

JESUS HAD DINNER WITH MATTHEW**LUKE 5:27-32**

Did you realize that Easter Sunday is only and exactly 41 days from today? One day two Christians were having a conversation. It was getting close to Easter Sunday. One casually asked the other, "Are you looking forward to Easter Sunday?" Just as casually, his friend responded, "Well, no, as a matter of fact, I'm not. I never go to church on Easter." His friend was shocked, "What? You're kidding!" "No, I'm not," came the response back. "I don't go to church on Easter Sunday because I can't stand to see all the 'oncers' there. You know all those people who only come to church once a year. 'The annuals.' They get all dressed up to make their grand appearance. They mess everything up at my church! They mess up the parking. They sit in my pew. It just confuses everything. I mean, who do these people think they're fooling? They're not fooling me and they're certainly not fooling God! Over the years, it's just upset me so much I've decided not to go to church on Easter Sunday." Then, with a tone of finality this follower of Jesus said, "I have no use for 'oncers.'" An interesting perspective. I assume that he didn't think God has much use for 'oncers' either.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. For those of you who are wondering, Lent is a period of time before Holy Week and Easter Sunday lasting around 40 days when Christians all over the world take the opportunity to reflect again on the meaning of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice for us. I'm told the English word "Lent" is a shortened form of an Old English word "lencthen" meaning "spring" pointing to the time of year we observe the events leading up to and including the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection. Its purpose is similar to the Advent season that precedes Christmas Day. Every year I like to put together a message series for Lent and Easter. This year I thought it would be interesting to look at seven stories found in the Gospel of Luke that all have one thing in common. In each story, Jesus had dinner with someone. That's why I'm calling the message series "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?" But these dinner stories involved very different people in very different circumstances. Each of them help us understand Jesus better. Each of them help us understand more fully the impact and significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Today's story involved a 'oncer' if there ever was one! It's what happened when Jesus had dinner with Matthew. Let's read what happened when Jesus came to his home for dinner and then reflect on the story's value. I believe this story helps us answer two very important questions. Here's the first one:

WHO MATTERS TO GOD?

Here's a little background. This man, Levi, had another name – Matthew. This is the same Matthew who became one of Jesus' twelve original disciple. This is the same Matthew who wrote the first book of the New Testament – the Gospel according to St. Matthew. At this point in his life, however, Matthew was anything but saintly. He was a 'oncer' at the very best. He's the kind of person who would only have turned up on Easter Sunday at Karl Road Baptist Church if then. In fact, because of his profession as a tax collector, he wasn't even allowed to attend religious services at the Jewish

synagogue – kind of the ancient equivalent of today’s local church. He would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to go to a service in the local synagogue even once a year! If the leaders of the synagogue had seen Matthew coming, they would have literally prevented him from entering the building and participating in the service.

Anytime you read the first four books of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – you run into a group of people called Pharisees. It was a very influential, all male Jewish religious group in Jesus’ day. By all accounts the Pharisees were highly disciplined guys who really tried to take their Jewish faith seriously. They went to the synagogue regularly. They had a very moral lifestyle. They maintained a rigorous, impressive devotional life. They fasted and prayed a whole lot. They gave money to the poor. And they also went to great lengths not to associate with people who had bad reputations. From all outward appearances, the Pharisees were godly men who were totally devoted to God. Please notice something else about the Pharisees from the passage we just read. Clearly, they had figured out to their own satisfaction who mattered to God and who didn’t matter to God. When they saw Jesus hanging around people who they had already concluded did not matter to God, they were greatly offended by Him and His actions.

The general consensus was that tax collectors belonged to a group of people who did not matter to God. Someone may be thinking, “What’s the big deal about being a tax collector? I don’t like the IRS any better than anyone else, but being employed by the IRS is an honorable profession.” Being a tax collector in Jesus’ day was very different than being a tax collector today. Rome governed the land of Israel at this time and they imposed taxes on the people. For a fee, they hired local Jews to collect these taxes from the other people in a given community. As long as Rome got its cut, so to speak, the Roman officials in charge could care less what individual tax collectors might do to boost their incomes. It was an economic system destined for abuse.

The majority of these tax collectors became very wealthy by charging far more than what Rome actually demanded. They imposed all sorts of additional fees which they kept for themselves. And because they had the authority of imperial Rome behind them, who was going to challenge them? As a result, tax collectors were considered thieves. They were also considered traitors by their fellow Jews. Here were Jewish men collecting money dishonestly from other Jews on behalf of their enemy – Rome – and lining their own pockets in the process. Sure, you could get rich being a tax collector, but you paid a very heavy price. You were hated. You were despised. You were sneered at. No one wanted to be your friend. Nobody invited you over for dinner. And you could be sure no one invited you to church! In fact, if you were dumb enough to have tried it on your own, you’d be met at the door and escorted off the property!

Can you appreciate more fully now what Jesus did here in our story? Jesus invited this godless, unspiritual, non-religious man – Matthew - that everyone else had already dismissed as of no possible use to God to become one of His closest associates. A disciple! But Jesus didn’t stop there. He accepted Matthew’s invitation to dinner at Matthew’s home. Eating together back in Jesus’ day meant a whole lot more than it

does today. It was a tangible way of saying to another person, “I value you. You’re important to me. I accept you. I think you’re a good person. And I believe God feels the same way about you, too.” If you didn’t respect someone, like someone, or approve of someone, you did not invite him or her to dinner and you certainly did not accept his or her invitation to dinner! Then, someone texted or tweeted the news of this unusual dinner arrangement to the Pharisees! Jesus had accepted an invitation to have dinner with a whole bunch of people who didn’t matter to God! They called Jesus out, “What is he doing eating and drinking with crooks and “sinners”?” (Lk 5:30 MSG) But, then, boldly and clearly, Jesus sent a message from God to the Pharisees, to the tax collectors and other spiritual losers of His day, to you, to me, and to everyone everywhere for all time and eternity. “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders—an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.” (Lk 5:31-32 MSG) In other words, everyone matters to God regardless. And Jesus was willing to practice what He preached by having dinner with Matthew and his ungodly, unacceptable, and unspiritual friends.

Do you matter to God? I believe on any given Sunday, people wander into this church and other churches across our country who want to have that question answered. Do I really matter to God? You’re seeking something. You’re searching for something. And the fact is that God is seeking you, too. You wouldn’t be here today if God hadn’t put it in your heart to come. God wants to have a relationship with you. God wants to forgive your sin. God wants to liberate you from the shame and guilt that weighs you down every day of your life. God wants to change and transform every area of your life for the good. God wants to be your anchor when the storms of life blow in – and they will. God wants to assure you of an eternal future with Him after you die. And here’s maybe the best news. Your past mistakes don’t erase your value to God. Neither do your present circumstance. Not matter how painful, shameful, difficult, and even degrading – none of those circumstances destroy your value to God. You matter to God regardless. The greatest proof of how much you matter to God is what we’re focusing upon in this season of Lent. It happened 2,000 years ago when Jesus suffered, died on a cross, and rose again from the dead paying the penalty – in advance – for your sins and mine and making it possible for us know His Father as our Father. You matter that much to God? Indeed you do! A thousand times... yes!

When Jeffrey Ebert was five years old, he and his family were involved in a head on collision with a drunk driver. This was before factory installed seat belts and air bags. Jeffrey’s dad was driving the family home at night on a two land country road. Jeffrey was sitting on his mother’s lap when the other car swerved into their lane. He doesn’t remember the actual collision itself, but he clearly recalls the fear and confusion he felt seeing himself covered with blood from head to toe. But it wasn’t his blood. It was his mother’s blood. In that split second when the two oncoming headlights glared into her eyes, she instinctively pulled Jeffrey closer to her chest and curled her body around his. It was her body that slammed into the dashboard. It was her head that shattered the windshield. It was Jeffrey’s mom who took the impact of that terrible collision so that her son wouldn’t have to and his life was spared. Fortunately, after extensive surgery,

his mother eventually recovered. Jesus took the full impact of your sin and mine on the cross. And His blood permanently covers your life and mine.

Who do you identify with most in Jesus' story – the Pharisees or the tax collectors? If we're honest, we're probably closer to the Pharisees. Most of us are disciples of Jesus. I doubt anyone here today is a 'oncer.' No one is going to consider us just too bad or too lost for God. Any church in America would be pleased and eager to welcome us into its membership. Our temptation is to make an unconscious, unpublished list of people that we sort of assume God values and those God doesn't value. If I took a poll today and asked the question, "Who does God value?" how would you answer? How about a Billy Graham, a Rick Warren, missionaries, persecuted Christians in other countries? All true! But how about some other people? Do people who commit crimes matter to God? Do presidential candidates matter to God? Do child pornographers matter to God? Do the leaders of ISIS matter to God? Do refugees and immigrants matter to God especially those who follow another religion – Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists? The fact of the matter is that probably all of us carry around an unpublished list of people – either consciously or unconsciously – that we don't think have value to God. They don't have value to us, so why would God value them?

Here's something to consider. Because every person matters to God regardless, every person ought to matter to you. Not just some people – every person. If you truly understand what Jesus said and did in this story, it will change forever how you look at other people and how you treat them. Here's a simple fact. You've never met a person who didn't matter to God and you never will such a person. You'll never run into a person to whom God has said, "You over there! You don't matter to Me. You have no value to Me." When enough disciples of Jesus understand that basic truth, it changes how we do church. Wouldn't it be great to fill up KRBC with people living in our community who – for whatever reason – don't think they matter to God, who've concluded that they've somehow forfeited God's love and care forever? But because of the way we treat them when they walk in the door – our love, our concern, our respect – they start to believe maybe they could have value to God. A second question now...

WHAT MATTERS TO GOD?

Here's an irony. While every person matters to God regardless, not every attitude in a person's heart and mind is acceptable to God regardless. Frankly, there are attitudes that will cut you off from God and other attitudes that will bring you near to Him. Here's an attitude that will bring you near to God: the ability to face the truth about yourself. Meaning what? This begins with a willingness to admit that you're a sinner who deserves every bit of God's judgment. Like everyone else, you acknowledge that you have not always lived a life that honors the Lord. Sure, some people have lived more sinfully than others, but the fact remains that you yourself have fallen short of God's glory, God's best, and God's standards. You own that. You acknowledge that. This is a willingness to stand before God and say in so many words, "God, I can't fool You. You know who I am. You know the wrong things I've done and the right things I failed to do."

I don't think anyone had to convince Matthew that he was a sinner. People back then were happy to remind him of that fact every day! He knew full well that he practiced a dishonest profession that took advantage of people. What about the Pharisees? They didn't think of themselves as sinners. Jesus interacts with them in this story in a very interesting way. He doesn't challenge their religiosity. He's doesn't even challenge their claim to be right with God. He just says in so many words, "Men, God sent Me to help those who are spiritually sick. God sent Me to sinners and spiritual losers. If you're not sick and you're not a sinner, I guess I didn't come for you." If you can't admit that you're a sinner, there's not a whole lot Jesus can do your today or any day.

Here's another attitude that will help you get and stay near to God. You acknowledge that you can never make yourself acceptable to God. Matthew had given up that illusion. He knew his lifestyle was displeasing to God. Those around him underlined that painful fact by barring him from the place everybody else went to worship God – the local synagogue. The Pharisees had a very different opinion of themselves. They felt they were already doing everything necessary and needful to save themselves. They didn't need Jesus coming from Heaven to Earth on their behalf. They certainly didn't need Jesus dying on a cross for their sins. They were doing a pretty good job of keeping the rules and making themselves acceptable to God on the basis of their own good behavior. It's been my experience as a pastor that the hardest person to share the good news of Jesus with is not the terrible, "in your face" sinner, but instead the person who is outwardly religious and highly moral. That person is often blinded by his or her own goodness and just can't see his or her awesome need of Jesus.

I have a great deal of respect for Alcoholics Anonymous. The roots of that fine organization go back to a Christian pastor actually. One of the foundational concepts for the successful treatment of alcoholism or drug addiction is that each alcoholic or drug addict must admit his or her problem and his or her need. No cure is possible until that person hits rock bottom, so to speak. But even after people have been successfully dry or drug free for years and years, they've been taught to keep on thinking of themselves as alcoholics or addicts for the rest of their lives. They no longer drink, but they're always alcoholics. They no longer abuse drugs, but they're always addicts. That attitude is absolutely essential to staying well.

I believe right there is a spiritual parallel. A follower of Jesus never stops being a sinner saved by grace even though he or she has stopped living a life of sin. Every day we keep on needing the grace and forgiveness only Jesus can provide. The spiritually healthy person is the one who recognizes that he or she is just one step away from spiritual failure every day. You don't have to go out and commit a sin to recognize your need for the Lord. After all, when Jesus called him, Matthew got up and gave up his dishonest job and then followed Jesus for the rest of his life. That's important to remember. Remember again how Jesus put it. "I'm here inviting outsiders, not insiders—an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out."" (Lk 5:32 MSG) Acceptance in our culture often means we're just supposed to keep on tolerating someone's sinful attitudes and lifestyle. "Who are we to judge?" we're told. But Jesus calls us to a changed life in every way. The transformation doesn't make you acceptable

to God; it's the evidence that you've been accepted by God. The Holy Spirit is now living in you. How could you not be transformed? How could you not be different?

Here's a third attitude that will bring you near to God and keep you close to Him your whole life long. This is the ability to put your trust fully in Him rather than yourself. Again, there's a very telling contrast between Matthew and the Pharisees in Jesus' story. The Pharisees trusted in themselves, didn't they? They trusted in their own spirituality... their own moral behavior... their own religious practices like going to the synagogue, fasting, praying, tithing, and giving money to the poor. This was all good and worthwhile stuff to do, but the motivation was all wrong. They weren't saying, "God, I love You so much and I want to live in a way that honors You as a way to show my eternal gratitude." That would have been great! God would have loved that! No, instead they were saying, "God, doesn't my life impress You? You should reward me with eternal life because of how well I live my life." Their heart attitude essentially cut them off from God and all that He longed to do in them and through them. Now, when Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow Me" that's all he needed to hear. Matthew knew he needed God. He knew full well he could never make himself acceptable to God. He put His trust in Jesus and not in Himself. What matters to God? The ability to trust fully in the Lord rather than yourself.

Baseball pitchers and catchers reported for spring training last Sunday in Florida and Arizona. A sure sign that spring is around the corner! Encouraging, huh? One of the greatest players who ever played the game was Ty Cobb. He still holds several major league baseball records. The most games played: 3,035. The most runs scored: 2,244. The highest career batting average: .367. He had the most hits ever, too, until Pete Rose came along. Ty Cobb also earned a reputation for being an angry, violent man disliked by many. Back in July 1961, a preacher visited Ty Cobb in the hospital and told him about Jesus and how to become his follower. Cobb was dying. He said to the pastor, "You're not telling me that a whole life of sin can be done away with by a deathbed repentance, are you?" The preacher wisely said, "No, Mr. Cobb. I'm not telling you that a deathbed repentance can do away with a lifetime of sin, but I am telling you that the blood of Jesus can!" At that moment, Ty Cobb invited Jesus into his life. As the preacher was leaving his hospital room, Cobb said, "Now, tell all my friends that I'm sorry I did this in the bottom of the ninth inning. I should have done it in the top of the first."

Wherever you may be along life's journey - the top of the first... the middle of the fourth... or the bottom of the ninth, you can turn in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ and surrender your life to Him knowing that you will be accepted. That's because there was never a moment that God did not value you. When Jesus had dinner with Matthew, He ended up answering two very important questions. Who matters to God? Everyone matters to God regardless. What matters to God? By the grace of God, I face the truth about myself. I acknowledge that I can't make myself acceptable to God. I'm a sinner saved by grace who stops living a life of sin. I gratefully receive what Jesus has done for me and begin to experience transformation. Then, I learn how to make trusting the Lord fully a way of life every moment of every day.