

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
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Lee Hanssen  
The Essential Teachings of Jesus: An Open Table  
Luke 5:27-31**

Good morning, everybody. My name is Lee Hanssen, and I'm the Director of Student Ministries and the Associate Pastor of The Table. All the other pastors were busy this morning, so they sent me to be with you but, nonetheless, I'm glad to be here. If you've been with us recently, we've been in this series called "The Essential Teachings of Jesus, Words to Live By." As John [Pastor John Crosby] and Brad [Pastor Brad Jackson] and I were discussing what we would want this series to look like and what we would like to include, we realized that one of the Sundays was Communion Sunday. We thought that was significant, and so we wanted to take a look at the interesting idea of whom Jesus ate with. Like, who were the people Jesus sat around the table with and then, what does that mean for us? As Kari [Kari Dubord, Kids' Ministries] mentioned in her children's sermon and as my teaching underlies, the reality is that Jesus Christ came for sinful, broken people, and He calls us, as followers of Jesus, into the world to love exactly the same way that He did then.

I want to share a story with you. A couple of years ago, I had a friend who got married. He and his wife were a Godly couple. They were active in a local church. They were in a small group, all good and healthy things. But through an unfortunate series of events, his wife ended up having an affair. It was a horrible thing, really painful, and I remember processing with him. I could see the hurt on my friend's face and the anger and the frustration, all things that seemed actually really valid at the time. Upon reflecting on this, I remember something that he said to me one time that caught me a little bit off guard. He said to me, "Do you want to know what the hardest part is for me, Lee? The hardest thing for me to swallow? It is that she gets to take Communion with me. That she gets to come to Jesus' table right next to me."

In that moment, I became just as concerned for my friend's heart as I was for his spouse's because, you see, what my friend had done was close off Jesus' table. He had created this internal document inside of his heart, declaring who was in and who was out. He had created this boundary line that said, "You are worthy of God's love and grace right up until this point but as soon as you cross that line, there is no turning back." You know, we do things like this all the time. Perhaps it is a group of people, like a different political party. Or maybe a different social class, a different race, or perhaps people with a different sexual orientation than ours. And we do it to individuals as well. Maybe it is the person whose moral system isn't quite the same as ours or the family whose family values do not look just like ours. Or maybe it is the man or woman we know who deeply struggles with addiction and just can't quite seem to get it together. I think if we take an honest look at ourselves and inside of our hearts, we all have that person or group of people in our lives who we wouldn't feel that different about. What happens is that we ostracize those people.

That word *ostracize* literally means to exclude someone or a group of people from society. Jesus said that the world will know who we are by the way that we love each other. You know, when I think I am pretty good, and I really do, I think I do a pretty good job of loving people who look like me, who believe what I believe, who think like I think, who talk like I talk and hang out in the places where I hang out. In preparing for this message, I had to ask myself a really hard question: how am I really doing? If I strip everything away and just look at the facts and the realities of my life, how am I really doing loving the people in my city, in my neighborhood, and maybe even in my own family who are different from me? In a similar way, I ask you the same question. How are we doing loving the people who make us feel uncomfortable, the people who have either been ostracized or who have ostracized themselves? There is not much difference in those two types of people because the reality is, those people are on the outside regardless of how they got there. And if that is where they are, I believe that Jesus invites us into that space to be with them, to love and to reconcile with them. I believe those are the types of people Jesus is inviting to His table.

I called this sermon An Open Table because as I mentioned, in the Scriptures we often see Jesus sitting around the table with people. Meals were an incredibly significant thing in Jesus' day, much more so than they are today. Whom you sat around the table with and whom you ate with said a lot about who you were and what you cared about. And as we see Jesus eating around these tables, he isn't necessarily sitting with the kinds of people we would presume he would be. The story I am going to share with you today confronted me with one of the simplest and yet challenging truths in the Bible. Are you ready for it? It's pretty profound. *Jesus loves everybody!* And so the story in Luke 5 goes,

**27** Later, as Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. **28** So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.

**29** Later, Levi held a banquet in his home with Jesus as the guest of honor. Many of Levi's fellow tax collectors and other guests also ate with them. **30** But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with such scum?"

**31** Jesus answered them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. **32** I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent."

One of my favorite parts of this story is the text in the very beginning where it says, Jesus "saw a tax collector." Other versions say that He "noticed a tax collector." So often in my head, I picture Jesus getting up and knowing exactly what is going to happen from the moment He wakes up until the moment He goes to bed. I don't know that that is necessarily how it always happened, although I do believe that Jesus lived a very concise and precise mission—very clearly, every step of every moment of every day to walk in step with His Father and show people His Father's love.

What I love about this story is that it starts out saying that Jesus is walking down the street and He sees a tax collector. He notices a tax collector. Jesus had created enough margin in His life to actually move toward someone who had been pushed out toward the edges and the fringes

of society, and Jesus called him to follow Him. It is interesting to know that Jesus would call a tax collector. Tax collectors worked for the Romans and people hated the Romans, so tax collectors, just by default, were despised. They were viewed as traitors and outcasts because they worked for the enemy, and they were often quite greedy. When they collected money, they would skim off the top. They would collect extra, taking from people what didn't belong to them. Jesus had specific words about those who reject church discipline that show us the way tax collectors were thought of and treated. Jesus said this.

**17** ...if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. [Matthew 18:17]

Tax collectors, wealthy as they might have been, were shunned. They were actually so dishonest and so disrespected that they weren't even allowed to testify in a court. Another interesting note about tax collectors: while all these things were true about tax collectors, it was also the custom that tax collectors would have grown up in the area they were in charge of. They came from within the society. If you think about the implications of what that means, it means that Levi grew up with the people he was now stealing from. He probably played with them when they were kids and shared meals with them and then at some point, this group of people pushed Levi to the outskirts. They excluded him from their society. He was ostracized from respectable society. The fact that Jesus would even engage in conversation with Levi is a marvel to me because this man is despised and hated. He is, perhaps, the most unloved man in all of Capernaum, and Jesus calls him personally to be His disciple, "Follow Me." How wonderful! The text says,

**29** Later, Levi held a banquet in his home with Jesus as the guest of honor. Many of Levi's fellow tax collectors and other guests also ate with them.

You can picture Levi responding to Jesus' invitation to follow Him in the only really appropriate way, with complete gratitude. He throws Jesus a party. Luke describes the gathering with the word *megas*, meaning great. It wasn't a small intimate get-together with a few friends, a quiet little deal. It was a huge party. To his large house suited for a wealthy man, Levi invites "a large crowd of tax collectors and others." One commentator pictures the scene this way.

It was no doubt an unscrupulous, loud, and perhaps, vulgar company of people and Jesus was among them. He did not compromise anything of His character by keeping company with this lot. He maintained His dignity, but He also bestowed dignity upon these who had become outcasts of religious society—just by His presence and acceptance of them as people of value. The religious contingent that had been stalking Him was incensed. Their impression of holy people was that they kept themselves removed from sinners. This was not the pattern of Jesus and it is not the pattern He has for us.

If I put myself in this story, I wonder how I would I have handled it. I'll tell you what, I know how I would have handled it—the same way I handle all other situations that make me feel uncomfortable. I would have showed up late, so I would not have to make small talk. Then I would have found the person in the room who looked the most like me and I would have had a short conversation. Then within a short while, I would have left.

Now when I think about how Jesus handled this situation, I highly doubt that Jesus would have sat around debating the pros and cons of putting himself in a sticky situation and thinking, “Gosh, I don’t know, I really don’t like the way these people talk, and I don’t necessarily agree with all the things that these people do.” I highly doubt that that was Jesus’ response. I love also that Jesus didn’t throw the party. I love that He just showed up at Levi’s party. He just went. Jesus just brought Himself and His presence to the gathering and was among these people. You know what is so scary about just showing up? It is that we have to give up control of the outcome, and that doesn’t feel safe. And we love to feel safe, don’t we?

Most of you don’t know that I have a brother named Tim and that Tim has been in prison for the better part of my life. An even sadder part of that story is that not one time in almost thirty years have I ever made an attempt to go and visit my brother. Not one time. When I was getting ready to prepare this message and talk to you about moving toward people who have been excluded and shunned, I thought, how can I stand up there and encourage and challenge this congregation to move toward uncomfortable situations and people who are different from them when I can’t even do it myself? So Tuesday night for the very first time, I went to visit my brother in jail.

Picture the scene with me. I showed up in this room, and it was just like you see in the movies. It really was. I felt like everyone was looking at me, and that was because everybody was looking at me. So I’m standing in line. You have to fill out a form and write who you are there to see. I pulled out my ID. I have a big, goofy smile on my face in my driver’s license picture. So I’m holding my form and my ID, getting ready to see my brother, and this girl behind me, starts making small talk. She is like, “Oh, you smile on your driver’s license picture?” I’m like, “Well, yeah,” and she gets this sassy look on her face and says, “I always smile on my mug shots.” I’m thinking, “Oh, my God. Get me out of here. Who are these people? I don’t want to be here. I don’t fit in here. I don’t feel comfortable here, and I want to go home.” I went back to my chair and I sat down and tried not to make any more eye contact with anybody.

Eventually they called my name. I walked through this door through these metal gates and sat down at this table, separated from my brother by plexiglass. I picked up the phone, and for the first time in years, I looked my brother Tim in the face. Do you know what the first thing I said to him was? “Man, you have a lot of gray hair.” After he forgave me for that rude comment, we had a really great time. It was a short time, only about 20, 25 minutes that they let me have with my brother, but in that short 20 to 25 minutes, I bet Tim said, “Thanks for coming” 30 or 40 times. His face lit up that his little brother had come to see him. I got to tell Tim that I love him, and I got to ask him for forgiveness for ostracizing him from my life and our family, and I got to receive that forgiveness.

A missionary named Ron Hutchcraft, who works for Campus Crusade for Christ, preached a sermon called Rescue the Dying. He shared this analogy and story from his life from when he went on a hike. He was comparing it to his Christian life. He said, “I was on this hike in Colorado and the path was really wide. It was really safe. A lot of people had traveled this path.” And then he said he came across a big copper pipe that ran across a stream. The copper pipe had gotten all green and mossy and was really slippery, and the water was going over it at a rapid pace. He said, “I realized that I had gone as far as I could go safely.”

At some point, if we really want to follow Jesus, we have to realize that if we just hang out with people like us, who think like us and talk like us and act like us, that we have gone as far as we

can go safely. But I don't believe that Jesus calls us to be safe. I don't find that anywhere in the Scriptures, actually.

One of our mission pastors, Mike Hotz, who was up here sharing announcements, said this a while back. He said, "Let's not sit around and try to change the way that we think." We're good at that, aren't we, talking about how we want to change. He said, "Let's not sit around and try to change our thinking. Let's just go, and maybe that will change the way we think." I love that don't you? Because you know what? Something happens when you sit across the table from someone who is different from you. Yes, there might be awkward silences and, yes, you might get something stuck in your teeth, but as you look someone in the face, you are confronted with the idea that you are staring into the face of a human being Jesus loves. You are staring into the face of a human being Jesus Christ came and died for, and then you realize that maybe, just maybe, you are not so different after all.

I can see Jesus at this party, hanging out with people who probably would have been terrified to approach Him on the street. His joy lights up this party of outcasts, and it becomes an occasion they will remember to their dying day, the afternoon that Jesus, the Messiah, ate dinner at the same table, shook their hand, put His arm on their shoulders. They would have never forgotten a day like that, and neither would have Levi. The story goes on and says,

**30** But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with such scum?"

Can't you see the look on their faces when they ask that?

**31** Jesus answered them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. **32** I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent."

When I really think about why the Pharisees responded this way, it actually makes a lot of sense. They had never known anything different. They had never seen anything different. No one had ever shown them anything different. I believe our hearts want to move out to these places, but a lot of us don't know any different because we have never seen any different and we have never experienced anything different. You see, we do the same thing. We all have our own ideas of who we think should be at the table and maybe even more important, who we think we shouldn't. What these Pharisees were doing was saying they deserved a place at Jesus' table. You know what happens when we demand a place at a table? When we say we deserve a seat at a certain table? We push someone else off of their seat. When we demand a place at the table, we push someone else aside. We move them to the outer circle of our world.

You know, one could say a lot of things about my brother Tim, but I bet Tim knows that he needs a physician. As I sat across the table from my brother, he told me he knows he is a man in need of grace. He told me he knows he needs forgiveness from God and from our family and from many. When I left there, quite honestly, there was a part of me that wished I had done more.

Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, used to say, if he could teach the church today one thing, only one thing, he would teach them how sinful that they really are. Because you know what happens when we realize how deep the realities of our sin are? When we realize

how great our sin is, we realize how incredible our Savior is. And you know what happens when we realize how broken we really are? We are then able to accept and move toward other people who are broken, too.

The scribes and Pharisees in this story, in their own opinions, thought they were blameless, free from the disease of sin. They didn't think they stood in any need of Jesus, the Great Physician, who came to cure the maladies of our souls. Jesus said that they will know who we are by the way we love each other, and I believe that. I believe that you are here because you want to become more like Jesus. If you are in this room and want to become more like Jesus, let's stop sitting around trying to change the way that we think. Let's go! Let's move toward people who have ostracized themselves or people we have willfully pushed aside, and let's leave a seat at our table for them—because that's what Jesus would do. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*