

More than that, to the people of Israel, tax collectors were collaborators (in the negative sense of that word). By the very act of collecting tax for the Roman government, they were viewed as traitors to Israel and supporters of Roman occupation. By turning toward Rome, they must have turned away from God. What does Jesus do? *and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up, left everything, and followed him.* There are 2 simply huge upsets in that short sentence.

Jesus said "follow me". Chapter 5 is part of the 'calling the disciples' narratives where Jesus is pulling together those who will follow him. So far, in Luke's gospel the only other ones who've been named are Simon Peter, James and John who are all fishermen (nothing to object to there). We know there are other followers but the rest aren't named until half way through chapter 6. Luke, by specifically telling the story of Jesus calling Levi, lets us know there's something integral to Jesus' life and ministry that the story demonstrates. But the first question people would have was "Why would Jesus ask a tax collector to follow him?" Levi the tax collector is a traitor to his people. There's nothing romantic here, Levi isn't undercover, there's no evidence he's collaborating because of pressure on his family. He works for the Romans because he can make good money. So why would Jesus, who people were starting to think just might possibly be the longed for Messiah who would help Israel overthrow its Roman oppressors, walk up to someone who worked for the Romans and say "follow me".

Just as astonishingly, Levi gets up, leaves everything (implication being steps away from cash) and follows Jesus.

Compare that to the story of the rich young man in Matthew's gospel (you can think about the significance of Levi Matthew telling that story later). The rich young man says "I've always been good and followed the law but what do I need to do to have eternal life". In reply Jesus says "If you wish to be perfect, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and come follow me". And the young man turns away from Jesus, grieving, because he has many possessions and knows that he won't give them up. But here in Luke, Levi does leave everything at the tax collection booth and follow Jesus. In one step, Levi goes from outcast to disciple.

Luke 5:27-32 The call of Levi

Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."



Immediately the action moves on. The new setting is Levi's house *Then Levi gave a great banquet for Jesus in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.* Note that Jesus is sitting down not just with Levi who could be said to now be a follower. He's sitting at table with tax collectors and others. Jesus is sitting having a meal with people who were regarded as God's enemies; not a quiet formal meal. He's at a party. A feast.

It's easy for us to miss the importance of this. Meals, hospitality were not just about fueling the body with nourishment. Being welcomed to a meal was a symbol of friendship, of unity, even of intimacy. It wasn't sitting down to a meal with 500 of your nearest acquaintances (as of tomorrow that becomes dinner for one...). Accepting hospitality meant alignment, acceptance, possibly even reconciliation.

And the pharisees (the leading non clerical religious people of the time) reacted to what they saw.

The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

It's a reasonable question in their framework. Culturally you set boundaries by who you ate with and what you did when you sat down to eat. Mary Douglas describes it as Policing the human body (what you ate) in order to police the social body and maintain a common identity.

Jewish food laws actually set cultural boundaries. If Gentiles eat pork, it's hard for Jews to sit and eat with them. If you can't eat the same things, why eat together? In some respects we can cause the same exclusions today when people have dietary requirements. Gluten free, dairy free, egg free, vegan, paleo. It can be tempting to give up sharing hospitality with people who can't or won't eat the same things you do.

Back in Isaiah when he envisions in chapter 25 the great banquet that God will lay out, it includes all peoples, all nations, all faces and all the earth. But by Jesus' time the Israelites have lost sight of that vision of God's great banquet and set ever decreasing circles of inclusion. They did it out of an understanding of purity, extending the purity required of the priests into the homes of the religious. They're neither the first nor the last to do that. To their eyes, Jesus this promising rabbi, is rejecting all they stand for. The people, working and striving towards purity in order to be acceptable before God. Instead this Jesus eats with the impure. With sinners. [you'll note Luke's shift in language between observation 'tax collectors and others' to judgement 'tax collectors and sinners']

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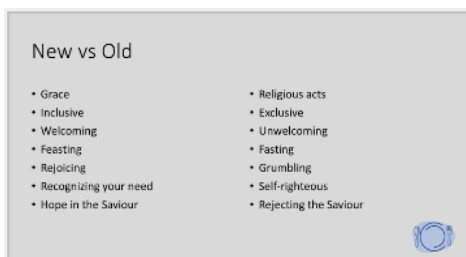
Through his actions, calling the despised and rejected to follow him, eating with them, breaking down barriers set not by God, but by God's people, Jesus accepts these sinners and welcomes them into God's kingdom.

Who can I eat with? Was the question of the day. Why is that even a question? Is Jesus' response.

God's grace

God's grace turns everything upside down. And Jesus describes what he's doing with the image of a doctor who avoids sick people. Just as a doctor goes to sick people to treat them, a Saviour has to go to sinners he says.

I want to be really clear here, none of this is an analogy for anything in the current Covid19 pandemic. Nothing I say today calls into question the dedication of health care personnel or the control measures being put in place to flatten the impact of the spread of the virus. We're talking solely about the image Jesus uses to describe to the Pharisees that he's not going to follow rules which lead to people thinking they can't be in relationship with God. The rules that said you have to work for your salvation and that God doesn't accept you as you are. You don't have to change before you're accepted by God, Jesus says. "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance". Take action, he says, Follow me. You can Come as you are.



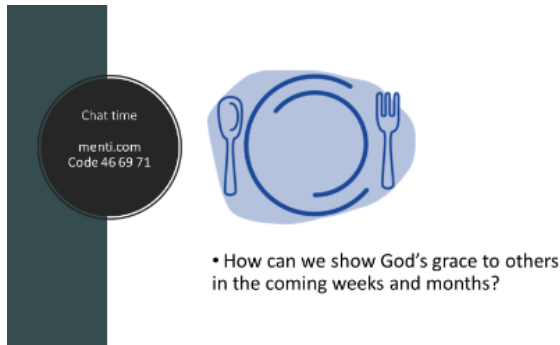
Tim Chester says this about the difference between the pharisee's understanding of receiving God's grace and Jesus way. ..."the new way is gracious rather than religious, inclusive rather than exclusive, welcoming rather than unwelcoming, It is characterized by feasting rather than fasting and rejoicing rather than grumbling. It recognizes its need, and finds hope in the Saviour rather than feeling self-righteous and therefore rejecting the Saviour.

Sharing God's grace

It can be very easy for us to react like the pharisees. And sometimes we do it without even realising we are. We close people out by using language they don't understand, by making them come to us instead of us going to them. There are so many ways we can lose sight of Jesus' acts of grace showing God's welcome to all in society who turn away from being an 'enemy of God' and instead follow Jesus' call. We can forget that Jesus calls us 'while we are sinners and still far off'.

In the last few weeks in our country, in our neighbourhood, we have seen ludicrous and disheartening acts of self-interest that can make us despair for our society. You foolish Melbournians! Where is grace, in these actions? Where is hope, charity or kindness? As we live through the challenges of the coming weeks and months, how can we show God's grace to others? Without judgement, and with acceptance. Let us remember that in Christ we're included at Gods table and that the invitation goes out to all

How can we be generous and hospitable, while being conscious of the care and health of others?



Chat time 2 – 5 mins – break into small groups of a couple of pews. Spend a few minutes talking about - how we can show God's grace to others in the coming months (in the church/outside church). Go to [menti.com](https://www.menti.com) put in code 46 69 71 and as your group comes up with ideas, type them in so we can all see the ideas you come up with. If you're watching on the live stream, you can join in by going to [menti.com](https://www.menti.com) **Code 46 69 71** and submit your suggestions for how we can show God's grace to others in this challenging

time. **menti.com Code 46 69 71**

Thank you for sharing your suggestions. I hope you remember and act on them, and I'll also share them with the staff team and we'll see if we can communicate some of them to St Michael's members. Sharing God's grace, that he welcomes us before him, that Jesus calls us to follow him, to come as we are and to share in fellowship will be important over the coming weeks and months. May you be blessed, may you know God's guidance, protection, love and grace. Amen.

Prayer based on Luke 5:27-32

Lord, your outreach towards sinners consoles us. Forgive us for the times when we are swayed by prejudice, when we judge, despise or exclude others. Thank you that mercy is at the heart of Jesus' mission. You call us to want to be at your table no matter who else is there! Grant us the grace to respond to your call – to follow you wherever you lead. Amen.

After a time of prayer:

Be with us, Lord, in all our prayers. Thank you that in your great grace you remind us that in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving you encourage us to present our requests to you, and promise that the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Direct our way this week, empower us to share your love and hope, and defend us by your gracious help, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

