

# Eating with Jesus, eating with the Father

Jeremiah 23:1, Luke 15:1-32

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## Introduction

'If you *really* want to please God, you *can not* have close contact with bad people.' That was the attitude of the Pharisees who saw Jesus eat with sinners and tax collectors. 'Bad! Bad! Bad!' was their reaction.

'Decent people like you here in Church must only be friends with other decent people! Bad company corrupts good morals! Do not even come close to those lost people, who are so far away from God! That is the Pharisee motto.

The Gospel story of Luke 15 begins with the Pharisees and how upset they were about Jesus and how he behaved. And let us be fair and reasonable, they had a point. Our Lord Jesus *did* attract all those 'wrong types'.

And if you took the laws of God *seriously*, you really *had* to maintain your distance from those people. They could *easily* defile your pure life, and that would make it *illegal* to even enter into the House of God, into the Temple. And the Pharisees wanted to be in the house of God!

So the table manners of Jesus were *very* upsetting indeed. He was criticized for them by the religious establishment of Israel, and in order to counter this criticism, Jesus told them the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

They had two points of criticism against Jesus

1. He receives or he welcomes sinners
  2. And related to this, he even eats with them
- "He receives", or "he welcomes" sinners, really means, "he warmly invited them". It was an active deed of Jesus. He searches people. He wants those people within the realm of his personal space. They *were* ritually unclean according to the laws of Israel, but Jesus warmly embraces them.

And he even had the audacity to eat with them - the ultimate form of communion. These dinner parties were not our tea on the terrace, or polite western dinners, where we speak softly, where we nibble a bit on some *nouveau cuisine* food that sits on the far northeast corner of our plate. These were *serious* food and drinks parties. Celebrations of togetherness, as people in the Middle East can do so extravagantly.

## 1. Jesus aims to bring sinners home

Jesus begins to answer *why* he does this, with the parable of the lost sheep; he first points to the fact

that God so loves each human being, that if one is lost, He tries to find that person. The shepherd goes and searches until he finds the poor lost animal. Carefully he puts it on his shoulder, to carry it all the way back to the flock.

Israel knew the language of Holy Scripture very well: *God* is called the Shepherd of Israel. Think of Psalm 23, where David prays: The Lord is my Shepherd.

The Pharisees considered themselves the spiritual guides of Israel; they believed that they were appointed by God as the shepherds of the nation.

When Jesus says that he is the *Good* Shepherd, we must *stress* that word 'good'. He openly criticized the Pharisees for being *bad* shepherds. They *did not* take care of the sheep that have gone astray. They worried more about ritual laws of purity, than about the law that says that we have to love our neighbor as ourselves.

They *did not* sympathize with lost people; they *did not* search for them; they only condemned and kept their distance. But Jesus took them as sheep, on his shoulder. A *good* shepherd cannot allow sheep to be lost; the herd must be complete, all must be saved, even if it is at the shepherd's own expense!

A similar idea we also see in the story of the lost coin. The poor woman, owner of ten drachmas, that are, ten small silver coins, lost one of them. Maybe she had them wrapped in a piece of cloth, or they were part of the dowry she received when she married, ten coins on a necklace. She lost one, worth a day's salary, and this also made the whole necklace look bad. So she did not rest until she had found the coin.

For finding it she had to sweep the dirt floor of her small house, maybe even the courtyard outside. Hard work, dirty work. Two weeks ago I decided to clean out a shed in my front yard. Sweeping it was an awful job, and I needed a shower immediately after, with dust all over me, even in my ears and nose.

And then, after much effort, the woman found the coin! Her hard paid off. She had not been satisfied until this lost coin was back on the necklace.

The Pharisees were not prepared to do the hard work for bringing lost people back to God. They certainly did not want to get dirty by touching the lives of these people. 'Let them get lost, as long as

we are pure for God, as long as we can enter into his house...'

What had happened with the law that says that we have to love our neighbor as ourselves? The whole focus of the Pharisees was on their individual salvation and wellbeing first and foremost.

With this parable Jesus shows why he does the hard work of being with the people that are lost. He is prepared to do it, to welcome them and eat with them, because of the love of God.

And then the third parable, the longest of the three, of the prodigal son. What an emotional story. We can maybe see the first two parables as an introduction, but now Jesus is really going to answer the Pharisees.

## 2. Jesus feasts with saved sinners

First Jesus shows that he takes sin seriously. He describes a young son who decides to leave his father. I do not doubt that those who heard this parable were aware that Jesus was using the father in the story as the symbol for the heavenly Father, God Almighty.

The younger son who left his father lived a loose life; he wasted his money, and ended up in the mud with dirty unclean pigs. Totally forbidden for a Jewish man.

Mind you, this sinful lifestyle is not the core of the problem. The heart of the problem is leaving the Father and acting as if he does not exist, as if he were dead. The problem is more on the side of a lack of love than a lack of ritual purity.

The heart of sin is being separate from God. This is an important lesson from these stories. Being lost is not due to leading a wild life, but the wild life is the result of being lost. Being lost means: not being attached to God, our Father in heaven. Not being where the shepherd is. Not being on the necklace with the other coins.

The story of the prodigal *also* shows us how deep the love of our heavenly father is. He wants each person who is lost to return to him. The coming of the Son of God to our world is part of the great *search party* of the Creator. He wants his family to be complete! He wants all sons and daughters to be with him in his house. Why does Jesus eat with sinners? Because he wants to find those sons who are lost.

If you are among those lost sheep, lost coins, lost children of God, He does love you, he is searching, and he deeply desires for you to return to Him.

The son was hungry, humiliated, homesick, and he returned to the father, dirty, exhausted, impure from his contact with the pigs; he was, of course, not ritually purified.

He returns to his father's house as a man laden with sin and guilt. But he returns – he returns! That is the big issue! And immediately the father embraces him. He welcomes him, and eats with him. The Pharisees response: 'How dumb of the

father, now he is also impure. Now he cannot pray to God...'

But the father is not worried about being defiled by his son's life; his sole desire is to have his child back.

The father in the story then organizes a magnificent party with much meat and wine, and the feast had all that was needed to express the joy that his son, who once was lost, had now been found! He was dead but now alive again!

In all three parables, the climax is the feast. And this is what Jesus is saying: 'I enjoy big meals and feast with these sinners – *because they have been saved.*' Jesus is not saying: 'I welcome them and I feast with them in order that they may be saved.'

He does not eat as an evangelism method – though that would be great as well. But in this case he says: 'These people were lost, and thanks to God's love, they have been found, and therefore we feast together!'

'You Pharisees do not want to touch them, but they are the children of God who have returned to the Father and therefore we must celebrate!'

Are these people who were lost and are now found, perfect people? Do they obey every detail of the ritual laws of God? Have they already learned to be nice and polite as good church people? No! But that does not matter. They were lost, and they are found! They have returned to the Father!

To the Father? I can see the Pharisees think... Is Jesus comparing himself with the father in the story, who throws a party because the son has returned? Does he put himself in the place of God? Yes, I think that is exactly what Jesus is doing.

## 3. Drawing near Jesus and God

In the first verse of Luke 15 we read that the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus – to listen to him. They desired to be close to Jesus for his words. Is this not what we desire today? To be close to Him and hear from him?

The apostle James, in his letter, says: "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you..."(James 4:8)

When the prodigal was drawing near his father, even before he had fully reached him, the father ran to him. How embarrassing to see that village *'umda* run to his son! That was against the customs of those days - worthy people do not run! But love is stronger than custom... God draws near to those who want to be with him.

If we want to come to God through Jesus Christ, God honors our very first small step and begins to embrace us, to draw us deeper and deeper into his love, and out of the old life of sin and misery and loneliness and being lost.

But Jesus has more to say, about the Pharisees, when he speaks of the older son in the parable. Interesting is that we read that the tax collectors

and sinners drew near to Jesus to listen— and thereby they were saved. The prodigal son drew near to his father and was saved.

But the *older son also* draws near. It says in Luke 15:25 – “he drew near... “ No, *not* to the father, but *to the house*. He came close to the house, but quarreled with the father.

We must be careful with parables that we do not try to explain every word and sentence. They are good stories with a central lesson, and not every detail of the story has a special meaning. But in this case, I cannot restrain myself.

The older son drew near the house, not to his father. The Pharisees were so used to going to the Temple, often just called ‘the House of God’ in the Bible. For example, in the Gospel of John, when Jesus drives all merchants out of the Temple, he says: ‘You shall not make the House of my Father a house of trade.’

Is Jesus here maybe telling them that they were greatly pious in going to that *house* of the father, but that they did not even come close to the father, the owner of the house, *himself*?

The sinners they detested so much had been lost but were now saved. They were in the house with God and Jesus. They were drawing near to Jesus to listen to him. They wanted to learn from him.

But the Pharisees excluded themselves from being in the House of God by not showing love to ‘those sinners’. Their refusal to even come close to them, also excluded them from drawing near to Jesus and listening to him.

## Conclusion

The greatest lesson for me in these parables is that we must never be a stumbling block for other people to return to God. To always be inviting all people to come to Jesus Christ and listen to him. Anyone who desires to come closer to Jesus and listen to him, is welcome *here in our midst!*

A change of life and lifestyle is important, but the heart of the matter, for all people, is to first be connected with Jesus Christ. So as *Church* that is what we *focus* on.

That is what we must also do personally. Draw near to Jesus, and listen to him. And if this is our desire, if this is what we do, then the Father welcomes us with arms wide open. Then our Lord Jesus feasts with us, feeding us with bread and wine.

**Amen**