

Matthew is sitting at a table collecting taxes. Matthew is not well liked. He could be overcharging the taxes. He could be taking advantage of his countrymen. He's working for the hated Roman government collecting these taxes. He has compromised himself by cooperating with them.

Then Jesus comes along and says, "Follow me." Amazingly, Matthew packs up his things to follow Jesus. They end up at Matthew's house, having a meal. Along the way, Matthew has invited other tax collectors and "sinners." They're having something to eat with Jesus.

But, the Pharisees stand off to the side, complaining, "Why does He eat with sinners?" Jesus' answer: It is the sick who need a doctor, not the healthy. He says He wants mercy shown, not mere religious ceremonies.

So, who is eating with Jesus? Who would be lumped into this group labeled "sinners"? The tax collectors are there. What sin's going on with them? We could call it greed. It could be they held onto money too tightly or money had too tight a hold on them. Their lives revolved around getting and keeping money, then buying stuff.

But who else is at the table? You and I are at the table as well. We've all seen how the rapidly rising inflation cuts into your income. Money isn't going as far as it once did. The volatility of the stock market makes you worry about investments or retirement accounts. Your anxiety grows. "Am I going to have enough?" When your mind goes there, you begin to hold on to the money too tightly or it takes hold of you ever more tightly. So when our Lord calls for giving, generosity, and taking care of others, we end up mostly taking care of ourselves. It reminds me of what Paul says in Romans: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be.

Another group that gets labelled "sinners" is prostitutes. Now, we know that this sin involves selling one's body for money or acceptance or drugs or whatever. But more is going on with this sexual immorality. Underneath prostitution, you find the loss of the sanctity of sexuality and nudity instead of where it is properly expressed in the marital relationship. It is no longer viewed as a sacred gift for husband and wife.

Do we fall under this umbrella of sinners too? Not as prostitutes, but we live at a time when sexuality and nudity are exploited, exposed, and explicit for us to see every day of our lives. How difficult it is to keep our desires, our urges, our eyes, our minds, and our hearts pure. Sites on a computer invite us to click on a link that will show us a movie star wearing a slinky red dress or see-

through top. Movies routinely show couples in various stages of nudity and sexual activity. We are bombarded with these images, pictures, seductions, throughout the day, and they infect our desires, our urges, our thoughts, our actions. We, too, are sinners. Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be.

What other sinners are at the table with Jesus? Those who can't keep the Law with their mouths like they should—or won't keep the Law. I can imagine the language used by some of these people at the table with Jesus. Filthy words. Coarse talk. Some profanity.

It's no different today. The same kind of foul language flows into our ears and perhaps out of our mouths. What do we say in anger when we lose our temper? How quickly we lash out with mean words, hateful words, words that God never wants us to speak. Hurtful words that appear on Facebook or some other social media about a politician, someone who is different from us, someone who riles us up. Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be.

Other sinners? Those of us who worry too much. Those filled with anxiety about nuclear weapons, climate change, pandemics, Artificial Intelligence, unsafe cities. Our Lord calls for us to trust, but we are so deep into worry that we fail to pray, fail to seek peace in His promises despite the dangers we live with every day. Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be.

Then there are the Pharisees. They're standing off to the side, feeling better than the sinners and tax collectors. They are looking down at those who are eating with Jesus. A condescending attitude leads to comparing themselves to those people at the table.

That's a temptation too. The man holding a sign at the busy intersection in the Cities. The socially awkward co-worker or student. Someone from a different race or nationality. We too easily judge, too easily stand off to the side, too easily compare ourselves with them to make ourselves feel better. Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Who shouldn't be eating with Jesus? We shouldn't be. We should be on the outside looking in.

And yet, Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them! He has invited us to eat with Him! Now eating at Matthew's house in our text wasn't like eating at the food court at a mall, where you're with your family but you don't know anyone else. The tables there are separated from one another, and you walk out after a quick meal without interacting with anybody around. This is also not like a formal meal, like a wedding reception, where people are seated by how

important they are or whether they are special guests. You may have a polite conversation, but where you get to sit tells everyone who you are.

No, this meal brings people together. I imagine the tax collectors knew one another, and possibly the other sinners did too. Good food was had, but also laughter and hearty conversation. This table didn't reserve spots for those more important, nor did it leave out those who didn't fit in. **Everyone** was welcome. When Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them, everything changes. The table becomes a place of warm fellowship, where no one is better or worse, and the invitation includes everyone.

Something else has happened at Matthew's house. It may be Matthew's table. He may have invited the tax collectors and sinners to be there. But he is not at the head of the table. Jesus is. Jesus has become the host. He is the one everyone defers to. He speaks, and everyone else listens. The Pharisees don't accuse Matthew of anything. They question what Jesus is doing at this table. And Jesus has taken charge. He has welcomed sinners to sit at the table and eat with Him.

Why has Jesus done this? Why is this welcome to the sinners? Because they need Him, of course. But also because of His mercy. He desires mercy from the people, not mere religious ceremonies going through the motions. Yet He also knows that mercy needs to come first from Him if there is to be mercy shown by His people. And His mercy flows freely from His sacrifice of Himself.

I repeated a number of times the apostle Paul's words, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The sentence doesn't stop there. Paul goes on to say, "and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:23-24).

Think about another meal Jesus hosted. This one happened on the night He was betrayed when He was eating with His closest disciples. Even though He knew Judas would betray him, Peter would deny Him, and the rest would run away, He still welcomed them to the table. He ate with them.

Then He heads to the cross. He is abandoned. Left alone. He is on the outside looking in at Jerusalem, the Holy City. What is He doing there? He is showing mercy by sacrificing Himself. All the greed, all the lust, all the fear, all the anger, all the worry, all the condescension—all of it—He has taken it on Himself. Out of this sacrifice comes the mercy of His forgiveness. Like the good physician who knows just what the sick need, Jesus welcomes us in His merciful forgiveness.

Three days later, He rises from the dead. A few days later, He has another meal. Peter, John, James, Nathanael, Thomas, and a couple other disciples go

fishing. They don't catch anything. From the shore, Jesus calls out to them and tells them to throw their nets on the right side of the boat. Whoa! 153 large fish in the nets. John says, "It's the Lord." Peter plunges into the water and sashes as fast as he can go to the shore to be with Jesus. When everyone else is out of the boat, what is waiting for them? A meal. Breakfast. When the meal is over, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him. Three times Peter had denied him. Three times he needed to hear Jesus restore him. He is welcomed back into the family, back to the table of Christ's mercy for all eternity.

Who is eating with Jesus? Sinners. Sinners like you and me. All because Jesus is at the head of the table. All because He is the host. All of us are included. All of us are welcome. All of us are forgiven.

The table is right here. Here Jesus is the host. Here Jesus welcomes us with His very body and blood given and shed on the cross for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. Here we receive the risen Christ, who welcomes us once again. We receive mercy from Him.

We leave from this table, following Him. We leave from this table and that greed becomes more and more a spirit of generosity and giving. We leave from this table and the lust and desires become more and more a commitment for that gift of sexuality to be kept sacred in the marital relationship. We leave from this table and the worry and fear become more and more a peace that surpasses all understanding. We leave from this table and the anger becomes more and more patience and compassion, using our words to encourage someone. We leave from this table and we respect another person more and more no matter what his or her place or status is in life. We leave here and follow Jesus by showing mercy on Monday afternoon, Wednesday morning, and Friday evening.

Picture that moment (next Sunday/ today) when as brothers and sisters in Christ, we will gather together at this Table in joy, in closeness, in love, in forgiveness because of Jesus' sacrifice and mercy and every time we come to the Lord's Table. Remember, Jesus is the host, and He says to you, "Welcome to My table." Amen.