

JOIN THE PARTY

By Scott Grant

When I was about 20, I heard that an acquaintance was getting married and that several of my friends would be at the ceremony. So I decided to attend. I also brought a friend with me, and we had a great time. The only problem was that we weren't invited. I didn't know that you weren't supposed to attend such affairs without an invitation. The groom didn't seem to mind, though. He even shook our hands and said with a smile, "Thanks for coming." My friend and I decided that we enjoyed weddings very much, and we joked, after learning of our faux pas, that perhaps we should make a habit of crashing them.

Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom and his disciples to attendants. The Father is throwing a lavish wedding feast on behalf of his Son. Yes, we're invited. "Come to the party," the Father is telling us, "and have the time of your life." In Mark 2:13-22, Jesus attends a party and then evokes images of a party. Jesus' mission at first is to announce that the kingdom of God is at hand. What is the kingdom like? Mark's narrative tells us it's like a party.

Mark 2:13-22:

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him. And it happened that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, "Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?" And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."¹

An invitation to sinners

When Jesus last walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he summoned four men to follow him (Mark 1:16-20). Once again, Jesus walks along the shore. Mark's narrative leads us to wonder whether Jesus is about to summon more followers. After all, possibilities abound, inasmuch as a crowd has flocked to Jesus. When he first walked along the shore, he summoned fishermen—common laborers. Perhaps, now that he's become popular, he can aim a little higher.

In choosing Levi, a tax collector, Jesus couldn't aim much lower. When Jesus addresses him, Levi is sitting in his booth collecting taxes on goods as people enter the territory of Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee at the behest of Rome. Jewish tax collectors such as Levi were doubly despised, first because they gouged their countrymen and second because they collaborated with the enemy. Tax collectors symbolized foreign domination. The last thing a Jew in good standing would say to a tax collector, however, is the first thing Jesus says to Levi: "Follow Me."

By including Levi in his inner circle, Jesus risks bringing discredit to himself as a preacher of the kingdom of God, the arrival of which was expected to exclude any Jews who collaborated with the enemy of God's people. A popular preacher of the kingdom who aligns himself with a tax collector will inevitably incite those who believe that the coming of the kingdom means the violent overthrow of both enemies and their collaborators. By summoning a tax collector, Jesus places both his mission and his life at risk.²

The fishermen left their nets and their families to follow Jesus; now the tax collector leaves his booth to follow Jesus. Levi was working for Herod, who fancied himself as king of the Jews but was actually a lapdog of the Romans; now Levi is following Jesus, the true king of the Jews who would become Lord of the world.

The calling of Levi both encourages and challenges us. On the one hand, if Jesus is willing to bring discredit to himself and place his mission at risk in order to call the Levis of the world, then no one is too far from God to be brought into his family. If, for whatever reason, we feel like outsiders, Jesus wants to include us. On the one hand, if Jesus is calling the Levis of our world, then he's calling us, as his followers, to open our arms to them. We may have to make adjustments to accommodate them. We may have to open ourselves to different ways of thinking about church. We may have to learn to relate to people who are vastly different from us.

Elaine Stedman, the wife of our first pastor, Ray Stedman, tells of the changes this church made with the advent of the Jesus Movement in the 1960s:

When Ray and I arrived in Palo Alto in 1950, we found a city of quiet dignity, perfect climate, and quality education amid enchantingly green hills and flowing orchards. ... Then there was Vietnam. And beatniks became hippies, the "flower children." The drug culture emerged. ... PBC, that quiet, well-ordered congregation, was caught in the middle of these baffling, frightening phenomena. Jesus himself was asking admittance for barefoot, bearded escapees from the kingdom of darkness. With fear and trembling we opened our doors. They tinkered with our self-righteousness, infected us with their contagious excitement, and shattered our complacency. And I finally had to give up my hat and gloves. The biblical principle of the Spirit's gifting of Christ's body for ministry created a welcoming environment for this "invasion." In the Sunday evening meetings, where we learned to identify various scents, including the aroma of pot, barefoot, straggle-haired youth crammed our turf and our hearts.

In these days, we've made some changes in our church to reach out to and accommodate folks in recovery. First we started R&R on Friday nights. Then, to foster the new life on Friday nights, we made room for Step Closer on Sunday mornings. Some of our other Sunday classes graciously changed their routines to accommodate Step Closer. We continue to think and pray about how to best reach out to folks in recovery, how to accommodate them and how to incorporate them into the life of the church.

A party with sinners

Jesus' calling of a tax collector is compounded by his sharing a meal with a crowd that includes not only tax collectors but also "sinners" who flagrantly disobeyed the Jewish law. In that day and place, sharing a meal meant sharing life. You didn't recline at table with everyone; you reclined at table with those you trusted and accepted. Above all, if you preached the kingdom of God, you didn't recline at table with tax collectors and sinners. To do so meant you were aligning yourself with the wrong people. If you reclined at table with tax collectors and sinners, many people in Israel would assume that you were opposed to the kingdom of God.

For the third time in Mark's narrative, Jesus enters a house. In each of the previous stories, Jesus healed someone: Simon's mother-in-law and a paralyzed man (Mark 1:29-31, 2:1-12). This story features a kind of healing as well. Jesus, in fact, compares himself to a physician. Tax collectors and sinners are outcasts from the synagogue, the place of worship. They can't go to the synagogue, and probably wouldn't want to, anyway. Jesus, however, goes to them. He enters Levi's house and dines with his people. He steps into Levi's world.

When Jesus healed a leper, an outcast, he restored him to community (Mark 1:40-45). When Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners, he heals them: he restores them to community. There can be no doubt that Jesus included these people in his community because his disciples, who formed his inner circle, are also present for the meal. He doesn't seem concerned that his disciples will be sullied by association with such a disreputable lot. Jesus brings together sinners and disciples and seats them at the same table.

Jesus stepped out of heaven and into our world to show us what heaven is like—to give us a glimpse of the coming new world. He doesn't drag us into church but meets us in the toll booths of our lives. He parties with us and our friends. By doing so, he challenges us to step into the world of others, particularly those who don't know him. Most "Levis" aren't going to dawn the doors of a church. They don't think church is worth their time. Furthermore, visiting a church, to many of them, seems like traveling to a foreign country. Therefore, we must be willing to attend their gatherings and party with their friends. At the least, we should consider throwing the kind of party they would enjoy. Jesus wants the "sinners" and the "saints," so to speak, to dine with him at the same table. Perhaps the time is coming and now is for us to step out of our cozy church and small groups and into the unpredictable world of sinners. We might be surprised by how much fun it is—by how much fun they are. The lyrics of an old Billy Joel song haunt me:

I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints

The sinners are much more fun
You know that only the good die young.³

Perhaps it would serve those of us in the church to laugh with the sinners a little more—and cry with them too, if that’s what they’re doing.

We might begin by looking for the Levis in our own church. Those who feel as if they don’t fit in are all over the place. Many of the recovery folks who attend R&R and Step Closer feel that they don’t fit in here, as do many of our teen-agers. Sociologists tell us that the transition from childhood to adulthood has become longer and more difficult and that teen-agers are turning increasingly to each other, not adults, for answers to their questions. You might consider helping out in our recovery or youth ministries. If you don’t know how to relate to recovery folks or teen-agers, we’ll help you. When I was in my early 30s, I served in a ministry to junior high students. At first, I entered the youth room with fear and trembling because I didn’t know how to relate to them. But I kept showing up and kept trying, and after about two months, I began looking forward to seeing my new friends.

Opening our homes

In the previous story, Mark introduced us to scribes, experts in the Jewish law. Scribes appear in this story as well, but this time Mark specifically identifies them as belonging to the Pharisees, an unofficial Jewish pressure group that aimed to purify Israel, through intense observance of the law and other traditions, in anticipation of the coming kingdom of God. Many Pharisees were fierce nationalists who opposed both Roman rule and Jews who collaborated with it. These scribes deem it scandalous for Jesus, as a preacher of the kingdom, to eat with tax collectors and sinners. From their perspective, he’s partying with the wrong people. The sense of the scandal can be explained by one of our expressions: he’s sleeping with the enemy.

Jesus, overhearing the Pharisees’ question about his dinner partners, responds with a proverb. He is like a physician who helps not healthy people but sick people: Jewish “sinners” and presumably tax collectors who care little for the law. He heals such people by calling them: extending God’s forgiveness and inviting them to be part of his community. He does not exclude so-called healthy people, whom he equates with the righteous, unless they’re self-righteous, of course. The righteous are not those who live perfectly but those who belong to God in view of their faith, which manifests itself in behavior that can, in one sense, be defined as righteous. Jesus doesn’t need to call people who already belong to God. Therefore, he calls sinners and tax collectors and enfolds them into the company of the righteous.

Why does Jesus place his mission and his life at risk by choosing a tax collector and dining with him and his people? Because his mission involves the incorporation of such people into the people of God. The prophet Isaiah likened the advent of the kingdom of God to a feast that included not only the sinners in Israel but the pagans outside Israel also:

“The Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain;
A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow,
And refined, aged wine” (Isaiah 25:6).

After healing the servant of a Roman soldier, Jesus said, “I say to you that many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11). With a meal at the house of a tax collector, the party is in full swing.

In this story, how does Jesus “call” sinners and tax collectors? He calls them by eating with them. Healing takes place not during a worship service in a synagogue but over a meal in a house. The powerful Pharisees are arrayed against Jesus and his dinner partners. Jesus risks everything to share a meal with his new followers. In the end, such behavior will cost him everything. The tax collectors and sinners could say of Jesus, as the psalmist said of the Lord, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5). The party that Jesus throws is a costly affair.

Jesus both summons Levi to join him and enters Levi’s world. Opening our homes combines both the summoning and the entering aspects of Jesus’ mission. Many people who have no interest in attending our worship service are more than happy to accept an invitation into our homes. You’re inviting them into your world, yes, but you’re inviting them to experience something that’s part of their world. Church is foreign territory for many people, but a home is more familiar turf, even if it’s someone else’s home. We offer the healing of Jesus to others when we open up our homes to them.

The scandal of summoning Levi and partying with his friends is difficult to represent in the Silicon Valley, which, at least on the surface, applauds diversity. In some parts of our world, however, you’re risking your life if you align yourself with a member of an opposing faction. Perhaps we would better understand the scandal if we were to picture Jesus inviting a leader of Planned Parenthood or the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade to be part of his inner circle.

If we risk raising a few eyebrows or sacrificing a little comfort to welcome and party with some folks, we must remember that the mission of the church involves seeking and saving the lost. We must also remember that the party Jesus throws for us is a costly affair. It cost him his life. It may cost us something to follow him into the world.

The story of the Huguenots, French Protestants, in Le Chambon, France, illustrates the risky fellowship that Jesus modeled and passes on to us. Folks in the small town risked their lives to provide safe haven for their Jewish neighbors during the German occupation of World War II. When two police officers came to arrest the pastor of the church, his wife, Magda Trocmé, invited them to have dinner with them. Incredulous friends said, “How could you bring yourself to sit down to eat with these men who were there to take your husband away, perhaps to his death? How could you be so forgiving, so decent to them?” Trocmé answered, “What are you talking about? It was dinner time; they were standing in my way; we were all hungry. The food was ready. What do you mean by such foolish words as ‘forgiving’ and ‘decent’?”⁴ Such is the power of Jesus’ love that for at least one of his followers, it was second nature both to shelter the despised and to feed one’s enemies.

The bridegroom is here

The Jewish law, handed down by Moses, prescribed fasting once a year, on the Day of Atonement. However, kingdom of God movements, which sought to renew Israel, featured more frequent fasting. The Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12).

Disciples of John the Baptist, who preached about the coming kingdom, also fasted, apparently on a frequent basis. Jews fasted for the sake of humility, repentance, and mourning. They fasted, even in the first century, in connection with the Babylonian exile. The Jews had long since returned from Babylon, but as long as they were ruled by foreigners, they considered themselves an exiled people. They fasted in hope that God would restore their fortunes. After all, the prophet Zechariah predicted that God would turn their fasts of mourning into feasts of joy (Zechariah 7:3-5, 8:19). A feast of joy— isn't that what the story of Jesus' meal with tax collectors and sinners featured? Jesus and his disciples shared a meal with tax collectors and sinners, who had been far from God but were now drawing near. Jesus brings the exile to an end.

Jesus is asked why his disciples don't fast like those involved in other renewal movements. Jesus responds with three illustrations from a wedding that show why fasting for his disciples is inappropriate.

First, Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom and his disciples to attendants. A wedding is a time for feasting, not fasting—for celebration, not mourning. The prophets predicted that the coming of the kingdom of God would be like a wedding in which God, the bridegroom, would marry his people (Isaiah 54:5, 62:4-5, Hosea 2:14-20). With the presence of Jesus, the kingdom is coming, and the divine-human wedding is imminent. The day that Jews had been fasting for has come. If ever there was a time for joy, this is it.

However, Jesus would be “taken away” from his disciples when he was crucified, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Servant of the Lord: “By oppression and judgment He was taken away” (Isaiah 53:8). Fasting and mourning would be appropriate on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, even if the New Testament doesn't record the disciples of Jesus as fasting when he was “taken away” from them. Jesus told his disciples, in reference to his impending crucifixion and resurrection, “Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy” (John 16:20).

I don't crash weddings anymore; instead, I perform them. As a pastor, I get to stand on sacred ground with a man and a woman as they commit themselves to each other. When I first started performing weddings, I wasn't prepared for the emotional impact they would have on me. During one wedding, in fact, I was so overcome with emotion that I forgot to direct the bride to recite her vows to the groom. From then on, I've forced myself to keep a certain emotional distance during the marriage ceremonies that I perform so that I can keep my head about me. Otherwise, I know that joy would get the better of me at times. When it comes to our marriage to the divine bridegroom, however, we don't have to keep our heads about us. Feel free to let joy get the better of you.

Explosive joy

The final two illustrations both concern something old being unable to adapt to something new. A new piece of cloth, when it shrinks, causes an old garment to tear; and new wine causes old wineskins to burst. In each case the new forces some kind of movement to which the old cannot adapt. For the disciples of Jesus to fast while he is with them would be like sewing a new patch of cloth on an old garment or pouring new wine into old wineskins. It makes no sense to continue mourning the exile and fasting in

anticipation of the new age when the exile is ending and the new age is beginning. Jesus brings with him the new age—and explosive joy that obliterates the sad old garments and wineskins. No, his disciples “cannot” fast; it’s not even possible for them to do so.

The prophets not only compared the new age to a wedding, they also said it would feature new garments and new wine (Isaiah 52:1, Joel 2:18-19). The bridegroom, Jesus Christ, is here. He gives us new clothes to wear for the wedding, resonating with the Apostle Paul’s words: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). He pours the new wine of his joy into our ever-expanding hearts, as he himself told his disciples: “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11). We can therefore say, with the prophet Isaiah, who anticipated the day of Christ:

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord,
My soul will exult in my God;
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,
He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels (Isaiah 62:10).

Jesus is not opposed to fasting, just fasting that fails to recognize the new age (Matthew 6:16-18). Later, disciples are seen as fasting in the book of Acts, but they are not mourning the exile (Acts 9:9, 13:3, 14:23, 27:9). There remains in our day a place for mourning—and for fasting in connection with mourning, repentance, and seeking guidance. The new age has dawned with the coming of the Messiah, but we still live in the shadow of the old age. If it was appropriate for the disciples to mourn on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, it is appropriate for us to mourn both in memory of that day and for the sin that placed him on the cross. Those who mourn for such reasons will be comforted (Matthew 5:4).

The New Testament, however, gives us more incentive to rejoice than to mourn. Paul even goes so far as to tell us, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). The reason to rejoice, quite simply, is the Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament encourages us to focus on him and assumes that joy will result. Jesus told his disciples, “Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you” (John 16:22). Seeing Jesus, and seeing the way he sees us, causes a heart to rejoice.

I wonder sometimes if we’re more intent on using the Bible as a manual for life than seeing it as a love story. If it’s a manual, then God is a kind of spiritual mechanic who knows how to fix the engine of your life—not a very compelling story, if it’s a story at all. If it’s a love story, then Jesus is the bridegroom and we’re the bride, and if we see his beaming face—and Paul tells us that we can—then our faces will beam as well (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6).

The last word of advice I give a groom before he steps to the front of the church to wait for his bride goes something like this: “When she walks down that isle, she’s coming for you. Focus on her, and don’t take your eyes off her. The rest of the ceremony will take care of itself.” If the groom focuses on his bride, joy will overtake the day. Fix your eyes on Jesus, and joy will overtake your life. Rejoice in the Lord always—because, well, you can’t help yourself.

We always want to think that some secret way of living will help us make life work if we could only discover it and latch on to it. We're like those who were fasting and mourning and waiting for something that had already come. Much teaching that passes itself off as biblical doesn't get around to talking about Jesus much. Whatever joy it promises, then, doesn't have much to do with him. Don't get stuck in the rut of trying to make life work. Instead, accept the fact that life will never work the way you want it to until you see Jesus face to face.

Until then, though you see in a mirror dimly, spend a lot of time looking into his face (1 Corinthians 13:12). If you do, you might even find life working a little better. Are you depressed? Bored? Jaded? Doubting? Consider taking a closer look at Jesus. Maybe spend some time with him in the gospels. Even if you've known him for a lifetime, more of him remains to be known, and more than a lifetime remains to know him. Don't try to patch the hole in your life with Jesus; it will only make the hole bigger. Don't drink a glass of Jesus for what ails you; it will only make you more miserable. Instead, let Jesus pour his life into you, and let his joy shape you for his purposes.

The joy that comes from knowing Jesus is sure to explode some of your categories. You might find yourself, to your own surprise, rethinking basic presuppositions. You might find yourself expressing faith in new ways. You might find yourself doing and saying things you never thought you would. You might feel as if you would burst if you didn't do something for Jesus' sake. You might find yourself, for example, welcoming and going to the Levis of our world. You might find yourself, like members of our medical missions team, bringing the joy of Jesus to the sorrow of India or to a local place of pain.

The kingdom of God is a party

When my daughter Christina was about 18 months old, I was bouncing her on my knee one afternoon. For some reason, as she was looking into my eyes, she started laughing. Experiencing her laughter caused me to laugh also, which intensified her laughter. We sat there on the couch, locking eyes and sharing a crescendo of laughter for quite some time.

The kingdom of God is a raucous party. Lock eyes with Jesus, and sooner or later you'll catch his joy. Sooner or later, you'll feel his laughter. Join the party. The joy of the party is so explosive that you may find yourself inviting others to the party and even bringing your joy to their parties.

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¹ Literary structure:

A Jesus picks tax collector out of the crowd (13-14)

B Jesus and disciples dine with tax collectors and sinners (15)

C Question about eating (16)

D Answer by way of illustration (17)

B' Disciples of Jesus not fasting (18a)

C' Question about fasting (18b)

D' Answer by way of illustration (19-22)

² Levi bears the name of Israel's priestly tribe. In the days of the prophet Malachi, however, the priests had turned away from the Lord. Nevertheless, the prophet anticipated the day of the Messiah, who would bring with him the kingdom of God: "He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness" (Malachi 2:7-9, 3:3). In effect, when Levi gets up to follow Jesus, he is raised to new life, signaling the arrival of the kingdom of God, notwithstanding the expectations of Jewish nationalists.

³ Billy Joel, *Only the Good Die Young* (Columbia Records).

⁴ Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper Perennial). Referred to by Os Guinness, *The Call* (W Publishing Group), 96-98.