

Connect360: Friends in Low Places

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- *Lesson 7 in the BaptistWay Press Connect 360 unit “The reMARKable Journey Begins” focuses on Mark 2:13-17.*

Levi celebrated his decision by inviting Jesus to eat at his home. This probably was a formal dinner given in Jesus’ honor. Guests reclined together on cushions seated around a low table. Levi included a diverse guest list—Jesus and his disciples, as well as “many tax collectors and sinners.” Levi probably invited his friends to join Jesus and his disciples at the banquet. Jesus’ acceptance of Levi signaled that others who shared his despised profession would also be welcomed. Levi also invited many “sinners.” This word sometimes is used to describe people who had no time or interest in following the Pharisees’ strict rules for ritual cleanness. It also could be used to describe those whose morals were lacking—the “scoundrels” of the first-century world. Either way, many people from this group were drawn to Jesus and chose to follow him. (Mark L. Strauss, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*)

In the ancient world, sharing a meal together sent an important social signal. Most people would eat only with those who shared similar social status. Jesus was not concerned with issues of social rank or standing. By eating with Levi and his guests, Jesus showed acceptance. All those who would follow him were welcomed to come, regardless of their past, their baggage or their qualifications. Scripture sometimes speaks of a great feast that will take place at the end of time to celebrate the kingdom of God (Isaiah 25:6-8; Revelation 19:9; Luke 14:15). The only people excluded from this feast will be those who refused Christ’s invitation to enter. By eating

with sinners—as Jesus did throughout his ministry—Jesus was foreshadowing the great heavenly banquet that is yet to come. Jesus is even now preparing a feast for his people, and all those who come to him in repentance are welcome.

Holiness is good, but not self-righteousness

The Pharisees were angered by Jesus' actions. The Pharisees strictly observed the Old Testament Law. They particularly were concerned with holiness and with avoiding anything that could defile them spiritually or make them ritually unclean. To avoid this defilement, the Pharisees followed the oral law as well as the written law. This oral law was what is sometimes known as the “fence around the law,” a body of oral tradition that expanded on and attempted to clarify the Old Testament. The idea was that if they did not break the “fence” around the commandment, they would also not break the commandment itself. The Pharisees would never have dreamed of eating at the home of a common Israelite—much less a tax collector—because they could not be sure that the food had been prepared according to their standards. Since Jesus was a respected teacher, they expected him to follow their standards. (Strauss)

The Pharisees' desire for holiness was good, but they let their desire warp into self-righteousness and exclusionary practices. Their insistence on following rules they themselves had created put obstacles in the way of people who were seeking God. We need to be careful that we do not make the same mistake. Holiness and righteousness are good things, but we must remember that our righteousness does not come from ourselves. It is the gift of God. Jesus did not hesitate to keep company with “sinners.” Neither should we.

Compiled by Stan Granberry, marketing coordinator for BaptistWay Press.

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