while, which means that they ignore each other's texts or calls or their existence. Until, all the while they're pining for each other, until they resolve their differences eventually and they live happily ever after.
[1:29] The end. Entertaining, feel-good, predictable. But, there is one love story that is true, that wasn't created for entertainment purposes, that isn't only temporarily feel-good and certainly isn't predictable.

It's the greatest love story ever told and it's the one that we're living in here and now. It's the story of God's agape.
The Greek word that was used to describe God's unconditional love for us. It's the love story of all love stories and it revolves around a father giving his son to the world.
Who would love the outcast, forgive the sinner, welcome the wanderer. Who'd die on a cross, good conquering evil, giving eternal life to all who believe, now and forevermore.
Agape is considered the highest form of love. It's a covenant love between God and his people based not on emotion or feeling, but on God's grace, his character demonstrated in his actions.
[2:42] Agape love doesn't judge or discriminate. It doesn't get bored or impatient. Agape love is perfect love. And it's the love that took Jesus to the cross to die for us, for our sin and shame.

Agape is God's heart. Agape is perfect. Which leads us to our theme today as we continue in the sermon series of what would Jesus do.
Today's title is what would Jesus do? Eat and drink with the outcast and the sinner. And I'm so excited that I get to preach on this because to me this is God's heart.
He communes with the outcast, the last, the lost, the least, the sinner. And before we go much further, let's clarify what we are talking about when we talk about the outcast.
The outcast is the one who is rejected, isolated from normal society. They are cast out.
[3:43] We might think maybe of people in the Bible who had leprosy, who were cast out of society, made to live in isolation so that they wouldn't infect anyone else.

Sadly, that's something that still happens around the globe today. We might think of people that we know who have been made to feel outcast by their peers. Or maybe that's something that we actually have felt before ourselves, feeling outcast at times.
And as we carry on this morning, I want to make the case as well that the sinner should also be an outcast. See, if heaven is our home, then surely our sinful nature theoretically should disqualify us from being part of it.
Our sinful nature surely should and could cast us out from our society, so to speak. But because of God's great love for us, he doesn't let that happen.

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In the passage this morning, Jesus calls Levi, later called Matthew, to follow him, to be his disciple. And in the context of the time, Jewish tax collectors were hated by their fellow Jews because they worked for the Roman government.
[5:02] And they were also hated for notoriously being greedy, extorting money from everyone, even the poor people, and keeping profits for themselves.

Tax collectors, lightly putting it, didn't have very many friends. But we see in this passage that Jesus doesn't bat an eyelid at Levi's occupation.
He doesn't come in judgment. He doesn't call Levi by his greed or by his sin. He sees Levi sitting in the very booth in which he was extorting money. And he called him to come, to follow him.
And from extorting money to then being invited to follow Jesus, Levi then finds himself the host of this dinner party. Not just for Jesus, but for the disciples and for a mishmash of tax collectors and sinners.
His encounter with Jesus changed his life. And we don't know if that was an immediate change that led him to offering such hospitality or whether Jesus was the party planner in this situation.
[6:05] But what we do know is that this potentially lonely tax collector suddenly found himself surrounded by a bunch of people, a community of people who Jesus wanted to spend time with.

And the saviour of the world invited him to be his disciple. And we know that that was life changing for the apostle. Now, we might not all be tax collectors in the room, but we are sure all sinners.
And I'm sorry if that is news to you, but you are one of us. When the Pharisees asked Jesus why he's eating with the tax collectors and sinners, he is quick and clear with his response.
It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinner. In other words, he's come to those whose lives are messy.
And that's all of us. The message version puts Jesus' words like this. Who needs a doctor, the healthy or the sick? I'm here inviting the sin sick, not the spiritually fit.
[7:18] The Pharisees thought that they were off the hook because they thought that they were spiritually fit, that they were righteous and sin free. But we're all sin sick. We are all sinners.

There is only one who is righteous and sin free by himself, and that's Jesus. But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus chooses to come to us in our sin and make us righteous, just as a doctor comes with the intention of making us well.
In Ephesians 1, verses 3 to 8, we get confirmation of this. It says, This wasn't a chore for Jesus.
It didn't go against the grain of his will. Jesus' love caused him to make us holy, to pay our debt, to wipe away our sin, to lavish his grace and mercy upon us, even though he very well could have reasonably cast us out because of our sin.
Jesus associating with the outcast or the sinner isn't an uncommon scenario. For example, if we look at John 4, we read about Jesus meeting with the woman at the well.
[9:15] Here's a woman who had been outcast from society after five failed marriages and is now living with a man who wouldn't marry her. She's collecting water in the middle of the day from the well on her own, without the normal gaggle of girls for company, because everyone is avoiding this multiple divorcee.

Jesus meets her where she's at, introduces her to the living waters, and offers her freedom from her sins. And then, amazingly, she went from being the village outcast to leading the whole Samaritan village to Jesus.
As with Levi, the tax collector, Jesus wasn't afraid of her sin, and her encounter with Jesus leads to a whole life change. We see this happening time and time again throughout the Gospels.
Jesus was unafraid of the leper. He was compassionate to the sick. He was a friend to all who received him. And he's just the same now, today, as he was then.
Today, he is still meeting with the outcast, the tax collector, the sinner, and bringing them into his light. Jesus loves to come into the lives and the situations of those of us who are outcasts, those of us who are caught up in our sin.
[10:38] And instead of disqualifying us from his family, he invites us into his way of freedom and belonging with him. You might know that I love a good book.

You'll know that I love a good love story. But I am totally rubbish at reading what I once heard Clive refer to as goddy books.
I dread to think how many goddy books I have on my bookshelf that I have read the first maybe three chapters of them and then never opened them again.

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Therefore, it comes as a surprise to me that I found a book that I actually only finished this week. I may have started it last summer, but I finished it this week. And I already want to read it again.
It's called Gentle and Lowly by Dane Ortland. And it's a beautiful book about the very heart of God, seeking to reveal the central truth about Jesus's heart for the sinner and the sufferer, the outcast, if you will.
[11:46] In the book, Ortland points out that the very people, sinners, who the Pharisees accused Jesus of associating with were the ones who really, truly understood who Jesus was and what he had come to do.

And because of that, they couldn't stay away from him. And Jesus couldn't stay away from them either. In Luke 15, chapter... In Luke 15, we find three parables.
The parables of the lost sheep, the lost queen, and the lost son. All parables that will show us that Jesus will go out of his way to find and meet with the lost, the wandering, the one who had made the most silly mistake.
And I think that we need to be reminded of this message again and again, that Jesus isn't afraid of or allergic to our sin. He comes to the outcast.
He comes to the sinner. He comes to the rejected because his heart is compassionate and full of grace and kindness. I reminded us earlier that we're all sinners, and sometimes that's not a comfortable thought.
[12:56] But Jesus isn't uncomfortable with it. Jesus loves to meet us in our sin and take it away. When I was probably about eight or nine, one of our summer holiday club songs was 1 John chapter 1 verse 9.

This is true every time. If you confess your sins to God, he can be trusted to take our sins away. Away. Away.
That's how the song went. The actual Bible verse goes, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.
Jesus does this willingly. It's his choice, his character. You could even say that our sin allows God to be everything he is.
Grace, mercy, love, forgiveness. These are all parts of his character, who he is. God is love. So if God was to stop loving us because of our sins, he'd actually stop being God.
[14:06] Our sins don't stop God from loving us. And speaking of his character, I recently learned that in the 89 chapters of the Gospels, there is only one sentence where Jesus tells us about his heart.

And that's Matthew 11, 28 to 30, where he says, come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon me and learn for me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.
This verse is the theme of the book, Gentle and Lowly, that I just referenced. That he is gentle and humble, or gentle and lowly in heart, meaning that he's not harsh, or even mean in the face of our sin, but the most understanding person ever.
And he's accessible to all of us, without qualification, without prerequisite. Even in the midst of our sin, Jesus remains unchanged.
He is forever gentle and humble. So when we look at the passage today, where Jesus eats with Levi and the other tax collectors and sinners, perhaps we can see ourselves there too.
[15:32] And we can know for sure that Jesus willingly chooses to sit and eat and drink with us, outcasts and sinners. And he chooses to do that every day.

As I was preparing for this morning, I had this song that kept going round and round in my head. And the lyrics go like this. You're the God of salvation.
We call on your name. You came to redeem us, to carry our shame. We stumble and fall down. We turn from your ways. In you we find mercy. We're held in your grace.
You're the God of compassion, the friend of the least, not coming to be served. You serve those in need. We surrender our burdens, our lives at the cross.
We trust in the Saviour, our God who is love. You never give up on us. You never let go or turn away. We're holding on to you. Our God is strong.
[16:35] Our God is good. God is good. And I think sometimes we forget this, that God doesn't give up, let go or turn away. We can trust in him to be patient and kind, slow to anger and abounding in grace.

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God didn't send Jesus to die for us because he needed us to be perfect. He sent Jesus because he knows the human condition. He knows that we'll keep on messing up, missing the mark and falling short of the glory.
But he persists and keeps on loving us, keeps sitting with us in the mess. And he will keep on sitting with us in the mess until we stand face to face with him in heaven.
And that's something in the mess and the chaos of the world that we can always hold on to.
Perhaps this morning we might be super aware of our sinful condition.
We might be aware of a sin that we keep struggling with or maybe we're feeling spiritually outcast or within our daily lives we're feeling outcast.
[17:49] Maybe we actually need to acknowledge our sinfulness so that we can fully understand the depth of God's compassion and grace for us.

But wherever we're sitting with this this morning, I pray that we would all have a revelation of the compassionate, merciful, loving God who comes to us, the sin sick in need of a doctor.
Let's pray. Amen. Heavenly, gracious, forgiving Father, thank you that this is who you are.
That you could use our sin to disqualify us but instead you lavish your love and forgiveness on us and you welcome us back home. We're sorry for those things that are coming to mind at the moment.
The ways that we've hurt you in thought and word and action. Please help us, God. Help us to turn from our ways and turn towards you. Thank you that you don't call us outcast.
[18:55] You don't call us sinner. But you call us yours. You call us free and forgiven. Thank you, God. Amen. There you go.

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