

The Table Talk of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, the meal table has often been a place of great fellowship for people, and for that reason, the meal table has always been, when conducted rightly of course, a great place of discussion.

Meal times are talk times. They are times when the very mundane things of life are discussed and gone over, a time when you go through the events of a day, when you talk about things that have happened to you.

They're times when I think sometimes the most enormous matters of life are discussed. And as it happens, there are various times in history when people have recorded the table talk of famous people, of great people.

Now, one of those people who, and my son knows this because he gave me a book about it all, one of those people who's really sort of magnificent in his table talk is Martin Luther, the great reformer. He was the great 16th century German theologian and reformer. Now, Martin Luther, let me tell you, was a, well, he was German, obviously, and a very colourful man, a great theologian, but a very colourful man.

[1 : 19] And the topics of his discussions ranged from the ineffable majesty of God, the omnipotent, to frogs. He talked about pigs and popes, pregnancy and politics, proverbs and punishment.

And let me just give you a little sample of his discussion. On the topic of monks, Martin Luther said, monks are the fleas on God Almighty's fur coat.

On God's purposes with humans, he said, God uses lust to impel men to marriage, ambition to impel them to office, avarice to impel them to earning, and fear to impel them to faith.

On popes, Martin Luther said, the only portion of the human anatomy that the pope has left uncontrolled is the rear end. Germany is the pope's pig.

That is why we have to give him so much bacon and sausages. On religious relics, he said. What lies there are about relics? One person claimed to have a feather of the wing of the angel Gabriel, and the bishop of Mainz has a flame from Moses' burning bush.

[2 : 35] And how does it happen that 18 apostles are buried in Germany when Christ only had 12? On the 26th of May, 1538, there was a big rain.

And about it, Martin Luther said, praise God. He's giving us 100,000 gulden worth. It is raining corn, wheat, barley, wine, cabbage, onion, grass and milk.

All our goods we get for nothing. And God sends his only begotten son, and we crucify him. Of arguing with Satan, when alone, Luther says, almost every night when I wake up, the devil is there and wants to dispute with me.

I've come to the conclusion, when the argument that the Christian is without the law and above the law doesn't help, I instantly chase Satan away with a fart.

These are just a sample of the talk of Luther and at the table. Now, there is another, let me tell you another German who's not quite as funny, whose table talk was also reported.

[3 : 43] Rather than famous, I guess you'd call him infamous. His name was, of course, Adolf Hitler. Adolf Hitler would talk late into the night in various houses that he owned, and there he would elaborate his famous schemes for a vast empire that would embrace the Eurasian heartland.

Now, he would talk about his plans for breeding a new, elite, biologically pre-selected race of his own design for reducing whole nations to slavery in the foundation of this new empire.

Listen to him discuss Christianity. The heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity. The deliberate lie in the matter of religion was introduced into the world by Christianity.

Or his comments about the Christian ministers of his day. I'll make those damned parsons feel the power of the state in a way that they would never have believed possible. For the moment, I am just keeping an eye on them.

If I ever have the slightest suspicion that they are getting dangerous, I'll shoot the lot of them. This filthy reptile raises its head whenever there's a sign of weakness in the state, and therefore it must be stamped on.

[4 : 54] We have no sort of use for the fairy story invented by the Jews. And listen to him talk about the possession of arms. The most foolish mistake we could possibly make would be to allow the subject racers to possess arms.

History shows us that all conquerors who have allowed the subject racers to carry arms have prepared for their own downfall by doing so. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the supply of arms to the underdogs is a sine qua non for the overthrow of any sovereignty.

Friends, table talk is a fascinating thing. You learn a lot about people as they discuss matters at the table. Table talk is often the place where you get into the mind of a person.

It's the place where their wishes and their desires are most obvious and most accessible. There is nothing like dinner table conversation with willing hearers gathered around for the revealing of plans and purposes of the people at the table.

So tonight, I reckon, that means that what we're going to look at in the Bible tonight is of great interest for us. You see, tonight we are going to find Jesus at table.

[6 : 06] And we're going to find a group of people gathered around him, fascinated with what he has to say and quizzing him. And he's just going to talk on. We're going to find Jesus giving us an insight into what makes him tick.

Now, so come with me tonight and we'll go to the dinner table with Jesus. Well, actually, it probably wasn't a table. It was probably a low set of things, of couches that people lay on and talk with each other.

So let's go to dinner with Jesus and see what talk results. Well, let's see what talk results. There is no table talk like the table talk of Jesus.

It's just wonderful stuff. So open your Bibles there at Luke chapter 5 and verse 27. Before we start, we have to look at the setting so that we know what's going to happen. Let's see what the occasion is for this meal that we're going to go and visit and who the guests are.

After we see, you learn so much, don't you, about Jesus and what he's on about by learning, by observing who it is that he actually eats with and what he says when he's at table.

[7 : 09] So with that in mind, look at Luke chapter 5, verse 27. So after this, he went out and he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth and he said to him, follow me.

And he got up and left everything. So there is Levi. Now, Levi's a tax collector. Let me tell you a little bit about tax collectors in the first century world. In first century Palestine, there are all sorts of significant taxes that the Romans had placed upon the land.

And these included a poll tax and a land tax. Now, the way the Romans collected these taxes was through state officials. However, on top of those taxes, there were additional taxes as well.

And these other taxes, you could farm them out for collection to other people. And they are the people that we know of as the tax collectors of the first century. Now, to be a tax collector, you had to bid for the right, which could often be a very costly business, you know, because it was a pretty good enterprise to be in.

But you'd have to bid for the right. The business of tax collecting could be very lucrative because there were all sorts of well-known devices for, well, defrauding the public of more money than you really had a right to defraud them of.

[8 : 25] And so the end result was that tax collectors were commonly reasonably wealthy, but regarded as being on the same level as robbers and swindlers, they were the social equivalent of pimps and informants.

So it wasn't really a good group of people to be amongst. So they were considered to be Roman collaborators who oppressed the people of God and stopped them from fulfilling their religious obligations.

So tax collectors, therefore, had no civil rights. They were shunned by anyone who was respectable, would have nothing to do with tax collectors. They were scumbags of the worst sort.

And look at what happens when Jesus meets Levi. He sees him sitting at the tax booth. He gives him this simple invitation. And then Levi gets up, leaves everything and follows him. And then in verse 29, we're told he holds a party.

And to that party, he invites a large number of people. And since tax collectors are social outcasts, then most of Levi's friends, you'd guess, would be social outcasts, just like him.

[9 : 26] And so the party is full of people who have bad social standing. Now, you need to understand something about eating in the ancient world as well in order to understand this story. In the ancient world, sharing a meal was a means of sharing your life.

You see, when you sat down at table with people, this was all about you sharing things you had. It was about sharing not only food, but life as well. And so the people you'd eat with are the people you're intimate with.

You know, the people that you're close to, the people that you're one with. And so eating was a very social occasion. It's about intimacy. It's about kinship and unity.

I think probably the Chinese people at Holy Trinity are far more familiar with this than we are. But that's what it's about. It's about belonging to a group of people. That's what eating was about.

And since the Pharisees were generally regarded, generally regarded Jesus as a righteous man, his presence at this table would have raised all sorts of questions. You see, Jesus is at this point breaking all sorts of religious and cultural conventions and breaking boundaries.

[10 : 32] And so questions have got to be asked. And so that's what happens in verse 30. Have a look at it here. Now, I need to say that we don't know where or when the discussion in verses 30 to 39 took place.

My suspicion is that the party probably went on for quite some time. And the Pharisees were probably hanging around the edges somewhere, somewhere outside. And they chat to the disciples who are probably hanging around there as well.

And the disciples report the conversation to Jesus. So my suspicion is there's, you know, parties went on for quite some time and people would be coming and going. And there's conversation. And then Jesus turns it into a public discussion at the table because, you know, he's getting these messages come to him and he says, well, let's open this up and we'll talk about it some more.

So let's see what the Pharisees have to say. The first thing to note is that they raise their protest indirectly with Jesus by raising it with the disciples. Second thing to note is that what Luke says in verse 29, have a look at verse 29.

It says, then Levi gave a great banquet for him and his house. And there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with him. So you've got tax collectors and sinners there.

[11 : 41] Now look at this. Sorry, you've got tax collectors and others there. Now look at verse 30 and notice what the Pharisees say. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples saying, why do you eat and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?

Notice the difference. There are tax collectors and others which the Pharisees think are tax collectors and sinners. It's clear that they believe that anyone who associates with a tax collector must be a person who lives outside of good relationship with God, i.e. a sinner.

So Jesus has been associating with people who are outside appropriate boundaries, that is, beyond the margins of God's friends. Now you can understand what the Pharisees are doing here, can't you?

Mixing socially with any known sinner just sort of condones their sin, doesn't it? You say, you're my friend, you're saying, I'm condoning your sin. It also discredits the ministry of Jesus to mix with such people.

How can it be a respectable ministry if you've got these sort of people hanging around with him?

And then let's see how Jesus responds. Because what he does is he talks about healthy people, sick people and doctors.

[12 : 47] Now, in other words, he talks about righteous, sinful and himself. I think that's what's going on. Can you see the correlation? Righteous, sinful, himself and people, sick people and doctors.

Now, he makes clear that he mixes with sinners because they are in need, they're sick, and he is a doctor. That is, he has a cure.

Now, it would be a strange doctor, wouldn't it, who simply went about lecturing on the healthy, there are some that do that these days, but went around lecturing the healthy on the dangers of disease,

but never going near the sick.

You see, no, real doctors, what do they do? Real doctors come with real cures to real sick people. At least that's what they're generally paid to do. And Jesus is a real doctor.

Jesus has a real cure to a real problem, the problem of sin. And so he must go to the sick. That's what doctors are meant to do. Actually, these days, of course, people come to the doctors, but doctors were meant to go out after the sick.

[13:50] So what Jesus is saying is very potent here. He's telling the Pharisees that the very ones they thought could never be friends with God are the very ones to whom God is sending him.

The outcasts, the sinners, the sick, these are the ones that God is inviting to his great party. Now look at verse 33. Then they said to him, John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.

Now, notice the little word they there. I wonder who they are. It would be tempting to think that they, in verse 33, are the Pharisees again. But that would make, I think that would make the reference to the disciples of the Pharisees in the same verse a little bit awkward.

So my guess is that Jesus is still sitting at table. He's answered the question of the Pharisees that have been brought to him by his disciples. And a group of people who are sitting there at table listen to his response. And they raise some issues with him.

And it's clear that Jesus, they say, doesn't keep proper company. But he doesn't, sorry, that he does not keep proper company. He doesn't keep proper religious observances either. Because what they know is, well, John's disciples, they fast.

[15:02] The disciples of the Pharisees, well, they fast as well. But what does Jesus do? He goes around partying with people that are really outsiders and that are not reputable people.

He goes about eating and drinking, attending parties and banquets like this one with all the wrong sorts of people. They hardly look like the righteous. And the response of Jesus is fascinating. Look at it. Look at what he says. He talks about wedding feasts and fasting and so on. You cannot make wedding feasts fast while a bridegroom is with them, can you? The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them.

And then they will fast in those days. Can you see what's going on? He's saying, look, the point is, fasting is normally, isn't it, about responding to a great loss.

Or it might even be a great expression of hope. That's why you'd expect the disciples of John the Baptist to fast. Why? Because they're waiting for a saviour. So you fast while you wait for a saviour.

[16:01] But he, Jesus, has already told everyone that the great day has arrived in his ministry. He, the saviour, has arrived.

The scriptures are being fulfilled. Sinners are being called to repentance. Good news is being preached to the poorest. We read about it in Luke 4. Freedom is being proclaimed to the prisoners. Sight is being proclaimed to the blind and released to the oppressed. It's the year of the Lord's favour now. That's hardly a time you sort of say, stop, let's fast.

No, it's a time to party, isn't it? The Pharisees have got it wrong. They're fasting when they should be feasting. They're shutting out sinners when they should be being doctors to the sick.

Can you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying they've missed the boat. They have missed the bridegroom. And the sad thing is that they'll probably continue to stuff all of this up.

[16:58] For when he, the bridegroom, is taken away from them, what will they do? They'll probably be found feasting, not fasting. They've got no idea what is going on here.

Now, we come to the last few verses of the chapter. Now, I don't know about you, but these verses, they've always confused me a little bit. So I'm going to try and paraphrase them for you.

He talks, he stands above the sort of table talk and he reflects on this thing about patches and wine. So let me try and paraphrase it. I think he's saying something like this.

Look, what I'm saying and doing looks terribly new, doesn't it, compared to those ancient traditions that are put forward by the Pharisees.

Now, when you get something new in the world of ideas and traditions, there are a couple of ways to react to it, aren't there? One way is to try and combine the old and the new together.

[17:53] But putting new patches on old clothes and new wine in old wineskins tells us that this simply won't work. The old and the new are incompatible.

They simply won't mix. In fact, if you try to mix them, you might end up destroying both. Now, there is another way to react. And the other way to react is to throw out the old and take on the new.

Of course, the old, he means here, is not the good things about the Old Testament scriptures and so on, but the way they've been mixed up and abused. He says the problem with this approach is that anyone who's had the old is not going to take that risk easily, is it?

After all, if you've had old wine, do you think you're going to go and risk the new vintage when you've got the good old stuff? That runs against the grain to do that, doesn't it?

So you need to understand what Jesus is saying. Everything that has been said so far in Luke up till this point is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

[18:53] Nevertheless, when you look at Jesus' ministry, it looks so innovative, doesn't it? It looks so new compared to the old and corrupt ways of Judaism.

Those old ways are so ingrained in the life and minds of God's people, it's going to be extraordinarily difficult for God's people to face change.

The end result is that they're going to miss out on the new vintage, which in this case is remarkably better than the one that's been around with the Pharisees in Judaism. They're going to miss the boat.

They're not going to take the risk. The Pharisees are going to continue to see themselves as healthy when really they are sinners in need of repentance. What they're going to do is they're going to continue to fast when they should be feasting.

And then what they're going to do is feast when they should be fasting. And they'll think they're right when in fact they are wrong. And they'll miss out on God's good, rich blessings. So friends, there's the whole of this passage.

[19:54] Now let's try and assess what Jesus has to say. Now I think that we are often so used to his sayings, we cannot see how revolutionary they are.

You see, in his ministry, Jesus is calling out to the world. And his first call is to repentance. He speaks to the world and he calls everyone to recognize, Friends, you are sick.

You are sinners. And his word to them is his word to Levi. Hear the word that I say to you and repent.

And rejoice then in the forgiveness that I've won for you. The only way to hear this call though is to do what? To recognize that you are sick. You don't repent if you don't think there's anything wrong.

So only sick people will therefore be cured. That's the first call of Jesus. He says, can you hear what he's saying? He's saying, friends, accept my diagnosis. You are sick with sin.

[20:56] You are an enemy of God and all that is good. However, if you come to me, well, I will cure you. I will make you friends with God. I am the doctor. I have a cure for this illness.

The second call of Jesus is to one of openness. You see, the Pharisees, I think, are a picture of us all. We have all established ways of thinking about God and the way he does things, don't we?

We have God, as it were, confined in a little box. And every now and then, he comes along and challenges us. Or someone comes along with his word and speaks it.

And they strike at our core belief structures. And what is the typical reaction? It's to say, the old is better. I'll stick with what I know and what has worked so well.

Let me tell you, as a preacher, it gets a certain point in a sermon where you can almost see this happen. You know, in banks, when people go into banks and they have the system whereby if they think you're going to rob the bank, they hit a button.

[21:58] And those, some banks it happens, those glass shields are meant to go shooting up. Sometimes, as a preacher, you can see that happen with people. You're about to get to the point and they're seeing you coming.

And they hit the button. And the wall goes up and they shut you out. You see, that's what happens when we get threatened, isn't it? Instead of thinking, this is a time when I might learn, we often just put the shields up and protect ourselves.

And when we do that, we refuse to let anything get in. We refuse to open ourselves to God's ancient truth. We refuse to think there might be something new that God is going to say to us.

And the truth we have is really, that old truth is really the truth. And we refuse to be teachable.

There's nothing worse than an unteachable Christian. And in fact, you cannot become Christian unless you become teachable.

But let's talk about us as Christians. We refuse often, I think, to be teachable. And when we do that, we shut ourselves out of God's goodness. And we find ourselves, before too long, fasting when we should be feasting.

[23 : 02] And feasting when we should be fasting. In slavery when we should be in freedom. In fear when we should be free of fear. So what I want to do is urge us to be open.

Friends, we need to make ourselves vulnerable to God and His Word. When you are threatened by God's truth, Don't back away from it like these Pharisees do. Regard it as an opportunity. You see, when I'm threatened, and I'm reacting rightly, I think I'm on the edge of learning something. If I just open myself up for a little while, God might teach me something new. This is the mark of God's people being open to God's Word, no matter how threatening it is. People who tremble at God's Word. So the call of Jesus is not only a call to repentance and to openness. I think it is also a call to breaking boundaries. You see, living in boundaries is the very most comfortable way to live. Now let me tell you, I'm a very ordered person.

[24 : 05] I like everything in its right place. I like my times of day set by certain things. I like certain things to eat and so on. You know, I like those sort of confined ways of doing things.

I like my ordered world. We all like boundaries, though, in all areas of life, don't we? And we use boundaries to protect ourselves. Now, what sort of boundaries might you erect?

Laws and traditions? Ways of relating to people? Ways of protecting ourselves? Boundaries are simply just accepted ways of acting or relating.

The problem is that most of the boundaries we have around us that protect us are made by us. That is, they are human inventions. And they have no divine sanction.

And they are often used to shut God out of our lives. And let me give you an example. Here's an example, well, taken from my life, but an example of how I think Christians often work.

[25 : 07] You see, you all know, because I'm here preaching tonight, I'm an Anglican clergyman. I became an Anglican clergyman because I wanted to tell people about Jesus. The Anglican Church seemed to me to be a very good base to do this from.

And I was outside the Anglican Church when I chose. So I looked and tasted and tried to see what would be a good place to do ministry in. Now the time came, though, when I saw that we, as an Anglican Church, were not doing as much as we could to reach people for Jesus.

And so I suggested that the Anglican Church should start a new congregation in a certain part of Australia, i.e. Western Australia. And at the time, the Anglican Church had established ways of doing things.

Now I should tell you that when I finally came to see the Archbishop of this denomination, he was very positive about doing this. But some of his clergy were not so positive. You see, they had things that are called parish boundaries.

And those things had existed for hundreds of years. Well, of course, way back in England, then we just brought them out here and shifted them a little bit and put them in new locations. They are part of Anglican Church tradition.

[26 : 19] And so when I went to start a church at Curtin University in Western Australia, I broke some boundary rules, even though I had the Archbishop's blessing on doing this.

And so people didn't like that. And they resisted the call of Jesus to evangelism. So local parishes said, no, no, we don't want anyone planting a new church in this sort of area, even though we had more, before long, had more people coming to church than some of those local churches did.

And even though that church thrived and some of the local churches are now dead. And of their property, I think, perhaps even has been sold by this stage.

You see, but the Anglican Church resisted, I think, this call of Jesus to evangelism. And it said, no, we've got rules. There are proper ways to do things. Now, that's OK. I can understand that there are proper rules and traditions.

But sometimes our rules and traditions stop us doing things that are right, don't they? My own view is that the Anglican Church will run the risk of dying if it doesn't think more flexibly about what it is doing and open itself up to the call of God.

[27 : 27] For example, there are lots of young men and women thinking about church planting in our country. And I think we as an Anglican Church are not as open to them as we should be. I think if we don't open ourselves up more, then we won't serve the cause of the gospel well.

One of the grand things about this church is that it's opened its door to ministry to Chinese people. Now, I think when Paul did it, it would have been incredible that anyone should have thought that you could do this.

But now there's a thriving Chinese ministry here. And in the years that come, we'll be presented with lots more opportunities like this. And some of them may be breaking boundaries a little bit. But friends, we need to think, what is Jesus calling us to? It is right to keep the rules of the club that we're in, such as denominational things.

But also sometimes it's the gospel that must drive us even further. The gospel must sometimes threaten the traditions that we have. But friends, it's not only denominations, is it, that refuse to break boundaries.

[28 : 33] We individuals have boundaries as well, don't we? You see, we also think that we have a right to privacy. A right to a roof over our heads. A right to a career.

A right to a decent income. To security. To comfort. And then God comes to us and tells us that the world is a sick place. And there are sick people in it.

And that we should be like Levi and leave everything to follow Jesus. And if ever God has come and said that to you, then the inevitable reaction often is to balk. And say, no, you can't mean that.

And then we begin to rationalize that call of God. Or we try to combine its newness and freshness with our old and established ways of acting and thinking. We think, how can I mix my career with this call to gospel ministry?

And all of those sorts of things. And the mix really doesn't work too well often. And the call isn't fulfilled. And the freshness and newness of the gospel goes by the board. And the sick are not reached. And our Christian life reaches a stability perhaps, but not the richness it might have had.

[29 : 40] There are even more boundaries we have. Boundaries that segregate us. Boundaries that cause us to mix only with people from our own social grouping. Boundaries that cause us to shun intimacy and unity with people that are different in age and class and race and social standing.

That's why I love Holy Trinity's mix, as I said, with Chinese ministry. Boundaries such as those don't exist for God. You see, for in God's eyes, we are all sinners in need of grace.

We are all sick. There is no distinction between us. And we shouldn't erect distinctions. So let me challenge you to be like Jesus. And to heed his call.

Recognize your illness. Repent of your sin. Be open to Christ's call. Be open to the newness of the gospel and the places it will drive you.

Break down boundaries. And be like Jesus in all of life. And friends, if you do that, you will go places you never imagined you might go. Because the gospel drives you out.

[30 : 46] It drives you into extraordinary places. That's why God has never liked being tied down. I think God sort of doesn't have a really good like of buildings in either the New or the Old Testament.

Why? Because buildings are used to keep him captive and his people captive. Now friends, you see what the gospel is doing? The gospel will drive you to go where God goes.

And God goes anywhere and everywhere. And that's what Jesus, that's why people are getting so threatened by Jesus. Because he's driving them in that sort of way.

So, let's pray. Father, we thank you for this table talk of Jesus. For his openness about our state.

For his willingness to put everything out there and to tell people that we are sick and in need of a doctor. Father, thank you for his willingness to tell us that we ought to be ready to be open even when we are threatened.

[32 : 00] Father, we thank you for Levi who understood a little bit of this and who left himself open to your call and followed you. Father, we pray that you would make us people who are open, people who listen to your word, people who are teachable, people who are ready to learn and people who are ready to go where you take us and where the gospel drives us.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.