

Our Saviour, Our Mission, Our Destiny

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[0 : 00] This evening I'd like us to turn back to Luke chapter 15 and we're going to be focusing especially on verse 2 but I'll just read verses 1 and 2 together.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

As you can see from the verses before you, these two verses are recording a complaint that was made about Jesus.

That wasn't uncommon in the gospels particularly from the Pharisees and the religious leaders they would see stuff that Jesus said and stuff that Jesus did and they disapproved and often their comments about Jesus were negative and you can see it highlighted there that they were grumbling talking about the fact that he was saying and doing things of which they didn't approve.

Frequently Jesus didn't match their expectations. They had a very fixed idea of what a rabbi or a religious leader should and should not do and often Jesus went outside those boundaries.

[1 : 22] And when they saw that they were not slow to complain, they were quick to criticize. So in many ways these words are recording a kind of negative thing aren't they?

They're talking about people who looked at Jesus and they moaned and complained about what he did. So at one level these are kind of negative words.

But at the same time what I want us to see tonight is that even those, these are words of complaint even though they come from a negative and critical spirit, the words of the Pharisees here actually contain some incredible theology.

And that's what I want us to see tonight that within these little words at the end where it says this man receives sinners and eats with them, we discover some of the most wonderful theology that lies at the very heart of the Gospel.

And there's three things in particular that we are going to hopefully see. We're going to learn a bit more about our Saviour, we're going to learn a bit more about our mission, we're going to learn a little bit more about our destiny.

[2 : 38] All of these arise from what's being said. So first of all we'll just spend a wee bit of time thinking about our Saviour, what this teaches us. If you look at these verses you can see that Jesus is criticised both for what he does and for who he does it with.

So you can see that he's criticised because he's receiving and eating and he's criticised because of who he's doing that with, he's doing it with sinners.

And there's a bigger explanation of that earlier on that these sinners also comprised tax collectors.

So what Jesus did is criticised and who he does it with is criticised for the Pharisees.

Both of these things are unacceptable. Now all of this reveals more about the culture at the time of the New Testament. More kind of at a general level Greco-Roman society was heavily influenced by class structures.

So we know a little bit about that today but it's not quite so prominent particularly in our own island although we do have an idea of classes. In Greco-Roman society, society 2,000 years ago in and around the Roman Empire, class was a massive thing.

[3 : 55] So you had very clear divisions as to who the different people were. So if you kind of split society to these kind of levels, you had the elite at the very top, then you had maybe what we could kind of call professionals, people who were maybe business owners etc etc.

Then you would maybe have slaves. Now it's important for us to remember that slaves weren't necessarily like, they weren't sort of like ball and chain kind of slaves, like a teacher would be a slave, a tutor, a doctor might even be a slave, somebody who is owned by somebody else but who performs an important role in society.

You would maybe also have labourers who would work for a day here and there. I'm sure there are another box because at the bottom you'd also have beggars or people who are kind of just below any kind of line of employment.

That's a kind of rough category but you had these very, very clear class divisions and there was very little overlap between them.

My drawing is terrible there, not just because it's not very neat but also because it's inaccurate because the elite box should be tiny because there was very few elite people and the slaves, labourers and beggars boxes should be huge because that's what the majority of people were.

[5 : 14] And just like it is today, all the wealth was held by a small number of people. You had very, very clear class divisions and so that meant that you kind of stayed with your own sort of people.

Somebody up here or up here would have avoided the rest as much as possible. That's how society was then.

The same kind of segregation though applied in the religious life of the people as well. And you can see that even reading through the Gospels that you have the scribes and the Pharisees, they're kind of in a class of their own and other people aren't just not at that level and you have this very kind of clear segregation where there's the religious elite, then there's maybe the more general kind of people and then you might have people who've made mistakes in their lives who are sinners and they're kind of definitely not part of the religious community.

That kind of segregation was so prominent. Let me rub out all my scribblings here. The result of that was that there were certain people that you just avoided and part of the reason you avoided them was because you kind of saw them as almost like a kind of contaminant that you had to keep away from and the divisions were very strong.

That was intensified by what we call an honor, shame culture. This is something that's very prominent in many parts of the world still today.

[6 : 51] It was prominent in the West until not that long ago, maybe 100 years ago. It was very prominent in the early, in the period that were of the New Testament whereby honor and shame were massive.

Honor is what you prized more than anything else. So today we tend to prize possessions and money more than anything else, that's what society prizes. In these days, honor was more important.

To be honored by the community, to be recognized as somebody who was worthy of honor, that was what people wanted more than anything. If you could bring honor to yourself, honor to your family, that was what society really chased after.

Of course, part of that was avoiding shame at all costs. And shame could come upon you if you failed to meet up to society's expectations or if something went badly wrong in your life, if you failed or did something that you shouldn't have done.

And that, that shaming meant exclusion. And again, that brings us back to the kind of class structures that somebody's made, a complete hash of their life who's dishonored themselves or dishonored their family.

[7 : 59] They're not allowed, it's just they're shunned. And a great example of that would be if we had wredged further on in Luke 15, we have the parable of the prodigal son. There you've got a son who's dishonored his family and brought shame.

And the typical response to that would be, he's gone. Keep him out of the family. He's made a hash of everything.

So all of that meant that social boundaries were very firmly set. And there was a very strong kind of them and us categorization. And we saw that hinted at in the reading where Jesus says, you know, when you have dinner, don't just invite your friends, your brothers, your relatives or rich neighbors. That's just the people in your own class. He's saying, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And the reason he said that was because the inclination would be, let's just stick with their own, it's them and us, the boundaries are very clear.

Now that might seem a long way from life today. It's easy for us to think, well, things are so different, but in so many ways, the same patterns continue. We might not have the same class structures as firmly set as they did in Greco-Roman society, but we still have very, very clear boundaries.

[9 : 14] And we find it very easy to drift into kind of them and us categories that can happen in loads of ways, it can happen in politics. People have one opinion, people have another opinion, it's

them and us.

It can happen in terms of moral issues, people who believe one thing and those who don't believe, people who embrace one type of lifestyle, people who question one type of lifestyle, them and us. It can even happen socially. The clothes we wear, the status we have, it's so easy to kind of categorize people and to set boundaries.

And it can easily keep into church life as well. This morning we were thinking about the fact that in regards to the role of women, some people are what we call complementarian, some people are called egalitarian.

There's a great, you could say, them and us. I'm not that, I'm not that. They're good, they're bad. It's so easy to separate things into these categories. We can do it by denomination, we can do it by theological position on something like baptism or spiritual gifts or whether we want exclusive samadhi or whether we'll include hymns and music alongside samadhi.

[10:23] It's so easy to separate people. And perhaps most of all, it's easy to separate those within the church from those who are outside. It's them out there and us who are here.

And that can be especially true when it comes to people whose lives are a mess. So if you think of somebody whose life is really corrupt, they're out for themselves.

They don't mind if they hurt other people in the process. They are quite happy to exploit others for their own benefit. Like a tax collector in the New Testament.

Or somebody who's just careless, who gets embroiled in all sorts of things that are wrong because they've made foolish decisions and they don't seem to care about what's right and wrong.

Or even the people who are crushed, people who've made massive mistakes in their lives, people whose lives are a total mess.

[11:28] It's so easy to see them as in a different category, away from us. And consequently, these are the kind of people that it's really easy to avoid.

Or maybe even to shun, to criticise, to talk about, or at the very least just to set very firm boundaries between us and them.

What did Jesus do with those kind of people? He received them and ate with them.

Now it's hard for us to recognise even just how shocking Jesus' actions in these verses would have been to the society around him.

I sometimes think, what's that modern equivalent of a tax collector? We tend to think of a tax collector as someone who works for HMRC, a civil servant, a noble person in society.

[12:38] Of course, I'm sure you know enough to know that that's not what the tax collectors were like in these times. Tax collectors were seen as traitors, they were working for the Romans, and they were exploiting their own people in order to be made rich.

I sometimes think that the modern equivalent of a tax collector is a drug dealer, someone who is very happy to hurt his community so that he gets rich.

Jesus is having dinner with them.

This tells us many amazing things about our Savior. I'll just skip a little bit. It's telling us that he's brave because he knew fine he was going to be criticised.

Can you find that this was doing something that was not done? It's telling us that he is so brave. It's also telling us that he's compassionate.

[14:00] These are people whose lives are a mess, whether it's a rich tax collector who's living with a massive amount of guilt, or whether it's a poor sinner whose life and marriage and everything is just chaos.

These are the people that Jesus cares about, these are the people that Jesus wants to reach. It also tells us that Jesus has got good eyesight.

What do I mean by that? It's telling us that Jesus is able to see past the badness and brokenness of these people.

He is also able to see past the stupid barriers that his society has built and that everyone stays with him.

His eyesight is brilliant because he sees beyond all of that. This is so crucial for anybody here who has ever felt excluded or who feels a sense of shame.

[15:07] We don't have that formal honour shame culture that you had in such a prominent way in Greco-Roman society. We are still incredibly good at making people ashamed of themselves when they make a mistake, especially on social media.

You see that all the time. It can be in big ways when people make a huge mess of their lives. It can even be in small ways. Sometimes it can be not having the right phone or not having the right hairstyle.

This is how it gets. There was a certain way you had to tie your shoes. If you didn't tie it right, you didn't fit in.

The ridiculous thing was that when I was in school, the fashion way to tie your shoes was to not tie your shoes and just to stuff the laces in the side of them, which meant that whenever we played football our shoes went fly.

Very stupid, but that's what it was. You had to do it. You had to conform. If you don't, it's so easy to feel ashamed. These tax collectors and sinners were the people who would have felt most ashamed of themselves and yet they're the ones that Jesus receives and he eats with them what an incredible honour that must have been.

[16:22] And here we see an amazing thing about Jesus. He's not trying to protect his own honour. He's not thinking, oh man, think of the shame if I don't meet, if I don't, if I, you know, people see me with these kind of people.

That never entered his head at all. He's quite happy to take the shame of this public criticism so that he can honour these people as his guests.

So we see in Jesus, his character brave enough to be ready not to conform to what the people around him expected, compassionate enough to reach out to those who are most broken and in need in their society and wise enough to have the eyesight that sees beyond all these superficial things that we place on the surface to look and see what really matters.

This verse and the criticism of the Pharisees is telling us a crucial lesson about the amazing saviour that we have.

We're also learning something, however, about our mission because these words aren't just teaching us about Jesus. They're teaching us about our mission as part of his church.

[17:38] I once heard a quotation that I never forgot that came from a lecture that was being given by a man called Leslie Newbigham. Now don't worry if you've never heard of Leslie Newbigham.

He was a church or settlement minister who went out to India and who spent most of his life as a missionary in India and he became very, very involved in the movement to bring more cooperation between churches across the world.

He was an incredibly perceptive thinker and he wrote several books analysing how the church is supposed to interact with culture today, especially as people were moving further and further away from the Gospel.

So a very interesting guy, he died I think in the late 1990s and he I think he was quite elderly so he lived for most of the last century. I heard him give a talk, I was listening to him online and I heard this quotation which I've never forgotten.

He said on the cross Jesus has created a place where sinful men and women may be accepted by God and enabled to live and rejoice in his presence.

[18:50] It is if you like the continuation of the ministry of Jesus who received sinners and ate and drank with them and the church is the place where that still happens.

Now I hope you can see the importance of what Newbigham is saying there. He is saying that these words here, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

That's describing a key aspect of Jesus' ministry. He welcomed sinners and he ate with them but Newbigham is saying it's not just Jesus who does that ministry, we continue it.

And theologically that makes perfect sense for at least two reasons. One because Jesus is our model in everything and so whatever Jesus does we are to follow him and seek to be like him.

But secondly because Jesus, because the very nature of the church is that Jesus is the head of the church, we are his body, we are united to him and we are united to one another in him.

[20:02] So the work that he began has to be the work that we need to continue on with. We are the means through which his ministry continues.

That means that the ministry of Luke 15 to that Jesus initiated is the ministry that we continue as the church of Jesus Christ.

And that instantly makes hospitality massively important in the life of the church. And you see that when you read through the rest of the New Testament, you see that when you read more about the history of the early church, there is a massive emphasis on being together and eating together.

Hospitality was so crucial in the life of the early church and that hasn't changed. It's just as important today and yet I do think that we are in danger of losing this and that's particularly tragic because our islands here is a place where hospitality has been incredible over the years. It's what we are known for and it's been a wonderful part of the church's life here for many, many years and yet I think that we are in danger of losing it today.

[21 : 32] I think we are a wee bit at risk of being like those Jesus described in verse 12 of chapter 14 where you just invite your friends, your brothers, your relatives, the people you know and that broader open hospitality that we've seen here for many years, that we've seen in the New Testament, that we see in the life of Jesus, it's very easy for that to be lost.

And there's lots of reasons why that can happen. And I think one of the reasons though why we can be at risk of hospitality being lost is because we put too much pressure on ourselves and we make it too hard.

And so there's pressure to produce an amazing meal, there's pressure to have an immaculate house, there's pressure for everything to be just right and we put a huge amount of pressure on ourselves but we've got to remember that hospitality does not have to involve a fancy meal. In the early church meals weren't basic, the kind of food that we eat on a normal day is food that they would have only dreamt of seeing.

And I think that's where we need to remember that the most important thing is not what's on the table. The important thing is who's at the table and welcoming people and being together is a massive part of the life of the church.

[23 : 07] There's three important aspects to this that I want to highlight that we see from Jesus' actions here. The first is a welcome. This man receives sinners that can also be translated welcome.

Jesus just welcomed and received sinners. People are welcomed into his company. That's a really important thing just to think about because if you imagine welcoming someone or being welcomed, what does that involve?

It involves being made to feel like you belong. It involves being made to feel like it's actually nice for this person to be there.

It involves feeling that this is something that's really good for everyone involved. Jesus made people feel like that. People feel welcome in his company.

We need to keep doing the same. We need to keep doing it more and more. This is where we have to guard against the opposite of ever making somebody feel unwelcome.

[24 : 08] I know that nobody ever... This is where we've got to be super careful because nobody ever thinks, right, I am going to go and I'm going to be as unwelcoming as possible.

Nobody ever thinks that. That's a warning because it's telling us that being unwelcomed is something that's far more likely to happen by accident.

It's something that we're all likely to do by mistake, which is why we've got to guard against it. It's easily done, not because we intend to, but just because we've maybe been a little bit careless or said something or done something that we shouldn't.

It's something that we have to guard and be careful about. Welcoming is really important. The second thing that's crucial is that we need to integrate people into the life and family of the church.

Jesus didn't just welcome people as they passed the door. It wasn't that he was speaking and then as they left, he just gave them a really nice long handshake and made them feel special. He did far more than that.

[25 : 09] He went and he ate with them. We've got to remember that was such an expression of honour in these days to eat with someone. It's a great reminder that we're not here just to welcome people to our services.

We are here to integrate people into our church family. That's what I really want us to think and pray about more than more, because I have to say, in terms of welcoming, you are brilliant.

You are already brilliant at that. I've heard so many people over the years say how welcoming Carlyway is and that is so good, but we can build more on that because we want to welcome people more and more, but we also want to integrate them more and more into the life of our congregation. The test for that, I suppose, is if you welcome somebody, they might come to your church and that's great.

If someone becomes integrated, they become the welcomeers themselves and so it goes on and that's what we long to see.

[26 : 20] So we want to welcome people, we want to integrate, but perhaps most, maybe most importantly all of all, this whole emphasis on hospitality highlights the importance of enjoyment.

Eating together is just brilliant. It's something that we should enjoy, spending time together is something that should give us such great delight and that's reinforced if you read the rest of Luke 15, you'll read three parables, they've all got one thing in common, they all have the same conclusion, they all end with rejoicing.

And that's something that we must never ever lose sight of. We want to bring people in, welcome them, integrate them and we want that to be done with joy at every stage.

So that joy to be visible and for it to be shared. Through the cross, Jesus receives us, welcoming us, integrating us, enjoying us as part of his family.

But the cross also means that we can now do that to one another, welcoming people in, integrating them to our family and thoroughly, thoroughly enjoying the incredible privilege of being together.

[27 : 37] All of this raises a crucial topic, something that is of massive, massive importance as we think about connecting with the mission field that's before us.

And it's particularly important in the Isle of Lewis because the church is such a prominent place in our culture. What is it that's so important?

Our reputation. Remember, these words are spoken about Jesus, not by Jesus.

This is summarizing his reputation. And what's so important for us is that this is our reputation as well.

Because our reputation is never one of excluding, never one of keeping ourselves to ourselves, never one of it being them and us.

[28 : 35] We want our reputation to be that church receives, nourishes and eats with them. It welcomes, integrates and rejoices in being together.

All of this is telling us that these verses, and especially verse two, is teaching us a crucial lesson about our mission as a church.

Last of all, we're also learning a little bit about our destiny. Jesus has come to inaugurate the kingdom of God.

That kingdom involves various aspects. Jesus has come as God's King and he's coming to put things right. He's come to enter into conflict with the kingdom of darkness to defeat Satan and to reassert God's rightful place as ruler overall.

That's an expression of God's sovereignty. God initiates his plan of salvation, sending his son. It means that we can be rescued and restored back to be the people that God wants us to be.

[29 : 42] Jesus is the kingdom that is brought into the kingdom, a community being established with Christ as the head. Jesus has come to inaugurate the kingdom of God.

When we talk about the kingdom of God, we must always remember that that involves what we call an already not yet tension or balance.

What we mean by that is the fact that in the coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God has come. God's here already, Jesus has come and he's established his kingdom, but at the same time it's not yet because the ultimate consummation of the kingdom is not now, it's in the future when Jesus returns.

The life and ministry of Jesus is emphasizing that God's kingdom is already here and yet it's also pointing us to the fact that it's not yet arrived and there's more to come.

We are being told and reminded whenever we meet the Gospels that what Jesus has come to establish here on earth in his church is a glimpse of what awaits us in the future.

[30 : 47] So that means that when we come to 15.2 and we think about Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them, it's not telling us just about what Jesus did when he was on earth and it's not just telling us about what the life of the church now should be, it's also pointing us towards the future.

We're being reminded that for everyone who trusts in Jesus, the new heavens and the new earth that await at the coming of Jesus is going to be the place where Jesus will receive sinners and eat with them forever.

It's the place where Jesus will receive you and welcome you to his table forever. The Bible is full of amazing imagery to describe that.

Heaven is described as a banquet. You even have that in the chapter that we read in Luke 14 just before this. You go to Revelation, you have the marriage supper of the Lamb, you have this incredible language of togetherness, of celebration, of rejoicing.

All of this means that for every single person here who trusts in Jesus, for every Christian who's already a Christian, for everyone who becomes a Christian, when you get to the gates of heaven, you will be so warmly welcomed.

[32 : 11] You will instantly feel more at home than you have ever felt before. That's why heaven will be the place of beautiful, joyful, delightful togetherness that will never, ever end.

That's our destiny to be received and welcomed by Jesus into his family and his kingdom forever.

And that's why the more and more we continue, this ministry of Jesus highlighted here, the more we do that as a church, the more we are giving the people who look at us a glimpse of heaven.

Because that togetherness, a church family gathering to worship on a Sunday, going home to eat a dinner together on a Sunday afternoon or during the week, going for a walk together, enjoying each other's company, being together, all of that is a foretaste of heaven.

That joy and delight in being together is pointing us to what eternity will be like for all who trust in Jesus and of course the opposite is through as well.

[33 : 27] And that's why aggression and hostility is so horrible. Because all of that is a foretaste of hell.

A place not of banquetting, but of thirst, a place not of eating, but of weeping and gnashing of teeth. There we go. I want my headings back, sorry I didn't put my three headings on my last point. In these few words that we have from the Pharisees, we have been reminded of the incredible Savior that we have, we've been shown what our mission needs to look like and we are being pointed towards our destiny.

How thankful everyone of us should be that this man receives dinner and eats with him.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen.